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Post-Racial or Racial Plateau?: *Pym*'s Revisions of *Arthur Gordon Pym*'s Racism

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Post-Racial or Racial Plateau?: *Pym*'s Revisions of *Arthur Gordon Pym*'s Racism

Twenty-first century America is racially controversial and contradictory. In the broadest terms, two racial discourses structure contemporary American society: one that acknowledges the persistence of racism, and one that suggests we are trending toward or have become a post-racial society.<sup>1</sup> For those who participate in the latter discourse, the 2008 election of President Obama signaled America's racial amelioration and our entrance into an era believed to be conducive to healing America's past racial wounds. Yet many others remain resolute—and rightfully so, considering the recent flood of police killings of African Americans and the subsequent protests—in their stance that argues for America's still-racist mindset. Fiction writer Mat Johnson contributes to the argument of America's failed post-racial state through his novel *Pym*, a spin-off novel of Edgar Allan Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), in which protagonist Chris Jaynes is driven by his theory that identifying the pathology of whiteness will explain why America has yet to become post-racial. In a similar vein, the debate of America's racial state as either enduringly racist or post-racial has become a source of interest for contemporary scholars Tim Wise, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and Ramón Saldívar, all of whom assert that America is not post-racial, and moreover, that we are “far from it” (Saldívar 1). But whereas these arguments of America's failure to become post-racial evolve from historical, sociological, or psychological roots, this essay contributes to such discussions through the lens of literature.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say, however, that deviations and more complex strands of discourse pertaining to our racial state do not surround this conversation.

This essay examines two works of literature separated by two centuries: Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) and Mat Johnson's *Pym* (2011). Johnson's novel is in direct conversation with Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*, as it imports Poe's characters and plot, albeit with biting satire. Both novels follow their respective protagonist throughout his time spent in a foreign environment, document his taxing encounter with racial others, and conclude with the tragic deaths of those around him, leaving only the protagonist and his companion to sail off into ambiguity. But aside from the more blatant connections between the two, both *Arthur Gordon Pym* and *Pym* are structured by similar racial triangulations. That is, Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* contains three distinct chromatic groups of white, black, and Native American, and similarly, Johnson's *Pym* is structured around a triangulation which includes black explorers, monstrous white Tekelians, and a white neoconservative couple named the Karvels.

My acknowledgement of triangulated racial structures in each novel is an attempt to amend the critical limitations that arise from past scholars' emphasis on racial binaries in Poe. Dana D. Nelson and Toni Morrison are among the many scholars whose critical works exert a narrowed focus on black-white dichotomies in Poe's work. Nelson's *The Word in Black and White*, for example, barely addresses the presence of Native American Dirk Peters in *Arthur Gordon Pym* despite his prominent role as Pym's loyal companion. To correct such thinking, I propose a focus should be placed on the triangulated racial structures present in both *Arthur Gordon Pym* and *Pym*. This approach broadens the scope of racial thinking beyond simply black and white, and furthermore, encourages the contemporary thinker's movement away from the simple and arguably racist white-black, good-bad, civilized-savage dichotomous conceptions of the preceding centuries.

In addition to my comparative exploration of *Arthur Gordon Pym* and *Pym*, my essay also interweaves discussion relating to Herman Melville's nineteenth-century novel *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) and Colson Whitehead's contemporary work *Zone One* (2011). In addition to incorporating these novels as a tool to briefly contextualize Poe and Johnson's novels—*Typee*'s analogous focus on the racial Other begins to authenticate the claim for Poe and the nineteenth-century's fascination in Otherness, for example—I also put these four novels in conversation with one another during my later discussion of genre. After noting how *Arthur Gordon Pym* and *Typee* adhere to elements of nineteenth-century non-fiction travel writing and how *Pym* and *Zone One* embrace science fiction conventions through their use of the apocalypse or apocalyptic elements, I pose the question of why the popular literary genre to interrogate race has evolved from the nineteenth-century travel narrative to the contemporary apocalypse.

Although produced by authors of different racial backgrounds, published in seemingly different cultures, and separated by two centuries, Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* and Johnson's *Pym* are novels with analogous plots and triangulated racial constructs. Yet these novels do have their differences as well, primarily in how each author constructs his racial triangulations. Whereas Poe's racial constructs are strictly chromatic, Johnson's racial constructs contain layers and racial fluidities that Poe's structure lacks. It is within this exploration of *Arthur Gordon Pym* and *Pym*'s racial similarities and differences that this essay places the majority of its focus. By mapping analogous racial triangulations in both novels, this essay comparatively examines how Johnson's contemporary novel *Pym* continues and revises race and racism portrayed in Poe's canonical nineteenth-century novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. As I explore Johnson's leveraging of *Arthur Gordon Pym*'s racist conceptions to critique contemporary American racism, I argue that the cumbersome and mirrored presence of racism in

both novels suggests a plateau in nineteenth-century and twenty-first-century racial ideologies, a point that highlights how startlingly little racism has changed from Poe's time to ours and authenticates refutations for post-racialist arguments.

### **Poe and Previous Scholarship**

Although Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* is a tangled work of fiction, much of the novel's plot and narrative cater to the nineteenth-century's interest in non-fiction travel writing. As title character Pym sets sail from Nantucket, embarks on an exploration of the uncharted South, and finds himself immersed in a foreign culture of a remote island's inhabitants, Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* conforms to the characteristics of the travel writing genre described by Janet Giltrow as "the setting out from familiar shores to travel remote coasts, [and] the discovery of an astonishing other-world" (19). Yet the plot of *Arthur Gordon Pym* is not the only element of the novel to draw heavily from this genre. Elements of the novel's narrative—Pym's digressive detailing of his surrounding environment, the novel's sporadic transition from prose narrative to journal entry, Poe's heavy reference to the travel writing of Jeremiah N. Reynolds—also elucidates Poe's attempt to craft a work of fictional literature that appeals to the republic's growing fascination with accounts of foreign adventures and Manifest Destiny. Similar to Nelson who mentions the circulating belief of Manifest Destiny during Poe's writing of *Arthur Gordon Pym*, Leland S. Person suggests not only the republic's interest in the explored and expandable, but also their growing captivation with race and Otherness as he explains, "Color and race differences fascinated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans, and I think Poe inscribes such fascinations" (206). Both Nelson and Leland are accurate to assert such claims, for aside from Poe's own ideological quirks that arguably make appearances throughout the novel, *Arthur*

*Gordon Pym* is a novel that largely caters to the nineteenth-century reader's curiosity for Otherness and the unexplored.

Just as it adheres to the nineteenth-century's interest in travel writing, the novel's plot also clearly reflects the whirlwind of anxieties and racial upheaval circulating among antebellum Americans during Poe's writing and publication of *Arthur Gordon Pym*. Whether the novel's protagonist Pym is onboard the boat *The Grampus* battling mutinous uprisings led by the ship's black cook, or caught amidst the brutal conflict that ensue between his fellow white explorers and black island natives called Tsalalians, fatal clashes between white and black structure the novel's entirety. Published in 1838, *Arthur Gordon Pym* emerged amidst some of America's most racially turbulent years preceding the Civil War. The novel typifies many of antebellum America's racial anxieties for otherness through the brutal and fatal conflicts that ensue between the novel's "savage" black Tsalalians and the "civilized" white explorers. From Nelson's examination of the novel's imperialistic undertones to John Carlos Rowe's connecting of the novel's conflict with the 1831 Nat Turner Rebellion, previous scholars have pursued extensive critical and historical analysis in regards to the novel's black-white, southern-northern, and savage-civilized binary. And of course such explorations are entirely grounded considering the novel's weighty emphasis placed upon Pym's peculiar Tsalalian excursion and the extensive discourse that details his encounter with the racial Other. Past explorations of black-white binaries in Poe's other fictions, too, are critically relevant considering the blatant racial commentaries they produce in the wake of antebellum America and its racial anxieties. From "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842) to "The Black Cat" (1843), Poe's envisioning of white and black in close proximity is associated with imprisonment and torture, pain and ruin. Likewise, the same tragedies that arise from black-white interactions in *Arthur Gordon Pym* also appear in

“Metzengerstein” (1832), in which antebellum society’s anxieties for blackness and slave uprisings take the form of a fevered horse who invokes a “singular, intense, and overwhelming anxiety” in his perverse white rider (84). And although past scholarship has rightfully pursued examination of black-white binaries in Poe’s fiction, to approach *Arthur Gordon Pym* in a similar manner is to partake in critical oversight for the novel’s other form of racial otherness, the Native American.

