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Melvillian Whiteness in Johnson's *Pym*

Henry Louis Gates writes that "Afro-American literary history is characterized by… formal revision," wherein "black writers read and critique other… texts as an act of rhetorical self-definition" (992). This revision is accomplished by a unique process of signification, an "Afro-American rhetorical strategy… [that] turns on the play and chain of signifiers" (989) drawn from literary and cultural texts, utilizing techniques such as "figuration, troping, …parody… [and] pastiche" (992). Mat Johnson's *Pym*, a parody of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, signifies not only on Poe and his text, but on a host of literary figures, from Douglass to Ellison, and on various aspects of current African American culture. But in Chris Jaynes's obsessive investigation of "the pathology of Whiteness" in America and the ensuing Antarctic adventure, Johnson also signifies on Melville's unique conceptions of whiteness in *Moby Dick*, particularly those expressed in "The Whiteness of the Whale" (Johnson 14). We first examine Johnson's signifying on whiteness in Poe's novel, then turn to his signifying on whiteness in Melville's.

White imagery in Poe's *Narrative* is uniformly attendant of the grotesque, dangerous, deceptive and deadly.[1] The "white and ghastly fangs" of (what turns out to be) Tiger "gleam … through the gloom" (Poe 17); Pym struggles to decode a message written in blood on a "white slip of paper" (22), the draft of a forged letter; Roger's face in death is "shrunken, shriveled, and of a chalky whiteness"

[1] Parts of this paper pertaining to Poe are drawn from a previous course paper, "Black Matter(s) in Poe's *Pym*," February 12, 2014

(49), which Pym imitates using "white chalk" (50); and a corpse on board the ghost ship "smil[es] constantly, so as to display a set of the most brilliantly white teeth," while a seagull "gorg[es] itself with the horrible flesh, … its white plumage spattered all over with blood" (64-5). In compelling counterpoint to its narrator's clear racial bigotry, rather than connoting innocence or purity, whiteness in *Pym* leads only to disaster, and white characters fare no better: one by one and en masse, they die horrific deaths; and several commit horrific acts, from mutiny, to murder, to cannibalism. The novel ends with the confoundingly ambiguous "shrouded human figure," with "skin …the perfect whiteness of the snow," standing in a sudden icy crevice (142).

We see very similar images of macabre whiteness in Johnson's *Pym*, not limited to his treatment of Poe's shrouded apparition. The Tekelians' faces are like "horrific masks" (Johnson 125), with pale eyes and "colorless lips, …an alabaster tongue… devoid of blood…, …slick gums as pale and shiny as porcelain" (123), and "long, nearly luminescent teeth" (163); their hands are "mitt[s] of calloused, pale, dead skin" (128), with "nails like ivory" (142), and limbs "as hard and heavy and white as marble" (155). Augustus, resembling a crookedly "fang[ed]" (163) "rotting marshmallow" (170), vomits and defecates whiteness, dying in a pool of bodily fluid as pale as "yogurt" (291). Pym himself has become "the ghost of a man" (145), more "bloodless corpse" than living being (133), and we see further reference to Pym's disguise as the dead Rogers when Garth covers himself with toothpaste to impersonate the recently departed Sausage Nose. Johnson also alludes to the cannibalism in Poe, with an additional sexual and racial twist, through the Little Debbie snacks, as when Garth tells Chris to "take a bite of the white girl" (16).

In Poe's *Narrative*, our only certainty when assessing the white dreamlike oblivion and shrouded figure of the novel's end is that it stands in complete contrast to the blackness of Tsalal.

Indeed, the work takes great pains to posit not only a separation of white and black worlds, but to depict a repulsion and combustibility between blackness and whiteness. Where Tsalal is wholly black, the Antarctic is wholly white. Segregation appears too in the "miracle" (Poe 111) of the Tsalalian water:

> It was *not* colorless, nor was it of any one uniform color -- presenting to the eye… every possible shade of purple… made up of a number of distinct veins, each of a distinct hue; …these veins did not commingle; and …their cohesion was perfect in regard to their own particles among themselves, and imperfect in regard to neighboring veins… [And if a] blade was passed down accurately between …two veins, a perfect separation was effected. (110)

The text implies an essential aversion between colors not only at a level of unseen molecular phobia, but in the realm of racial interaction as well. The black cook, one of the leaders of the mutiny, is "a perfect demon" (29-30), more"bloodthirsty" (30) than his white cohorts; and the Tsalalians exhibit an intense fear, detestation and destructive impulse toward whiteness: they react to the white bear pelt with "horror, rage, and intense curiosity" (127), and Nu-Nu is "violently affected with convulsions… drowsiness and stupor" at the sight or touch of white linen (141). After the Tsalalians massacre their white visitors, this racial combustibility culminates in the literal "explosion" of the *Jane Guy*, killing hundreds of black natives in turn (128).

Johnson likewise creates a world where issues of separatism versus assimilation continually rise to the fore. Early on, Chris resents the restraints imposed on him as a black academic -- that the college just wants "the black guy to… teach black books to the white kids" (Johnson 13) -- but rather than wish for equality, he dreams more of homogeneity, of the "hidden tropical utopia" (67) of Tsalal, "the great undiscovered African Diasporan homeland… uncorrupted by Whiteness" (39), where

"brown people… are the majority" (322). Booker Jaynes at first exhibits similar sentiments, demanding an "all black" (74) crew, partly because he does not "trust white people;" and telling Chris "life is too short to be reading more books by white people" (100): black people have their "own books… own culture," and do not need to "borrow theirs." Despite Chris's chafing at his academic constraints, he mocks others who stray outside the prescribed expression of their race, such as the NAACG and Garth's Karvel obsession. This interracial cultural aversion further manifests and finally combusts in Tekeli-li, where the natives are just as horrifying to the Creole crew as the Tsalalians are to men onboard the *Jane Guy*. Chris and Garth's first and last encounters with the Tekelians are marked by explosions: during the cave-in, Garth flashes back to a Detroit bombing, when he felt "like the world [was] coming to an end" (92); and they leave Karvel's dome in "fire and ruin" (308) only to find base camp a "massive, smoking crater" (314), and every topmost Tekelian tunnel collapsed. As in Poe's *Narrative*, only two survive, while the rest of the two groups perish: black and white meet, and meet their ends.

