

Counter Misprisions; Or, the Influence of Anxieties in Mat Johnson's *Pym*

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Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) casts an impressively long shadow. The most cursory investigation into the last thirty years of scholarship reveals how Poe's story helped inspire Jorge Luis Borges' criticism, the strange tales of H. P. Lovecraft, the fiction of Jules Verne and Julien Gracq, the ideas of personality and consciousness in the writing of Paul Bowles, the characterizations of criminality in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and even Yann Martel's 2001 novel, *Life of Pi*.¹ Among these legacies of influence, the most famous critical treatment of the novel is no doubt Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Reading the conclusion of *The Narrative*, where the titular character and his companion escape the South Seas only to be welcomed to the Antarctic coastline by a white giant, Morrison writes, "No early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe. And no image is more telling than the one just described: the visualized but somehow closed and unknowable white form that rises from the mists at the end of the journey—or, at any rate, at the end of the narration proper" (32). Morrison's subtle nod to the difference between journey's end and narrative's end acknowledges the way in which Poe's novel invites the possibility of either revision or continuation—a possibility seized upon by Mat Johnson's novel *Pym: A Novel* (2011). *Pym* not only springs forth from an anxiety of

1. See Esplin, Brown, Meakin, Pound, Thifault, and Kopley. For an excellent account of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*'s influence on its inheritors, see Zanger.

influence regarding the twinned literary powers of Poe and Morrison, but also ironically acknowledges that anxiety by constructing a narrative around an academic's quixotic search for the supposedly historical reality of Arthur Gordon Pym.

Johnson's novel effects a simultaneous linkage to and dislocation from its predecessors: its protagonist, Chris Jaynes, is able to continue and then trouble Morrison's critical framework regarding Poe. Hired as a professor of African American literature, Jaynes insists on teaching nineteenth-century texts of predominantly white writers—specifically his “passion,” Edgar Allan Poe—so as to uncover “the very fossil record” of whiteness in America (Johnson 7–8). In Jaynes's analysis of the importance of revisiting writers like Poe, one can hear the echoes of Morrison's trenchant reading of how myths of whiteness “function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing” (33). But while Morrison is celebrated for her critical reading practice, Jaynes is denied tenure for his refusal to conform to the strictures of literary field and genre. Jaynes intentionally “misreads” his role in the academy by reading the wrong kinds of texts, and as the novel progresses, various readings and misreadings become central to both the plot and the book's examination of the “pathology of Whiteness” (14). The disgraced professor furthers his misreading by believing Poe's novel to be a literal history, which leads him on an Antarctic journey to validate his opinion. The ludic tone of the narrative proper thus resists the solemn reading practices exemplified by both Jaynes and Morrison, presenting its story in often extreme satire and irony. Or, as one reviewer of *Pym* notes, “the book is polyphonous and incisive, an uproarious and hard-driving journey toward the heart of whiteness” (Mansbach).

In its polyphony, Johnson's *Pym* is not merely a narrative shaped by what Harold Bloom calls the “anxiety of influence,” although these anxieties are no doubt still at work. Rather, the novel is one degree further removed: a self-conscious and second-order product of the strains of influence that powerfully shape literature and scholarship alike. With this metafictional framing, *Pym* plays with the “matrix of relationships” that Bloom ties to the concept of “influence” and its necessary counterpart, “misreading”:

“Influence” is a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships—imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological—all of them ultimately defensive in their nature. What matters most ... is that the anxiety of influences *comes out of* a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation that I call “poetic misprision.” What writers may experience as anxiety, and what their works are compelled to manifest, are the *consequence* of poetic misprision, rather than the *cause* of it (xxiii).

Much is at work in Bloom's outlining of "poetic misprision," not the least of which being the complicated and not altogether synonymous relationship between the terms "strong misreading" and "misprision." According to the *OED*, misprision broadly signifies "the mistaking of one thing for another," or perhaps more generatively, "Malformation, regarded as a mistake on the part of Nature." *Pym* is a novel about countless malformations: literary, historical, and even natural. Shaped by a matrix of relationships that include a deliberate misreading of both the historical factuality of Poe's 1838 novel and the racial politics of present-day America, *Pym* charts a course for the Antarctic, for a space of revisionist and counterfactual possibilities. That *Pym* consciously misreads history to produce its narrative reveals that it is not anxious about its influences, but rather influenced by its anxieties.

Counterfactual Misprision

Fundamentally, *Pym* is a novel about reading—about "bad" reading to be exact. Its very composition is predicated upon its protagonist's excessively close reading of source material. Professor Chris Jaynes becomes so preoccupied with Poe's tale that he embarks on a journey that treats *The Narrative* as a literal telling of history. At the same time, the character of Pym is himself a bad reader of the market logics that dictate a story's reception and remembrance: his "confidence in his authoriality," writes Ki Yoon Jang, "... is simultaneously undercut by his non-understanding of the increasingly reader-directed mechanism of literary markets" (360). In other words, *The Narrative's* "Preface," written by "A. G. Pym," acknowledges the story as factually accurate while also admitting how the adventurer consented to allow Poe to publish the story "under the garb of fiction"—what he afterward refers to as a "ruse" (3). This fictional device is necessary, Pym clarifies, in order to avoid the appearance of falsehood: "having kept no journal during a greater portion of the time in which I was absent, I feared I should not be able to write, from mere memory, a statement so minute and connected as to have the *appearance* of that truth it would really possess" (2). Scholars of Poe will recognize this language from the author's self-ironizing short story, "How to Write a Blackwood Article," where a British magazine editor instructs a writer on how to tailor stories to a popular audience. "How to Write a Blackwood Article," alongside its sequel, "A Predicament," is commonly read as Poe's attempt to summon, in the words of Ecaterina Hanțiu, a "satirical and destructive use of the cliché"—a description that might likewise apply to Johnson's *Pym* (30). Attuned to the ways in