Despite the large amount of scholarship that examines black-white binaries in *Arthur Gordon Pym*, scholars, whether intentionally or not, gloss over the novel’s Native American “half-breed” Dirk Peters. Perhaps the subtleties of Peters’ Native American ethnicity are the reason for this problematic oversight, as the novel mentions Peters’ Native American lineage, “This man was the son of an Indian squaw of the tribe of Upsarokas,” only once (Poe 459). However, lack of acknowledgement of Peters’ ethnicity does not account for past scholars’ brushing over of his role in the novel, especially considering the interconnecting role he plays with both the novel’s black and white characters: Peters saves white shipmates Augustus and Pym from the brutalities of the black cook’s mutinous uprisings and remains Pym’s local protectant against the black Tsalalians’ desperate attempt to eradicate all things white from their dominantly black environment. Historian Ronald Takaki brings forth this need to address more than black-white binaries in nineteenth-century America as he writes, “According to Franklin’s delineation of the different racial groups in America, there were three based on color—white, black, and ‘twany.’ The question of the relationship between race and republican society could not ignore the presence of the native American” (55). To say the novel is structured simply around black-white binaries is to ignore both Peters’ racial allegiance to whiteness over

blackness and the century's fixation on Native Americans in fictions such as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827).

### **The Native American and Racism**

Having endured a prolonged and puzzling confinement below the decks of *The Grampus*, Pym surfaces to find that the ship has not only been taken hostage by a mutinous band of crewmates led by a black cook, but also that a savage and revolting Native American "half-breed" looms among the group of mutineers. Upon his first glimpse of Native American Dirk Peters, Pym explains:

Peters himself was one of the most purely ferocious-looking men I ever beheld. He was short in stature—not more than four feet eight inches high—but his limbs were of the most Herculean mould. His hands, especially, were so enormously thick and broad as hardly to retain a human shape...His head was equally deformed, being of immense size, with an indentation on the crown (like that on the head of most negroes), and entirely bald. (459)

Painfully short, displeasingly misshaped, and possessing facial features that Pym considers synonymous with an African American, Peters appears to Pym as a "ferocious-looking" animal whose deformity is both grotesque and inhuman, a description that echoes Leon Jackson's suggestion that Poe was "willing to exploit all the phenomena he found so distasteful" in Native Americans (113). Even Peters' facial expression invokes a sense of anxiety in Pym: "To pass this man with a casual glance, one might imagine him to be convulsed with laughter—but a second look would induce a shuddering acknowledgement, that if such an expression were indicative of merriment, the merriment must be that of a demon" (459). Yet after a longwinded

description that consumes almost an entire page of his account, Pym is blatantly unsure of what to make of Peters. Is he capable of laughter and merriment, or is he a mere demonic figure that resides in the distorted body of a man? Although stumbling over what exactly to make of Peters' physical frame and appearance, Poe's description of Peters is crucial to note as it highlights Pym's first impression of Peters and his Native American ethnicity.

Interestingly, the diction employed as Pym describes Peters is similar to language that appears in other nineteenth-century antebellum works that fictionally approach race and racial anxieties. Herman Melville's *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) and Poe's short fiction "Metzengerstein" (1832) are just a few to note. The plot and language of Melville's *Typee*, for example, mirrors that of Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*. Just as *Arthur Gordon Pym* fictionally documents Pym's escapade at sea and his callous conflicts with the island's black natives, *Typee*, too, fictionally documents protagonist Tom's time spent reconnoitering the villages of Marquesan native tribes called the Typee and Happar. And much like Pym who encounters the savage and demonic-looking Native American Peters, Tom also encounters a Typee native whose physical savagery closely resembles that of Peters. As Tom describes Typee native Kory-Kory, for example, he explains that Kory-Kory was:

a hideous object to look upon. His head was carefully shaven, with the exception of two circular spots, about the size of a dollar, near the top of the cranium, where the hair, permitted to grow of an amazing length, was twisted up in two prominent knots, that gave him the appearance of being decorated with a pair of horns. His beard, plucked out by the roots from every other part of his face, was suffered to droop in hair pendants, two of which garnished his upper lip, and an equal number hung from the extremity of his chin. (102-103)

Aside from their general revulsion and description of their respective natives' repugnant appearance, both protagonist remark on the demon-like appearance of Peters and Kory-Kory. Much like Peters' facial expression resembles to Pym the "merriment" that must be of "a demon" (Poe 459), the knots upon Kory-Kory's head resemble "a pair of horns," alluding also to that of a demon or the devil himself (Melville 102). Both Pym and Tom label the natives not only as a displeasing race to perceive, but also a race whose disreputable physicality resonates with demons.

In a similar vein, the language used to describe *Arthur Gordon Pym's* Peters also parallels language found in Poe's other fictional work, "Metzengerstein." Much like *Arthur Gordon Pym*, "Metzengerstein" is structured around race and racial anxieties present in antebellum America. The narration of Poe's short story recounts maniacal Frederick, Baron Metzengerstein's "perverse attachment" to a "ferocious" and "demon-like" horse with "unnatural fervor" who appears mysteriously after family foe Wilhelm Count Berlifizing's estate is burned down (87). For critics such as Maurice S. Lee who argue that "the antebellum era linked horses and slaves as branded, bred, and brutish chattel," the horse is a representation for black slaves (755). And as we read about the horse's human-like attributes, "the eyes, before invisible, now wore an energetic and human expression, while they gleamed with a fiery and unusual red," readers receive hints that the horse does indeed represent slavery, blackness, and fear of nineteenth-century slave uprisings (85). What connects "Metzengerstein's" horse to *Arthur Gordon Pym's* Peters, however, is the "overwhelming anxiety," "silent horror," and cringing effect both horse and Native have on Pym and the assumed white narrator of "Metzengerstein" (88).

I note the comparable language between Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*, "Metzengerstein," and Melville's *Typee* because it reflects nineteenth-century literature's reappearing portrayal of racial Otherness as demonic, dangerous, and fear-provoking. In other words, *Arthur Gordon Pym* is not the only nineteenth-century work that brings to light such revulsions and anxieties toward the racial Other. What is more, these works demonstrate that the antebellum era's anxieties toward Otherness is not simply restricted to a fear of blackness. Both *Arthur Gordon Pym* and *Typee* clearly demonstrate that native "savagery" and ethnicity was also a looming concern for antebellum Americans.