Though Johnson does not reference her by name, Chris's preoccupation with Poe and "the intellectual source of racial Whiteness" (8) clearly alludes to Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, in which she examines the making of "literary whiteness" (Morrison 9) in conjunction with "literary blackness," and while citing *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, suggests that "no early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe" (32). In his riffing on whiteness in Poe's *Narrative*, Johnson effects a subversion of conventional race roles. He combines Poe's portrayals of grotesque whiteness with Pym's aversion to the monochromatic Tsalal, but switches the races of subject and object: Chris narrates from a black perspective, while occupying the traditionally white role of commodifying colonizer; and his object, the uncivilized Other, traditionally the

role of people of color, is here occupied by whites. But as Chris states with unknowing prescience, "whiteness… has always been more of a strategy than an ethnic nomenclature" (Johnson 31).

In *Moby Dick*, Melville subverts conventions of whiteness through his characters' perceptions of the formidable titular figure. Ishmael harbors his own "vague, nameless horror concerning" Moby Dick, and in examining why "it [is] the whiteness of the whale that above all things appall[s]" him, concludes that whiteness confronts us with the prospect of obliteration and meaninglessness (Melville 168). He notes that despite the shade's many "sweet, and honorable, and sublime [associations], there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes… panic to the soul" (169): pointing to "the Albino" (171), whose "all-pervading whiteness makes him more strangely hideous;" to the "hue of the shroud" (172) matching the "pallor of the dead;" to "the sailor, beholding the scenery of the Antarctic seas… [who] views what seems a boundless church-yard grinning upon him with its lean ice monuments and and splintered crosses" (174). Having exhibited evidentiary precedents of ghastly, ghostly whiteness, he moves to explain why the shade has such effects.

Our terror, he surmises, is rooted in its elusivity, for whiteness, "by its indefiniteness[,] …shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, …stab[bing] us… with the thought of annihilation" (175). And since "whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors" -- reflecting all other hues and absorbing none -- there exists in vast whiteness "a dumb blankness," and the possibility that

> all [colors] are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, …cover[ing] nothing but the charnel-house within… [T]he great principle of light, for ever remain[ing] white or colorless in itself, …if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all

objects, …with its own blank tinge. (175)

By marking the universe with meaning and Truths, we perhaps merely speculate through "colored and coloring glasses," and such is the overwhelming white nothingness that anyone who abandons the existential safety of the interpretive lens "gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him."

J. Lasley Dameron has shown the influence on Melville's work of William Scoresby's accounts of arctic exploration, in which Scoresby "advanc[es] whiteness as the most vivid evidence of the void and the unknowable" (97), and where the "sterile whiteness" (98) of his polar landscapes "creates in the reader's consciousness a conflicting sense of dread and wonder" (97). Coming full circle, it is fitting that Johnson draws so much from Melvillian whiteness in his own conceptions of whiteness and the Antarctic. We see Ishmael's assessment of the albinism in Chris's repeatedly referring to the Tekelians as "albino monsters" (Johnson 122); Melville text lends significance to the pale "shroud" (163) worn by the natives, and with which Chris "wrap[s]" (292) Augustus's "rigor-mortis-stricken corpse;" and like Melville's sailor, Chris views the Antarctic as "frozen white death" (233), a "monotonous white hell" (271), as "white and silent and still as it [is] cold" (87).

Johnson also incorporates Melville's connoting of whiteness to annihilation and false, superficial meaning. "Antarctica [feels] …like nothing" (90), say Chris. "Frozen nothing. Nihilism in physical form," only "to be loved for its lack of content, people, possessions." Confronted with Pym's willful blindness, Chris has an epiphany that inverses Melville's eternal blankness and deceitful colors as applied to the course of colonialism and white domination, implying colorless glasses serve just as well in deluding ourselves: society and culture "stay so white by refusing to accept blemish or history," as he declares, "Whiteness isn't about about being something, it is about being no thing, nothing, an erasure…

[the] covering over [of] truth with layers of blank reality…, whipping away all traces of our existence from this pristine landscape" (225). Then again, we see an exact representation of Melville's colorful harlotry splashed over empty blankness in the form of Karvel's painted dome, a "faux habitat" (240) of "meticulous… illusion," where "every detail [is] man-made" (251) in the service of disguising with false flora and fauna "the hard, cold, industrial shell that kept [the] controlled world from the real one's chaos" (254).

Johnson takes Melville's conceptions in "The Whiteness of the Whale," and transforms them in the context of social and spiritual crises of today: the threat of global annihilation, the postmodern prospect of ultimate meaninglessness, and the effects of the garish illusions in which we knowingly or unknowingly submerge ourselves. In his double subversions of conventional racial roles, Johnson implies that this process of Western degradation today hinges less (or not only) on the fraught interplay of racial identities and cultures than on the violent wielding of power -- no matter the wielder -- and the insidious, warping effects of Western superiority and entitlement -- which manifests in the mind, and not on the skin. This is the irony of Johnson's closing image: Chris, desperate to reach a land untainted by whiteness, brings "the infection" of whiteness to the island himself, as he is a product of and distributor of the same ideological systems he abhors (30).

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