which the appearance of reality will market stories, Blackwood commands the story's aspiring author, "Put in something about the Supernal Oneness. Don't say a syllable about the Infernal Twoness" (217). J. Gerald Kennedy interprets this injunction to mean that "[a] writer catering to the popular audience cannot succeed ... by exposing the disturbing doubleness of experience, the breach between appearance and reality" (xvi). Indeed, Pym cedes to Poe's publication request in order to avoid potential charges of "doubleness," worried that readers might notice "breach[es] between appearance and reality." Seen within Poe's wider production, therefore, a careful reader will note how the artifice of *The Narrative's* preface parodies the advice proffered by the fictional "Mr. Blackwood"—namely, to avoid even acknowledging the possible charges of duplicity leveled at any fiction "based upon a true story."

This parodic analysis of the original *Pym's* "Preface" notwithstanding, the Poe scholar known as Chris Jaynes still reads the paratext as factual. Upon discovering a lost, or perhaps suppressed, manuscript by Pym's companion Dirk Peters, Jaynes proclaims it to be "the greatest discovery in the brief history of American letters" (39). Even if readers are willing here to go along with the notion that Peters's lost narrative at last corroborates the original story, an astute reader will note how Johnson's *Pym* is already playing with the breach between appearance and reality by providing its own fictional "Preface," where Jaynes confesses the story to be relayed "under the guise of fiction" at the behest of Mr. Johnson (4). In summoning the same five words from Poe's Preface, Jaynes and Johnson—or perhaps only Jaynes—take part in a multi-layered game of wordplay and paratextual conceits that throw attentive readers into a whirlpool of allusions, cross-references, and contradictions. In treating *The Narrative* as historical event, and presenting this 2011 novel as a parallel historical encounter, *Pym's* preface cues us into its self-conscious pattern of misreading. More to the point, by reading for factuality, Jaynes engages in a counterfactual reading practice that ignores the ironic artifices set forth by the original *Narrative*.

Pym, as a counterfactual interpretation of both Poe's novel and Poe's place in literary history, involves a form of "heresy," insofar as heresy implies a prehistory of the language of influence outlined by Bloom. *Pym* confounds orthodox—or might we say "doctrinal"—approaches to Poe's fiction. Writes Bloom,

Poetic Influence, as time has tarnished it, is part of the larger phenomenon of intellectual revisionism. And revisionism, whether in political theory, psychology, theology, law, poetics, has changed its nature in our time. The ancestor of revisionism is heresy, but heresy tended to change received doctrine by an

alteration of balances, rather than be what could be called creative correction (28-9).

Pym returns us to the heretical ancestry of intellectual revisionism, misreading not due to some unconscious anxiety of influence, but in order to essentially “change,” or at least challenge, “received doctrine.” *Pym* reads against the accepted conventions of historicity and politics, a misprision that generatively reimagines the function of race in American fiction. *Pym* is not, I think, “creative correction”; what Johnson’s novel entertains is much stronger than Bloom’s language allows. This is why I would like to suggest that *Pym* grows out of an “Influence of Anxiety,” rather than an “Anxiety of Influence.” Jaynes’s concern for the sociopolitical legacy of Poe’s novel, as well as his obsessive search for the historical underpinnings of its production, mark a self-consciously bad reading practice underscoring the ways in which a Bloomian model of literary inheritance might be said to domesticate or ignore the power of unorthodox thinking. That Jaynes embarks upon a dramatically literal reading practice in an era defined by postmodern irony is the greatest irony; his misprision highlights a need to continually reread the literary canon even as it satirizes the academic milieu in which such reading takes place.

If Jaynes is a heretically “bad” reader, this is not to say that he participates in a tradition of what Franco Moretti terms “distant reading.”² Rather, Jaynes is a neurotically close reader, one who takes stock of almost every plot hole and error encountered in Poe’s *Narrative*. He claims, in fact, that his love for *Pym* is partly inspired by its “failures”:

Pym that is maddening, *Pym* that is brilliant, *Pym* whose failures entice instead of repel. *Pym* that flows and ignites and *Pym* that becomes so entrenched it stagnates for hundreds of words at a time. A book that at points makes no sense, gets wrong both history and science, and yet stumbles into an emotional truth greater than both (22).

Jaynes goes on to summarize the entire plot of Poe’s novel, committing no less than ten pages and citing no less than nine extensive quotations from his source in order to mount the analysis. Jaynes naturally points our attention to the plot holes, such as the random appearance of Pym’s beloved dog, Tiger, who emerges in the shadowed hold of the ship after the preceding thirty pages failed to mention the animal even once (23). He then underscores the ways in which *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s narrative and historical “failures” result in an “emotional truth” that is both beyond and in direct contrast to

2. See Moretti, especially p. 62.

Poe's racist convictions. Even this conclusion is a form of bad reading, whereby his inability or unwillingness to critique Poe's racial politics results in his ostracism from the academic world in which he works.

In light of these critiques, *Pym* sets up a counterfactual retelling of *The Narrative* that seeks a deeper "truth," in a manner tapping into recent philosophical discourse on the topic of "counterfactual conditionals." According to philosopher Marc Lange, a "counterfactual analysis of logical truth allows the concept of logical truth to be connected directly to necessity," meaning for us that any truth statement issued by a text can be more directly linked to its potential social or literary outcome if placed in the context of the very counterfactual language employed by Chris Jaynes (Lange 293). On the other hand, Heather Demarest has mounted a critique of Lange by claiming that counterfactual logic, when placed under the stress of "additional counterexamples concerning nested counterfactuals," cannot justify its turn toward necessity (333). I find both arguments instructive in that as they speak to one of the central tensions at work within *Pym's* retelling: whereas Jaynes's mission to prove the existence of a historical Pym is a counterfactual conceit directed toward a "necessary" corrective regarding modern-day racial politics, the story also involves "nested counterfactuals" that seem to undermine, or at least satirize, that initial aim. *Pym's* counterfactuals are in fact profoundly "nested," not necessarily arriving at some deeper truth, but arriving at a productive rereading of Poe's *Narrative*.