Indeed, Peters plays a crucial role in demonstrating many nineteenth-century racial conceptions, specifically as Peters evolves from a demonic figure to Pym's emotional and physical loyal protectant. After Augustus discovers his father has been cast overboard during the mutineer's violent rampage, it is Peters who attempts to console Augustus. Pym describes this consolatory relationship in these terms: "[Peters] answered all my companion's questions with perfect freedom; told him that he had no doubt of his father's having been picked up, as there was no less than five sail in sight just before sundown on the day he was cut adrift; and used other language of a consolatory nature" (470). From what Pym presently understands, Peters is an "instrument" that helps Augustus cope (459). Similarly, Pym also recounts Peters' physical protection of him during an incident involving an attacking shipmate. Pym explains, "Presently, [Peters] was enabled to get hold of a heavy stool... With this he beat out the brains of Greely as he was in the act of discharging a musket at me, and immediately afterward... he seized him by the throat, and, by dint of sheer strength, strangled him instantaneously" (481). As he wards off Pym's attacker, Peters transforms into an instrument whose "sheer strength" becomes a façade

for his “arms, as well as legs...*bowed* in the most singular manner” (459). It should be emphasized, however—and this is crucial—that Peters’ transformation is just that—a façade. Even though Peters’ bowed arms and legs take the form of instruments of “sheer strength,” Peters still embodies and exemplifies the savagery Pym earlier equates him with as Peters so quickly, willingly, and effortlessly strangles Hicks with his bare hands. Yet the extent of Peters’ savagery is masked, in Pym’s mind, by the benefits of his savagery to whiteness. Because Peters aids in the survival of Pym and Augustus, he evolves from a savage native hybrid to what Rowe calls Pym’s “faithful and grateful servant”<sup>2</sup> (916). This evolution from savage to servant perhaps echoes the transitional roles Native Americans often held among nineteenth-century society.

The evolving role of Native Americans in nineteenth-century society is not a new concept. In his essay that explores both the rejection and embracing of the nineteenth-century Native American, Jackson explains, “The Native embodied traits that white Americans held in contempt and against which they defined themselves; at the same time, the Native offered a convenient emblem of indigeneity and antiquity that could be adopted and discarded at will. Fear and temptation, that is, could just as easily modulate into what Eric Lott has described as a dialectic love and theft” (98). As Jackson explains America’s interchanging contempt for or embracing of Native Americans, Peters comes to mind. Similar to the contempt the antebellum republic felt toward Natives, Pym, too, feels a contemptuous repulsion to Peters’ “savage” ethnicity. And, just as Jackson notes the dissolution of America’s contempt for and their simultaneous adoption of Native indigeneity, Pym also begins to adopt and overlook the once appalling physicality of Peters. Moreover, similar to America’s “love and theft” for Natives when they served as “emblem[s] for indigeneity and antiquity,” Pym gravitates toward Peters

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<sup>2</sup> Rowe, “Antebellum Slavery and Modern Criticism.”

when he wants to survive amidst a literally black environment that desires not only the segregation, but eradication, of whiteness (Jackson 98).

Similar to how the nineteenth-century conception of the Native American was constantly evolving, Peters, too, continues to evolve from Pym's faithful servant to his racial "equivalent."<sup>3</sup> In a moment of shock from seeing the *Grampus* ravaged and his white crew members slaughtered before his eyes by the island's black Tsalalians, Pym states in reference to him and Peters that "We alone had escaped from the tempest of that overwhelming destruction. We were the only living white men upon the island" (542). Where he was once repulsed by Peters' seemingly brutish demeanor, Pym now signals Peters' ascension into a racially equivalent position: he includes Peters as a white man. But crucial to consider in this instance is at what cost this transformation occurs. That is, Pym allows Peters to undergo this racial evolution when Pym encounters the aggressions of blackness and when Peters proves his savage ethnicity useful to the preservation of whiteness. Hints of superficiality linger among this racial evolution. Consider earlier as Pym explicitly deems Peters an instrument to his survival. To Pym, Peters is a tool that abets in the preservation of whiteness among the island's blackness. The moment Pym and Peters stand overlooking the Tsalalian's brutal eradication of their fellow shipmates is no exception. Pym continues to view Peters solely as an instrument to his survival as he superficially grasps hold of Peters as his fellow white man in a moment of racial isolation. Perhaps this racial superficiality suggests that nineteenth-century racial amalgamation is only possible when whiteness benefits. Or perhaps it highlights the blatancies of nineteenth-century racism, which Pym epitomizes as he ratifies Peters his fellow white man but then so plainly

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<sup>3</sup> This transformation happens only after Pym and Peters come in contact with the extreme blackness of the Tsalalians.

demotes him to his initial “half-breed” status soon after Pym no longer requires protection from blackness.

This sense of Peters’ superficial racial equivalence is further emphasized after Pym and Peters disembark from Tsalal and its menacing blackness. As the two men drift away from the blackness of the island and toward the reappearance of whiteness, Pym, not surprisingly, demotes Peters back to his original savage ethnicity and racially inferior state. Blackness no longer threatens Pym, and therefore, he renders Peters expendable. Nelson and Evelyn Hinz both briefly remark on Pym’s promotion and demotion of Peters’ racial status as they suggest, “Pym needs an ally when faced by an island of angry ‘blacks,’ and thus his arbitrary racial delineation shifts to include Peters in his exclusive ‘white’ club. Once back in his comfortably white-dominated world, however, Pym relegates Peters to a ‘half-breed’ caste” (101). In other words, Pym overlooks Peters’ ethnicity when it is useful, but makes no attempt to hide his distaste for Peters when his survival is no longer at stake.

As we think about how Peters’ character reflects popular racist conceptions of the nineteenth-century, it is hard to ignore how Pym’s initial and ultimate disdain for Peters resembles Poe’s own dislike for Native Americans. Jackson describes Poe’s personal views of Native Americans and accounts for their appearance in his work as he elucidates:

Poe did not like Native Americans...he did not see the need to create a national literature that emphasized or documented Native Americans...At the same time, however, and with no small degree of ambivalence, he was willing to exploit all the phenomena he found so distasteful, both for immediate personal gain and out of a sense of sheer intellectual fashion. Inexorably, Poe was drawn into the tempestuous world of native American literary practice. (113)

As Jackson describes Poe's contempt for Native Americans but his ability to overcome his distaste if it promised personal and perhaps economic gain, I cannot help but think of how Pym overcomes his repulsion to Peters when he realizes that Peters is perhaps the sole companion on the *Grampus* who can assure his survival. This idea becomes even more fascinating when we think of the peculiar auditory parallelisms of the name Arthur Gordon Pym and Edgar Allan Poe.

Aside from Poe's own ideological quirks that make appearances in *Arthur Gordon Pym*, Pym's thinly disguised motive for allowing Peters to momentarily stand with him as his equal perhaps exemplifies circulating white ethnocentrism and racist conceptions of the nineteenth century. *Arthur Gordon Pym*'s racist portrayals have been the source of conversations for scholars such as Morrison, Nelson, Rowe, and Sidney Kaplan. While Rowe asserts that *Arthur Gordon Pym* is a transparent "allegory of Poe's manifesto, 'Keep the South white,'" and Nelson claims that *Arthur Gordon Pym* is a "Eurocentric colonialist fantasy," both scholars agree on the overt nineteenth-century ethnocentrism and racism at play in Poe's novel. And Pym indeed epitomizes this overt antebellum racism as he ratifies Peters his fellow white man but then so blatantly demotes Peters back to his initial "half-breed" status soon after Pym's protection is no longer required. As Pym withdraws Peters' temporary "white man" citizenship, his actions resonate with what Timothy B. Powell calls nineteenth-century antebellum "mono-culturalism" in which the "constricting [of] the boundaries of 'American' citizenship" was prevalent "in the case of Indians and African Americans" (11). As he discusses the nineteenth-century's romanticization and removal of Native Americans, Powell alludes to literature's fascination in the Native American, but also reflects on the American government's simultaneous attempt to remove Native Americans to federal territory through the 1830 Indian Removal Act. In many ways, Pym's interest in Peters resembles a similar obsession that the nineteenth-century had with

Native Americans, although this “interest,” much like that of the American government’s, came with a cost.