Quite explicitly, *Pym* engages in a mode of forensics that seeks to justify its contradiction of inherited histories about both literature and identity. To take but one example, he willfully challenges Poe's insistence that Dirk Peters was a Native American and therefore "white." Traveling to a Gary, Indiana, where Peters's descendants now supposedly live, Jaynes attends a meeting of the Native American Ancestry Collective of Gary (NAACG), where the results of a recent DNA test are delivered in hopes of qualifying its members for federal benefits. Nevertheless, the researcher discovers that the members are predominantly of African ancestry, with an average of only "six percent" Native blood (55). The ensuing uproar from the NAACG, whose notions of identity have been fundamentally disrupted, points to the ways in which genetic substance and identity are inextricably linked in popular discourse about DNA. In *The Poetics of DNA*, Judith Roof observes that DNA has been granted agential capacity such that, "When we imagine genes as agents, they become literal representatives of our bodies, our wills, and our desires. We become our genes and

our genes become us, so that we imagine that we, too, somehow, survive from generation to generation” (149). Roof goes on to characterize companies and researchers who sell DNA results—including such websites as *Ancestry* and *LivingDNA*—as “selling identity cast as history” (199). In the terms of this essay, this researcher is selling “identity cast as facticity,” or at least a form of facticity. However, insofar as DNA evidence is perpetually made knowledgeable through metaphors of identity discrete from—and at times in contrast to—actual history and forensics, the appearance of DNA in Mat Johnson’s novel exposes the porous boundary between notions of “identity” and the realities of “fact.”

By riffing on the acronym for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as referring to the supposed “fact” of DNA, *Pym* issues a counterfactual corrective, making the case that Dirk Peters was indeed African American despite the original *Narrative*’s insistence to the contrary. *Or is this more accurately a counterfactual corrective?* The layers of fiction and fact are hard to parse out. Relaying these DNA findings, Jaynes dispels his readers and the NAACG of their fictional narratives of history, thus making amends for another fiction—Poe’s fiction—that erases the real Dirk Peters’s history in the first place. And all of this information is relayed through Johnson’s novel *Pym*, which in its full title announces itself as nothing more than fiction (*Pym: A Novel*). Johnson’s *Pym* goes so far as to tidily explain Poe’s paratextual material as an attempt to silence Peters: during his time in Gary, Jaynes is shown a letter from an exasperated Poe to an insistent Peters in which the author claims he will add “an epilogue in Mr. Pym’s hand to serve as the final linking entry” (50). In the epilogue mentioned here, the reader finds not Pym’s voice, however, but rather another writer’s: “the writer of this appendix,” a figure drawn in contradistinction to both the novel’s protagonist and Poe himself (176). Poe, “the gentleman whose name is mentioned in the preface,” has become disillusioned with the veracity of Pym’s account and has thus chosen to outsource the epilogue’s scripting (176). This additional division in authorship represents another sleight of hand by Poe intended, J. Gerald Kennedy argues, “to maintain the illusion of an absolute distinction between Edgar Poe and Gordon Pym” (291). When taken as a whole, therefore, here is the so-called “truth” behind *The Narrative*’s production according to Chris Jaynes: Poe’s novel, although declaring itself to be a fiction about and by Pym—wherein Pym’s “Preface” explains the fiction is fictional, and thus covertly factual—is gainsaid by the epilogue, which we learn was written by Poe in secret so as to silence a disgruntled

Dirk Peters, now in hiding for fear that abandoning Pym in the Antarctic will bring about vengeful repercussions from white, racist America.

The series of “nested counterfactuals” set forth by Johnson’s *Pym* problematize a linear reading practice, and by extension, frustrate the Bloomian model of influence. For Bloom, “to imagine is to misinterpret, which makes all poems antithetical to their precursors” (93). What makes *Pym* so confounding is the way in which it misinterprets by way of literal, historical engagement with its “parent” text; Bloom’s use of the word “antithetical,” therefore, does not easily fit a novel like *Pym* (94). On the other hand, if poetry is, as Bloom then suggests, “perverse, wilful, misprision,” then *Pym* eludes us once again—for its specific brand of misprision is more than happy to follow the fiction established by its predecessor (95). What I am trying to suggest is that *Pym*’s counterfactual misprision charts a course away from the “antithetical” model advised by *Anxiety of Influence*, casting new forms of poetic identity and new valences of “anxiety” that rather than merely challenge Bloom’s reading, offer new varieties of misprision and heresy. For Chris Jaynes, and Mat Johnson, how could it be otherwise? These two writers must direct themselves toward *four* original writers: Poe, Pym, Peters, and the unnamed writer of the epilogue. The influence is multiple, as are the accompanied anxieties. *Pym* is shaped by the influence of anxieties stemming from this fourfold narrative. Who to read, trust, defend, or pursue? Between fact and fiction, *Pym* is a blatant counterfactual construction meant to highlight those metaphors of identity that undergird our social and literary frames of reference. From Poe’s “maddening” *Narrative* to Johnson’s layered retelling, the displacement of any discourse of facticity seems to be precisely the point.

Counterpolitical Misprision

Part and parcel to Chris Jaynes’s misreading of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is his troubling redescription of the racial stakes inherent to Poe’s fiction. Claiming that *The Narrative* arrives at “an emotional truth greater than [science or history],” Jaynes offers an overly redemptive treatment of the original novel that risks eliding Poe’s barefaced racism as addressed by Morrison and others. However, as Tim Christensen argues, *Pym*’s mode of retelling might be understood as a form of what Christian Moraru has called “postmodern rewriting” (168). Although there seems little doubt that Johnson’s *Pym* indeed fits the mold of a “postmodern rewrite” that “reshap[es] ... cultural myths that ground the text being rewritten,” it does so in deeply disruptive ways

(168). For instance, Jaynes's project of exposing the "pathology of Whiteness" clearly satirizes the politico-academic template set forth by Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.³ On the very first page of the novel, Jaynes explains that the course he offers at the university denying his tenure is somewhat insensitively titled, "Dancing with the Darkies: Whiteness in the Literary Mind" (7). Jaynes is unwilling or unable to play the diversity game, to cater to the demands of the academy's standards of pedagogy. Yet, Jaynes's commitment to finding a "cure" for racism thrusts him into uneasy territory that only serves to seal his vocational demise:

My work, it's about finding the answer to why we have failed to truly become a postracial society. It's about finding the cure! A thousand Baldwin and Ellison essays can't do this, you have to go to the source, that's why I started focusing on Poe. If we can identify how the pathology of Whiteness was constructed, then we can learn how to dismantle it (14).

Chris Jaynes embraces a misprision that is not simply counterfactual, but more accurately, counter to accepted political language. Jaynes's critique of Baldwin and Ellison as ineffectual in "dismantl[ing]" the dominant ideology takes aim at a tradition of African American literature that has established itself primarily in relation to a canon of black writers.

In so doing, *Pym* dismisses the language of racial "authenticity" as simply another failed attempt to arrive at the factual, or the real. Deconstructively, Johnson's novel calls into question the rigid categories of racial identity, continuing the thematics at work in the scene showcasing the DNA test results, where we found a porous boundary between notions of identity and appeals to facticity. The university that denies Jaynes tenure is in search of the right kind of identity; they demand not only the appropriate ethnic participant, but also conformity to the apparatuses of racial authenticity in the contemporary academy. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that in Jaynes's stead, the university hires a professor of *modern* African American literature, a man who immediately signals his authenticity as soon as he claims to study "[t]he real shit," that is, the "ghetto" (18). This man's name is Mosaic Johnson—whose initials and surname offer a transparent self-parody of Mat Johnson himself, also a currently employed college professor—and his willing obedience to the standards of diversity and periodization prompts Jaynes to inform his successor, "Every good zoo needs a

3. While not going so far as to view *Pym* as satirizing Morrison's seminal study, Jennifer M. Wilks argues, "Johnson complicates his exploration of racialized service via Chris' (re)turn to Poe after his firing" (6). Wilks then adds, "Johnson and African American contemporaries such as Percival Everett and Danzy Senna juxtapose racial categories in order to complicate blackness" (7).

caged gorilla" (21). Jaynes's violent metaphor, with its stark dehumanization of Johnson, turns racial categorization inside out, satirizing both Jaynes's short-sightedness and those who would believe that an African American professor must study his or her "own" literature. *Pym* thus remains reticent about the more traditional forms of identity politics, and following Jaynes's censure of Mosaic Johnson, engages in a trenchant biopolitical critique about the status of humanity across ethnic and political boundaries.

Indeed, throughout his outlining of biopolitics, Michel Foucault explains that racism is fundamentally formed by modes of ontological division that exert disparate degrees of biological power on one group or another. "The first function of racism," he says simply, "[is] to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower" (255). In other words, Jaynes's dehumanizing of Mosaic Johnson reveals how even within a given racial category, biopower can be wielded in order to mobilize ontological "caesuras" within itself. As a consequence, *Pym's* repeated interest in the status of the human, inhuman, and nonhuman represents an ironic self-awareness of the ways in which racial discourse must resist reinstituting divisions, what Foucault calls "caesuras." Cary Wolfe has helped further expand the political stakes of Foucault's contributions by showing how biopolitics must be broad enough to encompass the wider "community of the living and the concern we should all have with where violence and immunitary protection fall within it, because we are all ... potentially animals before the law" (105). These words, from the conclusion of Wolfe's *Before the Law*, resonate with Johnson's novel, where various characters are humanized or dehumanized in strange and unpredictable fashion, producing a political misprision that critiques authentic or redemptive views of racial progress. Biopolitics, while not the primary investment of this article, is nevertheless a crucial lens through which to understand the ways in which the vernacular of "humanism" is taken up and troubled through the counterpolitical and counterracial rhetorics of *Pym*.

Both Poe's *Narrative* and Johnson's *Pym* explore the role of the racialized other—often dehumanized or bestialized—albeit ultimately from different vantages. Jaynes retraces Poe's voyage toward the other: toward Poe's island of "Tsalal, the great African Disaporan homeland," a place "uncorrupted by whiteness" (39). Here he plans to rediscover the people Poe describes in abundant, dark detail: those whose skin is "jet black," whose "canoes were full of black stones about the size of a large egg," who do not qualify as human to Poe, being "barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches

(131, 132, and 145). These “savages,” as Poe calls them, are terrified of whiteness, living in a world supposedly free from any “white materials” (178). As the writer of *The Narrative*’s epilogue clarifies, “Nothing white was to be found at Tsalal, and nothing otherwise in the subsequent voyage to the region beyond” (178). Pym and Peters escape Tsalal, only to be famously welcomed to the Antarctic by the shrouded white giant critiqued in Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*. Pym, however, inverts Poe’s model: instead of escaping south from enslavement at the hands of black islanders on Tsalal, Jaynes and his crew escape north from enslavement at the hands of white giants on the Antarctic ice shelf. In “The Quest for Tsalal,” Richard Kopley suggests that this reversal indicates of a deep “irony” at work within the novel, for

while the Tsalalians in Johnson’s *Pym* are a black force for redemption, the Tsalalians in Poe’s *Pym* are allegorically Romans laying siege to and destroying Jerusalem—that is, a white force for the elimination of redemption. The white “shrouded human figure” suggests, in my view, Christ prophesying the coming of the New Jerusalem. In both novels, then, regardless of the racial view advanced, the conclusion offers an image of transformative purity (44).