If nothing else, Peters’ relationship with Pym suggests the overt and politically accepted nineteenth-century racism against Native Americans that circulated during Poe’s writing of *Arthur Gordon Pym*. From the Indian Removal Act of 1830 to Governor Peter Burnett’s 1851 speech in which he vowed to undertake a “war of extermination” against the Native American nations, the government, as well as its republic, made little attempt to hide their contempt for the racial Other (Powell 13). Moreover, this blatant nineteenth-century racism becomes particularly lucid as government officials publicly promised to “wage war between the two races until the Indian race becomes extinct” (Powell 13). For many of America’s post-racialist supporters, these nineteenth-century racist atrocities are a contemptible thing of America’s past.

### **Johnson’s Response to Poe**

Immediately after the 2008 election of President Obama, many Americans argued that America had reached a post-racial state. Tim Wise highlights this racial ideology as he notes emails he received from readers of his books that state “the election of a man of color proved once and for all that racism was no longer a real issue in this country” (63). Yet Wise accurately retorts, “I suggest that Obama’s election, far from serving as evidence that racism had been defeated, might signal a mere shape-shifting of racism, from Racism 1.0 to Racism 2.0, an insidious upgrade that allows millions of whites to cling to racist stereotypes about people of color” (15). Wise’s views on America’s contemporary racial standing are supported by Ramón Saldívar and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, the latter arguing that despite the illegalization of Jim Crow racism, a newly evolved form of racism persists. In his *Racism without Racists* (2014), Bonilla-Silva labels his

proposed racial ideology “color-blind racism.” Contributing to the conversation of critical race theory, Bonilla-Silva contrasts the overt racism of the Jim Crow era with the contemporary racist practices that he claims “operate in a ‘now you see it, now you don’t’ fashion” (3). Yet he simultaneously exposes the similarities between the antebellum period, the Jim Crow era, and our contemporary epoch as he continues, “Instead of relying on name calling (niggers, spics, chinks), color-blind racism otherizes softly (‘these people are human, too’)” (3).

Among the spectrum of twenty-first-century authors who seamlessly intertwine these contemporary ideologies of racism in their works of literature is graphic novelist and fiction writer Mat Johnson. Born to an Irish-American father and an African-American mother, Johnson grew up with his mother in a predominantly black and racially stratified neighborhood. In interviews, Johnson explains that his mix-raced background contributed to adolescent feelings of alienation. Because of this, much of his work focuses on underrepresented aspects of the African American experience, a theme that emerges in *Hunting in Harlem* (2003), *The Great Negro Plot* (2007), and *Incognegro* (2008). Of special interest to this essay, however, is Johnson’s latest novel *Pym* (2011) which deals in part with this same theme of the underrepresented African American experience in America. But to say Johnson’s *Pym* is simply a fictional work that deals with the African American experience is to ignore the complexities and illuminating racial commentaries of contemporary America, along with the novel’s intertextuality with Poe’s *Arthur Gordon Pym*. Indeed, Johnson’s *Pym* is a biting satirical and racially complex novel that illustrates the presence of contemporary racism, and moreover, the same “color-blind racism” that Bonilla-Silva argues grips twenty-first-century America.

As many may predict from its title, *Pym* is a satirical spin-off novel of Edgar Allan Poe’s *Arthur Gordon Pym*. Just as *Arthur Gordon Pym* follows Pym through his adventure in a foreign

and remote environment and details his brutal clashing with the racial Other, so, too, does Johnson's *Pym* as it follows African American "blackademic" and Poe scholar Chris Jaynes as he leaves a society on the verge of apocalypse to venture into the heart of Antarctica in search of Poe's Tsalal, which Chris believes is the key to unlocking the pathology of whiteness. Similar to Chris' interest in Poe as a constructor of white pathologies, Johnson also admits his interest in *Arthur Gordon Pym*'s racial constructions. Unlike Octavia Butler and Colson Whitehead who repeatedly deny the theme of race and slavery in *Bloodchild* (1995) and *Zone One* (2011)—although such themes are undeniably present—Johnson openly admits to his attunement with Poe's racial subconscious and how his novel is indeed a "response to [Poe's] work" (Kopley 41). As I highlight how Johnson's *Pym* both continues and revises race and racism in Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*, I argue that Johnson leverages *Arthur Gordon Pym*'s racism to critique contemporary ideologies of "color-blind racism," and therefore, that *Pym* suggests contemporary racism has changed very little from that of the nineteenth-century.

### **Continuing Race and Racism**

Poe's constructs of chromatic categories make illuminating reappearances in Johnson's *Pym*. As Poe constructs strict racial categories between white, black, and Native American, Johnson reconstructs three similar categories between the novel's black explorers, a white couple named the Karvels, and a monstrous group of nonhumans called Tekelians. However, while Poe's categories are constructed by three chromatically-opposing groups, Johnson crafts two categories—the Tekelians and the Karvels—that are both "white." This dual presence of whiteness does not suggest that Johnson has departed from Poe's segregated categories,

however. The Tekelians, with their “horribly fishy smell,” their humanoid stature, and their residence in “the caves that widened to cathedral heights” are biologically, socially, and economically different than the neoconservative Karvels who reside in their Antarctic bio dome comfortably set at 72 degrees (Johnson 128-129). The Tekelians and Karvels live drastically different lifestyles and represent two contrasting forms of “whiteness.” But despite their physical differences, these two opposing forms of whiteness share startlingly similar racial ideologies.

Interesting to note, however, is that while both novels attempt to create racially-chromatic categories, specifically those of black-white binaries, *Arthur Gordon Pym* and *Pym* also falter in similar chromatic-based ways. Disruptions to black-white binaries in *Arthur Gordon Pym* occur as Pym describes the chromatic appearance of the white explorers and black Tsalalians, and in *Pym* as Chris remarks on his own racial appearance. In the case of *Arthur Gordon Pym*, Nelson and Paul Rosenzweig both argue that the possible collapse of black-white binaries in Poe’s novel occur as Pym describes both the black Tsalalians and the white explorers. Remarking on the Tsalalian’s “jet black” complexion and the clothes they wear, the “skins of an unknown black animal,” Pym suggests that the island natives and their environment are literally black (Poe 528). He also links the whiteness of the “schooner’s sails, an egg, an open book, or a pan of flour” with the whiteness of the *Jane Guy*’s crew. However, Nelson calls attention to this problematic binary description as she writes, “Seamen are not, of course, notoriously white in complexion. (It is difficult to imagine that every crewman on board the *Jane Guy* was albino). Yet it is evidently Pym’s priority to identify his group as white, in direct contrast to the ‘jet black’ Tsalalians” (101). Rosenzweig posits a similar idea as he questions, “How seriously are we to take Pym’s similar light-and-dark divisions of landscapes and races?” (Nelson 102).