Although Kopley’s allegorical reading proposes interesting ways of reading Poe’s novel, especially in light of its confounding conclusion, Mat Johnson’s *Pym* continually resists “offer[ing] an image of transformative purity.” In fact, announcing itself as directly opposed to the kind of “transformative” politics signified by Mosaic Johnson and the university’s “Diversity Committee,” Jaynes’s story suggests ways of reading through and across the firm division of black and white, authentic and inauthentic, human and nonhuman.

Put another way, no racial category is above critique and no character can be said to embody “purity,” for even Jaynes violently regards his anti-persona, Mosaic Johnson, as somehow less than human (“a caged gorilla”). Poe’s *Narrative* is also surprisingly attentive to human/nonhuman dichotomies and is far from predictable in its exploration of human definitions.⁴ First and foremost, Poe observes how the category of the “human” is troubled by discourses of eating, leading Jeremy MacFarlane to argue that Pym’s encounters with cannibalism results in an “existential crisis that emerges from the necessity of eating in the novel” (28). But what one eats is not the only litmus test by which one can be called “human,” for such classifications

4. See Mastroianni for a discussion of Poe’s experiments with hospitality as a means of “at least threaten[ing] to undermine white supremacist dogma” and redefining humanity (198). Also, for an even more recent account of Poe’s relation between the human and nonhuman, see Lilley’s incisive survey of the “malacological aesthetics” contained within *The Narrative*.

are also made through mere physical appearance. For instance, even as Poe observes the ways in which Dirk Peters is “deformed” and “Herculean,” he is nevertheless quick to specify how his “hands ... retain a human shape” (38). And like Peters, the final figure of the novel—the one famously emerging from the Antarctic cataract—is Herculean, “larger in its proportions than any dweller among men” (175). Still, despite the creature’s gargantuan size and despite *The Narrative’s* use of the gender-neutral pronoun “its,” Poe is insistent that this perfectly white figure is “human” (175). *Pym* reads against Poe’s definitions insofar as the characters refuse to call these creatures, whom they also encounter in Antarctica, “human.” Their entire voyage is, in many ways, a blatant inversion of Poe’s *Narrative*. Jaynes sails to the Antarctic aboard a ship called the *Creole*, captained by his emotionally unstable cousin Booker Jaynes, and manned by an all black crew featuring Jaynes’s best friend Garth Frierson, Jaynes’s ex-wife Angela and her husband Nathaniel, and Jeffree and Carlton Damon Carter, filmmakers who express interest in making a documentary they tentatively title “*Negroes on Ice*” (77). When they discover a lost civilization of white giants beneath the ice, including an ancient Arthur Gordon Pym somehow still living, they each respond to their new situation differently. Civil Rights activist and *Creole* captain Booker Jaynes sees only the creatures’ whiteness, and because of this fact believes them to be “blind to us in every human way” (145). Booker’s fear, in other words, is that they will be dehumanized in the eyes of the other—a fear soon substantiated when the party is sentenced to one hundred years of slavery by the ruling body of the Tekelians.

Dehumanization travels both directions in the novel, however, and Jaynes finds himself perpetually at the nexus of these transvaluations of ontology. The white giants are christened “Tekelians” by Jaynes—since they, like Poe’s islanders, cry out “*Tekeli-li!*”—but are further branded, even prior to their enslavement of the *Creole* crew, as “humanoids” (130), “monsters” (148), “snow monkeys” (153), and “snow honkies” (160). Concerning the last appellation, Jaynes supplies the following footnote: “I realize *honkies* is a racial slur and the Tekelians might not even technically count as human, but this was the word that ... stuck in my subconscious” (160). Elsewhere, Jaynes falters when trying to ask for help from the Tekelians, unsure if he can refer to them as “people” or not (147). Recording his own racism and his own instantiation of ontological “caesuras” between those who count as human or not, Chris Jaynes makes a redemptive, “transformative” reading of the novel’s racial politics at best implausible

and at worst impossible. And he alone is forced to negotiate these definitions, because Pym and the Tekelians regard him as white. As Jaynes makes clear during the scenes among the “snow monkeys,” “A point of plot and order: I am a mulatto ... so visibly lacking in African heritage that I often appear to some uneducated eyes as a random, garden-variety white guy” (135). His status as liminal racial figure—as “mulatto”—allows Jaynes to negotiate the terms of the party’s enslavement, even as he also repeatedly employs hostile, racially-charged gestures in describing their captors.