*Pym*, too, contains an element of racial collapse between the novel's black-white binaries, albeit in a slightly revised form. This complication arises as Chris remarks, "A point of plot and order: I am a mulatto. I am a mulatto in a long line of mulattoes, so visibly lacking in African heritage that I often appear to some uneducated eyes as a random, garden-variety white guy. But I'm not...I am a black man who looks white" (Johnson 135). Until this point, readers of *Pym* envision Chris as chromatically similar to his fellow black explorers. Yet the discovery of Chris' racial passing disrupts the white-black binary believed to exist between the novel's black explorers and white Tekelians. In this sense, Chris' "mulatto" appearance mirrors the same blurred racial lines that Nelson and Rosenzweig suggest take form through Poe's not so entirely black Tsalalians and white crew members. But whereas collapsed binaries in Poe's novel appear to be unintentional, Johnson's complication of Chris' racial appearance seems to be a conscious effort to challenge Poe's binary thinking, and furthermore, illuminate Johnson's own awareness for the complexities of race.

Aside from similar racial triangulations and disruptions to black-white binaries in both novels, Johnson continues to import elements of Poe's novel as he crafts Chris' friend Garth whose servitude and loyalty to whiteness resembles that of *Arthur Gordon Pym's* Dirk Peters. Just as Peters is labeled by Rowe as Pym's "faithful and grateful servant," (916) Garth is labeled by Chris as an "eager fanboy" to the novel's famous white painter Thomas Karvel (Johnson 254). Garth, a Chicagoan ex-bus driver whose two worldly obsessions include the famous painter Karvel and Little Debbie Snacks, has a peculiar loyalty to whiteness—he devours the Little Debbie Snacks whose logo is a white girl with blue eyes, admires any and all artwork of Karvel's, and attempts to stop Mrs. Karvel's genocide of the white Tekelians. Yet Peters and Garth's faithful servitude to whiteness diverge as Johnson transforms Garth into a character who

obsessively consumes white-affiliated objects as a comforting tactic and seeks to bury his own blackness in mass-produced paintings that allow him to “climb into a better world” (11). Much like his conscious effort to disrupt binary thinking through Chris’ racial passing, Johnson again consciously blurs the racial lines that Poe’s *Arthur Gordon Pym* so fervently tries to keep intact. Garth is a black man who wants to inhabit the sphere of whiteness, and does so upon his entrance into Karvel’s bio dome, but, ironically, his physical blackness simultaneously increases as Garth’s obsessive consumption of Little Debbie Snacks creates an even larger black body. He cannot inhabit one chromatic sphere without increasing his physical presence in the other. In a way, Johnson seems to suggest that Garth cannot inhabit a particular kind of whiteness, that inhabiting the whiteness Garth seeks is just as feasible as literally climbing into one of Karvel’s paintings.

Although Johnson continues in many ways the racial constructions created intentionally or not by Poe, *Pym* also revises *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s portrayal of race and racism. One of these more pointed revisions takes the form of *Pym*’s reversal of *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s demonized race. Whereas *Arthur Gordon Pym* depicts the black Tsalalians to be the savage aggressors of the novel, *Pym* casts the white monstrous Tekelians to be the savage and racist captors of the black explorers. Where black was once demonized, white usurps its place. In a similar vein, the Native American presence in *Arthur Gordon Pym* is entirely eliminated in Johnson’s *Pym*. This retraction of Native Americans occurs while Chris attends an event in which Native Americans gather to receive DNA results that verify their Native American heritage. To the dismay and utter disgust of all but one, they find that the majority of their racial heritage belongs not to Native Americans but to African Americans. Mahalia Mathis, who invites Chris to this reception, for example, finds that she is “two percent Native. Twenty-three percent European. Seventy-five

percent African” (Johnson 56). As Mahalia Mathis’ assumed Native heritage is ripped away from her, Johnson just as quickly eliminates the authentic presence of Native Americans in *Pym*, an act of removal which mirrors the twenty-first-century’s tendency to ignore Native survivance.

Johnson’s *Pym* is a racially complex novel, even as it, in many instances, mirrors the racial constructs of Poe’s nineteenth-century novel. As *Pym* casts Garth as Karvel’s loyal admirer, Johnson mirrors the same faithful servitude of Dirk Peters to Pym. But as Johnson “engagingly inverts Poe’s racial perspective,” he revises and strips away Poe’s Native American racial layer, rendering their presence void in *Pym* (Kopley 41). What interests this essay the most, however, is Johnson’s blurring of the lines between Poe’s strict chromatic white, black, and Native American groups. Johnson continues the triangulated racial structure that appears in *Arthur Gordon Pym*, yet he revises and complicates this very structure as he crafts one black group and two white groups that drastically vary in their economic, social, and biological standings. With a focus placed on *Pym*’s black explorers and white neoconservative Karvels, I argue that the relationship between white and black depicts the contemporary state of America’s racism.

It should be reiterated, however, that the Karvels are not the novel’s sole white construct. The Tekelians’ presence should be briefly noted, not only because they demonstrate *Pym*’s direct racial connections to *Arthur Gordon Pym*, but also because they play a noteworthy role in *Pym*’s triangulated racial structure.<sup>4</sup> In short, Johnson’s Tekelians echo antebellum racist ideologies. After the Tekelians discover that the black explorers are unable to follow through with their agreement, Tekelian leaders immediately declare, “the debt must be repaid...if you lack bounty,

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<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, to cast aside the Tekelians’ racial presence in *Pym* would be to follow in the footsteps of previous scholars who have placed focus on literature’s racial binaries, and as a result, overlooked other illuminating racial Others—much like Poe scholars have done with Dirk Peters—that come from approaching race through a triangulated lens.

you can work it off” (Johnson 154). As the white Tekelians blatantly declare the black explorers their slaves, echoes of *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s white explorers and their forced attempts to colonize the black Tsalalians emerge. The Tekelians’ racial conceptions in Johnson’s novel are eerily similar to the racist mindsets that structure Poe’s *Arthur Gordon Pym*. This is, in part, because Johnson’s white Tekelians are the racial inversion of Poe’s black Tsalalians. Just as Pym considers the black Tsalalians to be “the most barbarous, subtle and bloodthirsty wretches” (Poe 538), Chris conceives the white Tekelians to be equally as savage and grotesque with their “colorless lips...alabaster tongue as devoid of blood as his skin...gums as pale and shiny as porcelain” (Johnson 123). In other words, the Tekelians mirror Poe’s Tsalalians both ideologically and physically, a relationship that naturally dispenses *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s nineteenth-century racial ideologies into Johnson’s contemporary novel. However, it is through an exploration of Chris and the Karvels—the other two racial components of the novel’s triangulation—that the most compelling racial commentaries emerge.

### **The Karvels and Contemporary Racism**

While the Tekelians are an echo of *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s nineteenth-century racist ideologies, the Karvels are on the surface wholly different, not only socially, economically, and biologically from the Tekelians, but also because they bring to the novel a much more contemporary feel. While the blatantly racist and humanoid Tekelians and their cave-dwelling lifestyle are perhaps hard for the contemporary reader to relate to, the Karvels and their disdain for taxes, disenchantment with contemporary government, and love for Bill O’Reilly are much more relatable (even if contemporary readers are not equally enticed to play recordings of conservative political discussions without end as Tom Karvel does). The white neoconservative Karvels have

fled from an American society that seems to be on the verge of an apocalyptic collapse. Driven by his desire to remain undetectable by the government, Tom Karvel has constructed a bio dome filled with artificial color that is strategically positioned in the overwhelmingly white and remote landscape of Antarctica. With the arrival of Chris his black friend Garth, who are fleeing not from an apocalyptic society but from the white Tekelians that ardently desire to keep Chris and his black friends enslaved, the Karvels welcome the black refugees into their utopian bubble of artificial plastic multicolor where interestingly “the things [Tom Karvel] wants to exclude from his New Rights utopia are often associated with blackness or otherness—dirt, violence, stain, disease, poverty, crime, enslavement, and history” (Davis 9).