Chris Jaynes is uniquely positioned in yet another manner; due to his intimate knowledge of Poe’s novel, he alone appears capable of translating the desires of both Pym and his Tekelian compatriots. In one telling moment, the party deploys Little Debbie cakes in a comedic re-trope of a cliché, colonial trading encounter. Christensen reads this scene as indicative of Johnson’s critique of consumer culture in late capitalism, whereby “the Tekelians succumb to the serial consumption of sugary snack cakes ... [which] creates desire beyond the possibility of satisfaction” (176). These Little Debbie cakes (read: “sublime objects”) thus institute a “bottomless need,” and eventually lead to the enslavement of the novel’s adventurers.⁵ Jaynes’s reading of this moment is that when it comes to the relationship between the Tekelians and the Creole crew, it is not common humanity that unites them. “*Our animalism connects us,*” Jaynes explains after sharing another cake with a hungry Tekelian (126). While Christensen’s essay is rightly attuned to the capital critiques mounted by Johnson’s *Pym*, I cannot agree with his assessment that Garth is “closer to the mark” by regarding the Tekelians as human. Garth saying, of the cakes, “Them shits is good” does not, to my mind, signal a clear awareness of common humanity (127). Arguing that the hunger for commodity is a uniquely *human* form of hunger, Christensen seems to take for granted the “human” as a separable, ontological category—a category that I see *Pym* recurrently deconstructing and redefining. The narratives of racial progress are traditionally grounded in the logics of humanity and humanism, but *Pym* reads against these narrative tropes, parodying human and nonhuman hunger as ultimately indistinguishable. To understand *Pym*’s counterpolitical stakes is to grasp how, as Wolfe’s *Before the Law* suggests, “animalism”—and not humanism—connects the diverse forms of life depicted in this satire.

5. See also Žižek’s *Sublime Object of Ideology*, which Christensen engages with quite explicitly throughout his essay, especially in his discussion of this scene.

Pym is penned against “authenticity,” against the “human” as a discernible classification of being, and against political narratives based upon monolithic concepts like “transformation” or “purity.” This is misprision at its finest delineation, indeed spelling out what Bloom calls a “deliberate misinterpretation ... of a precursor” (43). *Pym* critiques not only Poe, but also Morrison, a twinned misprision that may help explain why I argue the novel grows out of “the influence of its anxieties.” *Pym* taps into preexisting political apprehensions, embodying a second-order treatment of the very concept of “anxiety,” as such, by addressing who in the novel counts as human. No character is spared from slippage into the territory of the nonhuman: even Garth is momentarily seen as “inhuman,” as a “beast,” when Jaynes finds him hiding in the shadows of the ice tunnels, ravenously eating Little Debbie cakes (120). These moments of ontological indeterminacy carry powerful significance, for they both invite and undermine an established politics that appeals to common humanity. Instead, *Pym* points toward our shared inhumanity as a counterpolitical gesture of self-conscious misprision that renders a biopolitical corrective on the level of “animality.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Bloom is one step ahead of us, however, observant of a “radical analogue between human and poetic birth, between biological and creative anxiety” (58). That is, the biological fight for survival and distinction—which as Foucault tells us, is always already a political fight as well—is akin to the poetic desire to create and recreate its inherited literary tradition. Inasmuch as this reading of *Pym* has sought to engage with and perhaps exceed the Bloomian model of influence it must also acknowledge how Bloom’s attention to antithesis is already tuned into the counterpolitical—and perhaps even *counterbiopolitical*—possibilities of artistic creation. In its many modes of rewriting Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative*, *Pym*’s most radical act is arguably its patent refusal to engage with the allegedly authenticating discourse of humanism, repeatedly exposing its characters’ turns toward the fraught biopolitical language of animality and inhumanism. Johnson’s novel, that is, rejects *The Narrative*’s interest in “retaining and redefining the human,” as Dominic Mastroianni contends, in favor of exposing the fault lines of this binary altogether (186). What I think we learn from Jaynes’s misreading of his various political and racial contexts is the way in which progressive ideas, once transformed into an inflexible identity politics, risk reinscribing the very boundaries against which those ideas were initially developed. A subtle retelling that moves against the grain of both Morrison and Poe,

Pym engages a counterpolitical misprision as much about biological anxiety as creative anxiety, as much about the meaning of “human” as the categories of racial identity.

Countersublime Misprision

Full of giants, *Pym* at last finds itself surrounded by looming, representative forces from a series of artistic legacies. All that has been repressed in the novel returns, as Bloom promises such repression must, since “Freud’s vision of repression emphasizes that forgetting is anything but a liberating process. Every forgotten precursor becomes a *giant* of the imagination” (106; my emphasis). Here Bloom uses the word “forgotten” liberally, signifying not a literal lack of memory, but rather a forced forgetting that makes creative—and yes, even biological—progress possible. Among these giant precursors are not only Morrison and Poe, but also the wider canon of eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narratives, which Jaynes has spent his academic career avoiding. Consider, on balance, that the entire novel is predicated upon Jaynes’s discovery of a manuscript by a black author, *The True and Interesting Narrative of Dirk Peters*—a title that plays with the early American literary formula made famous by *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Thus, as Jennifer M. Wilks has likewise noted, the standard canon represented by “not only the seafaring tale but also the neo-slave narrative” looms as a large, political force—and not merely a “plot device”—shaping *Pym* (3). In contrast to these literary tropes are the dominant, white aesthetics epitomized by the appearance of Thomas Karvel—a twenty-first century painter in the tradition of the Hudson River School clearly parodying contemporary artist Thomas Kincaid—who lives on the Antarctic continent. Coming to terms with the persistent aesthetics of the Hudson River School, including its erasure of labor and black bodies in favor of sublime landscapes, signifies a final way in which Johnson’s novel counters the anxieties and influence of its precursors.

Pym arrives at its climax in the presence of Karvel and his wife, far-right conservatives who have fled to Antarctica to live within a perfectly contained politico-aesthetic atmosphere under the glass arches of “a state-of-the-art 3.2 Ultra BioDome” (239). In this NASA-designed BioDome, Karvel pipes hours of taped radio programs through overhead speakers, featuring conservative pundits Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’Reilly, and Sean Hannity. Garth and Jaynes are saved from the Tekelians by Karvel, much to the delight of Garth, who is a lifelong fan of the man colloquially referred to as

the “Master of Light” (recall here that Thomas Kincaid has been called the “Painter of Light”) (35). Jaynes, on the other hand, despises the man’s artwork, all the more so after being forced to accompany Garth on “Karvel spotting” trips, where Garth tries to find the exact spot where the painter must have stood when creating some of his famous, and mass-produced, canvases (35). Like Garth, who visits these original sites to what if feel like to “climb in [the painting],” Karvel is also playing a game of “Karvel spotting” (36). He, too, wants to live inside his paintings, and the BioDome provides an opportunity to do precisely that: this “[h]ermetically sealed, fully self-contained” interior restages Karvel’s paintings in dramatically literal fashion, with “too green” grass and water that is “actually *blue*” (240–1). Recall here that one definition of misprision is a natural “malformation.” This malformation, however, is also “uncanny,” which, following both Bloom and Freud, refers to a process by which “something which is secretly familiar ... has undergone repression and then returned from it” (Freud 246). With its hyperreal construction of the sublime imaginary, especially its literal political echo chamber, the BioDome clearly metonymizes the “pathology of Whiteness” that Jaynes has spent his career pursuing. This vacuum for neoconservative, sublime ideology brings together the scientific and biopolitical undercurrents of the novel in one final critique of the poetics of the past.

Pym’s countersublime aesthetics underscore how the histories of art are implicated in the histories of racism, including the manner in which the language of influence might be said to privilege a canonical mainstream of white, male creators. For Bloom to say that poets must engage with the masters of the past begs the question, *Who counts as a “master”*? In what ways might the “anxiety of influence” unintentionally valorize an exclusionary aesthetic tradition of white, primarily male authors? Like the literary canon, the BioDome houses destructive ideas about inclusion and exclusion, human and nonhuman, freedom and enslavement:

A man who lives a life worth living, he’s a hunter. He hunts for something, he hunts for his dream. And his dream is always the same thing: to create a world he can truly live in, without Big Brother enslaving him to mediocrity. So I created this free land. First within my art, and now in life ... A clean canvas. A place with no violence and no disease, no poverty and no crime. No taxes or building codes. This is a place without history. A place without stain. No yesterday, only tomorrow. Only beauty. Only the world the way it’s supposed to be (241).

Mobilizing metaphors of both hunting and artistic creation, or the “clean canvas,” this vision of the sublime claims to avert violence by instituting its own kind of biopolitical violence. These images imply that certain sacrifices are acceptable in the pursuit of

unfettered freedom: namely, the sacrifice of the nonhuman other and the sacrifice of all human others not permitted access to the rarified, artificial milieu of the BioDome. Moreover, by describing the BioDome in relation to what it is “without”—that is to say without poverty, violence, history, and especially disease—Karvel signals that his dream is to immunize himself from the outside world and its others, a move that according to Roberto Esposito enacts the very functioning of biopolitical logic. In *Terms of the Political*, Esposito asks, “What is immunization if not a kind of progressive interiorization of exteriority?” (41).⁶ The BioDome is an example of just such an interiorization, taking the complexity of an “outside world,” with its diseases and discord, and forcing it to fit the eco-aesthetic frame of this strange, experimental greenhouse.

Karvel’s sublime is a biopolitical nightmare, supported as much by the violent rhetorics of exclusion as by its creator’s monomaniacal vision for his art. “God created nature,” he informs Jaynes. “I just improved on it” (241). Karvel works from that assumption that mankind is tasked with “improv[ing]” nature, an avowal that takes for granted not only the existence of God, but more troublingly, the idea that “nature” is a stable monolith. Timothy Morton has suggested we must understand the metaphors and imaginaries that subtend any idea of “nature,” as they do any concept of the “human.” In *Ecology without Nature*, Morton interrogates “how nature is set up as a transcendental, unified, independent category,” instead finding the term to be often contextual and contingent, linked to aesthetic ideas of the past, including the “sublime” (13).⁷ Karvel’s singular understanding of nature is constitutive of his biopolitical framing. When Jaynes at one point suggests redecorating the BioDome, having heard of Karvel’s dislike for the way a certain palm tree appears, the Master of Light’s curt answer says it all: “No. There is only one look. There is only one vision. Perfection isn’t about change, diversity. It’s about getting closer to that one vision” (251). Karvel’s racism is not *explicit*, as such, but rather knotted within his political, aesthetic commitments. His “one vision” is a white vision—of landscape without labor or black bodies, of nature without its “dark” or non-painterly aspects.⁸

Because Jaynes reads against the sublime, perceiving its ugly associations with a larger political history, he remains unconvinced by Karvel’s project. He regards the

6. On biopolitics’ relation to interiority and exteriority, Cary Wolfe offers, “It separates the inside from the outside, the intrinsic and the extrinsic, and yet also serves to bridge them, making them interdependent” (6).

7. Morton discusses the “sublime” most explicitly on pp. 46, 64, and 76.

8. Here I am thinking specifically of Timothy Morton’s *Dark Ecology*.

space as sheer “artifice,” especially at night, when the waterfalls and radios are shut off (249). Jaynes’s reservations in fact align with Christensen’s point that the BioDome a supreme example of Baudrillard’s theoretical “simulacrum,” an image that “displace[s] reality as the ontological base of knowledge and being” (178). That is to say that the BioDome positions itself as “real” only inasmuch as it supplants or removes the model of reality upon which it is based. The BioDome seals itself off from so-called “nature” in order to, as Karvel sees it, replace and improve upon that “nature.” The simulacrum then erodes the foundations of “reality,” or as Baudrillard puts it, has the effect of “concealing that reality no more exists outside than inside the limits of the artificial perimeter” (14). Nature and reality are both victims of misprision in Mat Johnson’s *Pym*, nothing more than simulacra that destabilize the model after which they are formed. And it is telling that the BioDome fails to uphold its perfectly immunized “perimeter”: fails, that is, to keep out the Tekelians, who soon destroy the shelter and propel Jaynes toward the story’s end. In these final moments, Jaynes counters the politico-aesthetic master narrative of the sublime imagination by once more reading against the accepted canons and categories of art.