The Karvels are of particular interest to this essay because they epitomize, I argue, what Bonilla-Silva’s has termed the contemporary ideology of “color-blind racism.” In his compelling work that has critically shaped the twenty-first-century’s conceptions of race and racism and greatly contributed to discourse pertaining to critical race theory, Bonilla-Silva maps America’s progression—or lack thereof—from antebellum racism, to Jim Crow racism, to colorblind racism. After conducting countless sociological interviews driven by his desire to expose contemporary America’s racism, Bonilla-Silva explains colorblind racism as “new racism practices...that are more sophisticated and subtle than those typical of the Jim Crow era. Yet...these practices are as effective as the old ones in maintaining the racial status quo” (25). Bonilla-Silva describes such practices as “racism lite,” yet articulates that contemporary racism is just as prevalent as it was in the nineteenth-century, but that it simply takes the form in racially-coded language and denials of racism (3).

Just as Pym ignores Peters’ misshapen, grotesque, and demonic Native American hybridity because he benefits from what he perceives to be a barbarism synonymous with Native

ethnicity, the Karvels, too, attempt to ignore the black explorers' race because they maintain and increase production rates within the bio-dome. Yet in both the case of Pym and the Karvels, the racial Others remain unequal, never able to progress despite their loyal devotion to their white "master." However, whereas in *Arthur Gordon Pym* it is politically acceptable for Pym to demote Peters back to his original racial inferiority and exercise forms of antebellum racism as Nelson suggests (101)<sup>5</sup>, the Karvels adhere to elements of contemporary color-blind racism, using racially-coded language that never explicitly states their racism, but emanates racial undertones nonetheless.

Although the Karvels never make specific mention of Chris and Garth's race, both Tom Karvel and Mrs. Karvel both indulge in behaviors that present them as color-blind racists. Mrs. Karvel, for example, immediately recruits Chris and Garth to maintain and farm the bio-dome's land, echoing nineteenth-century southern agricultural systems of sharecropping, in which landowners allowed tenants to use land in return for a share of the crops produced on the land.<sup>6</sup> Her reasons for doing so are never explicitly linked to Chris and Garth's race, although we do see coded body language as Chris reflects on her "smile a little too wide, her laugh a little too quick, her retreat to the kitchen a little too nervous" (Johnson 239). Although Mrs. Karvel does not admit to or provide an explanation about her nervous behavior around Chris and Garth, Chris does in fact remark that Mrs. Karvel's skittish behavior is a result of her "discomfort with my presence as a Negro" (239). In a similar vein, Tom Karvel, too, represents colorblind racism, albeit in a more literal sense. After asking Chris and Garth to clear a plot of land within the bio dome, Karvel adds, "You might as well take that patch of land past the cottage; I can't see that

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<sup>5</sup> That is, politically acceptable in terms of nineteenth-century racial conceptions.

<sup>6</sup> Because sharecropping was an agricultural system employed for both white and black alike, the post-bellum system, on the surface, did not appear as explicitly racist as slavery, for example. Yet because it was a system of maintaining control over black labor, racist undertones structured the system nonetheless.

from my place,” thereby highlighting his disinterest in seeing Chris and Garth perform manual labor, and therefore, his literal desire for blindness (243).

### **America’s New Racism**

The relationship between the explorers and the Karvels reveals what *Pym* seems to suggest is the subtle yet prevalent presence of colorblind racism in contemporary society. But as Johnson weaves the echo of *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s nineteenth-century racism into his novel through his insertion of the humanoid Tekelians (who suffer at the hands of the Karvels), *Pym* reveals not only the presence of a new and contemporary racism in America, but also suggests the reality of how little racism has changed from the nineteenth-century to now. As to the former idea, the relationship between the Karvels and Tekelians is vital in demonstrating the contemporary emergence of a new American racism. As readers come to discover that the exhaust from the Karvel’s bio dome is melting the foundations of the Tekelians’ ice caves, we find that the Karvel’s lifestyle has begun to eliminate the Tekelians and their distinctly different way of life. If we understand the Karvels to be colorblind racists and the Tekelians—a satirically monstrous form of white racists—to be an echo of antebellum racism, then it follows that the Karvel’s destruction of Tekelian foundations represents a contemporary racial ideology’s expulsion of a nineteenth-century ideology. Colorblind racism has usurped antebellum racism.

The relationship that forms between the Karvels and the explorers, however, proves to be more complicated in terms of what *Pym* seems to suggest about contemporary racism. The complexities of this relationship arise as the Karvels and explorers are confronted by the vast hoard of angry Tekelians in search of their escaped “slave” Chris. Faced by a common enemy, a seemingly innocent alliance between white and black forms. And for many whom ardently

advocate for America's entrance into an era of post-racialism, it would seem that this "alliance" demonstrates the Karvel's breaking away from racist ideologies as they seemingly risk their lives to defend Chris' freedom. For those who argue this, the alliance between the two races would suggest that shared humanity trumps color affiliation, a clear echo of post-racialist thinking. Although his choice of diction seems to carry a dehumanizing connotation with it, Adam Manbach comments on the Karvel-explorer relationship as he refers to it as a "cross-species alliance" (13). Conversely, Kimberly Chabot Davis provides a different stance on this alliance as she writes, "Here, white and black humans work collaboratively in multi-racial coalition, yet they only do so with the goal of destroying a third group" (15). Where Manbach simply submits to the Karvel-explorer relationship as an alliance, Davis acknowledges the underlying motivation for forming an alliance with the explorers. It is within this exploration of the Karvel's motivation for multi-racial collaborative work with the explorers that I argue commentaries on contemporary colorblind racism emerge.

Much like the limited scholarship on *Pym* lacks an exploration of the Karvel's masked motivation for forming an alliance with the explorers, many of the published reviews of the novel, too, fail to see the Karvel's collaboration with the explorers as anything besides an alliance or commentary for racism defeated. To amend these oversights, I call attention to the superficialities that linger among the "alliance" between the Karvels and explorers. Recall Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*. Pym makes no attempt to hide his immediate inclination to refer to the black Tsalalians as savage, or to mask the fact that he superficially promotes Peters to an equivalent racial status when the preservation of whiteness is at risk. Although the racism in *Pym* is subtle compared to the blatant racial overtones that riddle *Arthur Gordon Pym*, Mrs. Karvel, too, embraces the racial Other as her equal when it aids in her protection against the attacking

Tekelians and simultaneously ensures the continuance of her bio dome lifestyle. As she schemes to invite the Tekelians over for a genocidal supper, Mrs. Karvel explains, “We’ll give them a good, strong supper, and that will take care of all our troubles” (279). But keeping in mind the hints of colorblind racism that dictate her words and behavior around the explorers, speculation of Mrs. Karvel’s use of the word “our” should follow. Perhaps “our troubles” refers not to the Tekelians’ demand for the Karvels to return their black “slaves,” but instead, to the Karvel’s problem of having the Tekelians on their doorsteps interrupting the isolated life they have artificially created. Nowhere in this latter speculation of “our” does it acknowledge the troubles the explorers face.