Once again, Harold Bloom anticipates us, regarding one of the signature traits of the anxiety of influence to be the establishment of just such a “Counter-Sublime.” “*Daemonization* or the Counter-Sublime,” writes Bloom, “is a war between Pride and Pride, and momentarily the power of newness wins” (101). The Counter-Sublime is a mode of “*daemonization*,” not of the precursor but of the protégé, in turn elevating and then weakening the precursor through of mode of counteracting the inherited sublime imaginary. The Counter-Sublime, that is,

suggests the *precursor's relative weakness*. When the ephebe is daemonized, his precursor necessarily is humanized, and a new Atlantic floods outward from the new poet's transformed being ... The Counter-Sublime does not show forth as limitation to the imagination proving its capability. In *this* transport, the only visible object eclipsed or dissolved is the vast image of the precursor (100).⁹

The sublime is a fantasy, an image of man and nature that the next generation of poets must “eclipse[]” and “dissolve[]” with their own version of fantasy. If Jaynes is a “bad” reader, as I think *Pym* at times suggests, he at least proves to be a more incisive reader than Karvel or Garth. Jaynes alone can perceive the precarious artifice of this aesthetic production: the way in which Karvel’s artistic masterpiece, the BioDome, is ripe for

9. The Counter-Sublime does not imply that the “ephebe” can negate his or her literary inheritance, however, for as Bloom quickly adds, “Negation of the precursor is never possible” (102).

destruction. Jaynes alone documents the undergirding racial violence of Karvel's commitment to the "one vision" for his Antarctic dreamland, explicitly calling the BioDome a "plantation" (249). Layered misprisions—factual, political, and aesthetic—announce themselves with the BioDome's demolition, staging a literal implosion of *Pym's* legacies of influence.

But to the extent that *Pym* directly encounters the anxiety produced by its influences, it also reveals how anxieties are already implicated in the literary precursors with which it engages. From Poe to Morrison to the Hudson River School, such pretexts are always already plagued by their own anxieties, their own influences. In its metatreatment of the language of influence, *Pym* appears much more like a "mash-up" of precursors, such that the Bloomian model is both apt and, at the same time, not quite complete. Here my analysis echoes Marjorie Garber's 2016 critique of Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*. In "Over the Influence," Garber contends, "In these days of mash-ups, avatars, transformers, and surgical makeovers, influence is often a part of the artwork itself. Maybe it is the term that seems so out of date, so fifties, so seventies, so whatever. To revise, swerve, and tweak this essential function, we could rename it: how about the flu?" (759). To my mind, *Pym* is an example of this "swerving" aesthetic, which in its very formation acknowledges the limits and possibilities of influence. Garber humorously suggests the term "flu" as a substitute for "influence" because Bloom himself acknowledges the etymological linkage between the Italian *influenza* and poetic influence. "If influence were health," says Bloom, "who could write a poem? Health is stasis" (95). So, influence is a form of exposure or risk: a lack of immunization. Karvel builds his BioDome in order to institute absolute "stasis," unquestioned "health." The same might be said of "Diversity Committees" and canonical classifications, which hermetically seal themselves off against the possibility of contagion. We find, in the end, that *Pym* has been charting a course through various influences and *influenzas*, swerving amid these traditions so as to ironically highlight the imbricated qualities of anxiety and influence, health and disease. In the end, this essay seeks not so much to undermine Bloom's "anxiety of influence" but to allow it to evolve alongside postmodern strains of irony, reflexivity, and metanarrative.

After all, Mat Johnson's misprision is of a second-order, where *Pym* might be called a strain of the "flu," a metanarrative that embeds its influences within the story proper. Like its source text—Poe's *Narrative*—*Pym* never arrives at its destination, whether that means rediscovering the island of Tsalal or, as Jaynes hopes, finding a "cure" for

racism. In the concluding line from Jaynes's account, Garth, Jaynes, and the recently deceased Arthur Gordon Pym arrive at an island in the Antarctic seas: "Whether this was Tsalal or not, however, Garth and I could make no judgments. On the shore all I could discern was a collection of brown people, and this, of course, is a planet on which such are the majority" (322). These lines signal, for a final time, how monolithic categories are under pressure in Johnson's *Pym*—even the category of "blackness." For where Poe is attentive to the "jet black" skin of these others, Jaynes insists their complexion, as with the majority of those living on this planet, is "brown." This moment pushes toward a liminal, complex reading that refuses to participate in the ideological dialectic set forth by his predecessors: refuses, in other words, to strictly participate in the *daemonizing* Counter-Sublime proposed by Bloom.

In its various modes of counterfact, counterpolitics, and countersublime, *Pym* seeks to arrive at a deeper truth of societal formations, perhaps even a deeper understanding of history itself. Jaynes speaks quite pointedly to those who reject historical temporalities, noting how, for both Karvel and the Tekelians, whiteness is created by an exodus from history: "That is how they stay so white," he observes, "by refusing to accept blemish or history" (225). Wilks notes that this statement signifies a major motif for *Pym*, where the dream of a "postracial paradise" collides with a rejection of historical, political, or racial "blemish" (13). In and through these blemishes, influenzas, and anxieties we must traverse. Against the factual, the political, and the sublime—insofar as these are univocal categories built upon exclusionary, biopolitical logics—*Pym* holds the capacity to radicalize Harold Bloom's account of poetic influence: to "swerve" from its now familiar pattern. Mat Johnson's misprision is a *mistake*, an intentional *mis-taking* of its legacies, a bold underscoring of its precursors' anxiety, and a novel step forward in the diseased, unimmunized influence of literature and race in our world.

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