Nonetheless, the Karvel’s multi-racial collaboration with the black explorers sounds eerily similar to Pym and Peters’ partnership against *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s black Tsalalians. Because of this, we start to see that the racism in *Arthur Gordon Pym* and *Pym* is not as different as it may appear. In fact, the only thing that seems to differentiate the two novels’ racism is the blatancy of *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s and the subtlety of *Pym*’s. And although not explicitly speaking comparatively of nineteenth-century and twenty-first-century literature, both Kenneth Warren and Toure expound on the transition from this racial obviousness to subtlety as they clarify, “the most obvious expressions of segregation and discrimination give way to more covert but equally pernicious manifestations of racism” (Saldívar 3).

Although critical work on Johnson’s *Pym* is sparse, Richard Kopley and others have approached the text with a critical eye for the novel’s racial under and overtones, which are often hard to ignore given the constant and violent disputes between the novel’s monstrous Tekelians and the black adventurers. While many skirt around any solid claims regarding the function of race in *Pym*, Kopley suggests that Johnson’s *Pym* is “a hyperborean allegory of racism defeated

and the origins of the African peoples recovered” (14). Yet Kopley’s perspective of “racism defeated” is problematic considering the novel’s end, which concludes with Mrs. Karvel’s successful Tekelian genocide and the death of all, with the exception of Chris and Garth. Indeed, both representations of nineteenth-century and twenty-first-century racism are destroyed, but hints of the novel’s racial revenge come forth when the two sole survivors of the novel’s racial tragedy are black. Furthermore, as Chris and Garth sail off into an ambiguous abyss, as do Pym and Peters in *Arthur Gordon Pym*, they land upon an island that Chris describes as being inhabited by a “brown majority” (222). Despite its ambiguity, the novel concludes by prompting readers, and Chris and Garth themselves, to question whether their racial status—Chris’ ability to pass for white and Garth’s blackness—will be accepted by the “brown” racial Other. In no way do we concretely know that the eradication of the Tekelians and Karvels have destroyed the racism synonymous with them—racism could very well spring forth from the mysterious island’s brown majority who racially rival Chris’ “whiteness” and Garth’s blackness. Nevertheless, both *Arthur Gordon Pym* and *Pym* are intertwined not only by their impossibly ambiguous conclusions, but also by their failure to adequately resolve the novel’s racial disputes: Pym sails away with the fear of blackness ingrained in his mind while Chris lands upon an island inhabited by a racial Other that calls into question racial acceptance and Chris’ racial passing.

### **Racing the Apocalypse**

Although the plot of Johnson’s *Pym* follows, in many ways, the same narrative structure of Poe’s fictional travel narrative,—Poe scholar Chris Jaynes embarks on an adventure to find and explore Poe’s perhaps non-fictional Tsalal and Tsalalians—Johnson’s *Pym* also incorporates conventions of the science fiction genre. The novel’s exploration and questioning of the biological, political,

and social differences between its triangulated racial categories of black, Tekelian, and Karvel resonates with David Seed's explanation that "Science fiction constantly interrogates the limits of identity and the nature of difference" (27). As Edward James details the plot of science fiction as revolving around a "traveler...or small number of companions, who lands on a remote island," are welcomed by locals, and very soon "meet an older man who will spend much of the rest of the book lecturing to him about the delights of his society," it is hard not to notice the parallelism between Chris and his small group of black explorers, their initial welcoming by the Tekelians, and Chris and Garth's time spent with teleological Tom Karvel who obsesses over the perfection of his (void of blackness) bio dome (108). And indeed, the genre's "What if" premise looms during *Pym*'s conclusion when Chris stands before the "collection of brown people," in which his comment that "this, of course, is a planet on which such are the majority" prompts readers to question what has happened to whiteness and blackness, and what it means for "brown" to be the new "majority" (Seed 2).

Alongside the novel's echoing of Seed and James' description of sci-fi elements, one of the more illuminating elements of the genre take the form of apocalyptic events that loom in *Pym*'s background. Because *Pym* so closely mirrors *Arthur Gordon Pym*'s racism, triangulated racial constructs, and plot, it is interesting to consider why Johnson has chosen to incorporate elements of nineteenth-century travel writing alongside his inclusion of science fiction conventions, specifically the convention of the apocalypse which details humanity's destruction. *Pym* is not the only contemporary African American novel to incorporate an apocalyptic plot and setting, however. The apocalypse makes an illuminating appearance in Colson Whitehead's contemporary zombie apocalypse novel, *Zone One* (2011). It is fascinating to note that not one but two African American novels published in 2011 contain the presence of an apocalypse

among critical discussions of race and racism. Why, we should ask, has the popular literary genre to interrogate race evolved from the nineteenth-century travel narrative that explores encounters with racial Others to the contemporary apocalyptic novel in which humanity confronts its devastating demise?

Hints of looming violence emerge in the first few chapters of *Pym* as Chris briefly mentions the risk of “airborne explosions flying to Chicago” (47), Wall Street as a “high-risk bombing target” (71), and the “November Three Bombings” and their national bombing campaign (92). Yet the violence Chris fleetingly but continuously remarks on is not simply limited to the United States. Violence is expanding across the globe. As he reflects on his society’s trauma—the “smoke in the streets and people coughing into cloths ripped from their shirts” and the “flashes of blood with no clear points of origin”—Chris turns on the television and finds that “this time there wasn’t just one place identified in the chyron, one nation, one landmark in flames (97). This time there was Tokyo, and Paris, and Berlin. And then there was London, and New York and L.A., and Sydney, and Seoul, and at one point even Stuttgart” (97).

Readers are yet again reminded of the novel’s on-going violence and apocalyptic happenings latter in the novel as well, not only when the explorers lose contact with the outside world, but also as Tom Karvel speculates on the possible end of the world—Antarctica being the one exception. Karvel hypothesizes on the state of the apocalypse as he explains:

One minute I’m sitting here watching *Fox & Friends*, then they start talking about some riot. I go get some nachos, next thing you know I come back and it’s all dark. It’s dark everywhere. TV. Phone. Internet. Nothing...First thought: nukes. Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, they’ve been begging for it for years. But a nuclear attack couldn’t have taken out everything at once, not even a big one. So I’m

thinking something biological....probably engineered or something, sitting dormant in everybody's systems while it spreads across the world. (237-238)

In addition to Karvel's speculation on the world's apocalyptic ending, *Pym's* conclusion again reiterates the novel's apocalyptic background as Chris and Garth, the sole survivors of Antarctica's violence, stand before an island's brown inhabitants whom Chris speculates to be the world's "majority."

What fascinates me most about the novel's on-going apocalypse is not the destruction and devastation that occurs across the globe, nor is it how Antarctica is sheltered from the apocalypse's ensuing universal violence. What interests me most is why the three groups inhabiting Antarctica are able to continue the outside world's violence in an area that seems to be naturally resilient to corruption and tragedy. While humanity has seemingly ended across the continents, the black explorers, the Tekelians, and the Karvels continue to exist—at first—in the remoteness provided by Antarctica, almost as if its whiteness provides some form of shelter from the violence that plagues the rest of humanity. However, while the outside world suffers from airborne explosions, bombings, and perhaps forms of biological violence that Karvel earlier suggests, Antarctica and the three opposing racial groups that inhabit it undergo their own version of violent attacks. This appears in the form of Mrs. Karvel's genocidal attempt to eradicate the Tekelians, which, ultimately, results in the demise of all but Chris and Garth. What separates the violence of the outside world from Antarctica, however, is that although Antarctica is spared from apocalyptic destruction, the explorers, Tekelians, and Karvels seem to create their own violence and apocalyptic ending. The inescapability of violence, combined with the racial tensions that drive such violence in Antarctica seems to suggest the inherent violence of humanity.

The close proximity of contemporary racism and apocalyptic destruction in contemporary literature is not limited to Johnson's *Pym*, however. Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), published in the same year as Johnson's *Pym*, is a thrillingly complex contemporary novel that intertwines elements of science fiction with contemporary society's growing fascination with the zombie apocalypse. Although Whitehead claims that race and racism are exempt from his novel—"I don't really write books about race"—racism indubitably structures the novel's entirety (Forsberg 142). Set in modern-day New York City, protagonist Mark Spitz is assigned as a sweeper in the quarantined area called Zone One, a knock-off military job which entails his searching for and elimination of zombies that the marines have missed in their raid of the city. As Glen Duncan accurately notes, the zombies, which are called "skels," are "of two kinds. They're either dozily rapid predators reduced to a monolithic imperative—eat living flesh—or they're 'stragglers,' harmless catatonic piteously stuck at their former posts" (1). Although perhaps unintentionally, *Zone One*, much like *Arthur Gordon Pym* and *Pym*, is structured around triangulated structures. That is, forms of "humanity" in *Zone One* are either categorized as the living, skels, or stragglers. Clearly, Whitehead's *Zone One* contains the same apocalyptic element of society and humanity that appears in Johnson's *Pym*. Commentaries of race and racism, too, are largely intertwined within *Zone One*'s portrayal of an apocalyptic America, albeit in a perhaps more complex way than in *Pym*.

While race in *Pym* is neatly categorized between black, Tekelian, and Karvel, race plays a more complex role in Whitehead's *Zone One*. This is because while categories in *Pym* are defined by their racial standing, categories in *Zone One* are not—racial diversity exists within all three groups of living, skels, and stragglers: "Every race, color, and creed was represented in this congregation [of skels] that funneled down the avenue... The city did not care for your story, the

particular narrative of your reinvention; it took them all in, every immigrant in their strivings, regardless of bloodline, the identity of their homeland, the number of coins in their pocket. Nor did this plague discriminate” (Whitehead 303). Susan Saulny comments on *Zone One*’s amalgamation of race within these three contrasting categories as she writes, “the blending of the races is a step toward transcending race, to a place where America is free of bigotry, prejudice and programs like affirmative action” (*New York Times*). However, her take on the coalescing of race among the living, skulls, and stragglers is too sanguine a perspective on America’s racial state. Mark Spitz lives in a seemingly post-racial society, yet the fear for reanimation of “prejudice, parking tickets, and reruns” continues to haunt the remaining living inhabitants of New York City (288). Furthermore, it should be noted that the novel’s racial diversity comes only after humanity faces an apocalypse and begins a gradual fade into its demise. Saldívar illuminatingly remarks on this as he explains:

The near total leveling of difference that occurs among the surviving humans on the verge of apocalypse and on the fulcrum of mediocracy with the victory of the living dead drives the power of hope in *Zone One* toward a posthuman world. Only here, in a country populated by the living dead who nostalgically linger among the ruins of their former lives, might we finally, unequivocally, encounter a ‘postracial’ era...In the end, Whitehead proposes that it may well be necessary first to imagine the end of the world before we may imagine the historical end of racialization and racism. (13)

Just as *Pym* highlights America’s continued colorblind racism and concludes without any unequivocal hope of America’s ability to overcome its racist mindset, *Zone One*, too, suggests

that contemporary America is able to eradicate its racist ideologies only when humanity, and race itself, is eliminated.

In addition to the similar racial backgrounds of their authors and their same publication years, both *Pym* and *Zone One* employ conventions synonymous with apocalyptic fiction. In both novels, the destruction of society is imminent and the devastation of humanity is constantly looming. The apocalyptic genre details impending and unavoidable tragedies, and more often than not, the predictable and ultimate demise of humanity as we know it, whether from natural causes, man-made destruction such as the airborne attacks and bombings in *Pym*, or at the hands of rabid flesh-crazed zombies in *Zone One*. In both Johnson and Whitehead's apocalyptic novels, the excitement of newness and expeditions into the conquerable and obtainable are no longer present nor attainable. Territories have been charted, interactions between cultures have been exhausted, and the discovery of the racial Other—or rabid flesh-eating zombie—has only led to conflict and anxiety.

Poe and Melville's nineteenth-century novels, on the other hand, engage with generic conventions of nonfiction nineteenth-century travel writing. Like Giltrow and Douglas Ivison describe, this popular nineteenth-century genre documented explorations of newness, expeditions into uncharted territories, interactions with unknown cultures, and experiences among the racial Other, as is the case in both Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* and Melville's *Typee*. Naturally, a sense of optimism and excitement emanates from such novels as the promises of novelty and conquerable lands unfold with each description, much like how Poe's Tsalalians and their culture prove initially conquerable and advantageous to the white northerners, and similar to how Melville's Typees open Tom's eyes to fascinating cultures that rival his own.

Having explored the apocalyptic elements in both *Pym* and *Zone One*, I return to the question I proposed earlier—why have popular literary genres evolved from nineteenth-century travel narratives that explore encounters with racial Others to twenty-first-century apocalyptic novels that document humanity’s ill-fated demise? I argue that Johnson and Whitehead’s novels reflect contemporary America’s failure to adequately correct the racial conceptions present in nineteenth-century antebellum America. The travel narrative, a genre full of initial discoveries, has evolved into the twenty-first-century apocalyptic novel where our failure to embrace, learn, and grow from nineteenth-century discoveries results in the imminent demise of humanity and all racial conceptions as we know it. Both *Pym* and *Zone One* suggest not only that America has failed to become post-racial, as some members of contemporary society tenaciously argue, but also that the only way to absolve America of its racist ideologies and past racial wounds is to eradicate all forms of race, and in the process, humanity as we know it.

Although separated by centuries, Johnson’s *Pym* extends and revises Poe’s *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s portrayal of race, racism, and racial categorization in a multitude of ways. We see this as Johnson mirrors *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s triangulated chromatic categories, as Chris’ battle with whiteness echoes *Pym*’s tragic encounter with blackness, and as shockingly similar forms of racism emerge throughout *Pym*’s traversing throughout Tsalal and Chris’ expedition throughout the Antarctic. However, Johnson’s awareness for race and racism makes an enlightening appearance as he carefully transports Poe’s characters and plot into his novel in a successful attempt to leverage *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s racism to critique contemporary American racism. By exploring the superficialities of *Pym* and Peters’ multi-racial collaboration, we find that Poe’s nineteenth-century *Arthur Gordon Pym* embodies elements of overtly ethnocentric and racist ideologies surrounding the Native American. In a similar vein, examining the Karvel’s elusively

racist relationship with the black explorers and their destructive interaction with the Tekelians demonstrates to readers of Johnson's *Pym* how the Karvels epitomize the discreet and damaging ideologies of contemporary colorblind racism that both Bonilla-Silva and Wise argue has gripped American society. What is more, as the Karvels aggressively eradicate the Tekelians, *Pym* marks the extinction of *Arthur Gordon Pym*'s nineteenth-century racism and the contemporary emergence of a more subtle yet equally as prevalent racism. It is because of this reoccurring sense of racism that continues to make routine appearances in canonical literature of the nineteenth-century to literature of the twenty-first century that I argue literature suggests we have entered a racial plateau, a period in which contemporary America has failed to correct its racist conceptions that originated centuries ago and in which race continues to be an ever-present issue that Johnson and Whitehead's contemporary literature bleakly suggests can only be corrected by the demise of humanity itself.

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