

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Mat Johnson's *Pym* and Reflecting Whiteness in the Anthropocene

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### Abstract:

As critics begin to construct a literary and cultural archive of the Anthropocene, I argue that this archive must include works that demonstrate the epoch's White supremacist and settler colonial roots *in addition to* focusing on geologic stratigraphy and altered atmospheric conditions. I read Mat Johnson's novel, *Pym* (2011), as an exemplar text of an expanded Anthropocene archive. Through its narrative form and use of genre, *Pym* makes visible how racial ideologies in Euro-centric forms of environmental representation actively produce an altered atmosphere by way of ignoring the effects of anti-Black racism and settler colonialism. Throughout the novel, Johnson weaves together African American cultural traditions with complex allegories of climate change and the Anthropocene, showing that the so-called world made by humans signaled by the name 'Anthropocene' is much more precisely what philosopher George Yancy calls a 'white world making.'

To trouble the ideological power of 'the Anthropocene,' I engage the climate science concept of the 'Albedo effect,' arguing that the Anthropocene—as both a narrative concept and a physical reality—figures as a metaphorical inversion of the Albedo effect. In climate science, the Albedo effect refers to the whiteness of a surface and its attendant capacity to reflect solar radiation, thereby preventing the solar radiation from being absorbed by the land, air and sea. Albedo is Latin for 'whiteness,' and more whiteness means less warming. I argue that the Anthropocene exhibits an inversion of this reflective process: in the Anthropocene, what is reflected is Whiteness, not as a color, but as a racial and settler colonial strategy.

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## Introduction

Deep within Antarctic ice, tiny bubbles hold within them a moment of atmosphere. Where atmosphere is usually shifting and ephemeral, here it sits steadily in a frozen time capsule, giving present-day climate scientists access to samples of atmospheric composition from over the last two million years or so. This atmospheric composition, including the amount of greenhouse gases present at any given moment, is a product of all the geophysical and biological processes happening on earth. Volcanic activity, animals breathing, plants decomposing, nuclear proliferation and the rise of the internal combustion engine all contribute. So, too, do the material impacts of social systems like racism, colonialism, and the economic structures built upon them. Thus, the atmosphere trapped in all those tiny bubbles in centuries old ice is also a complex record of social systems and their atmospheric effects. This mixing of human activity and geologic forces is the key marker of the geologic epoch commonly, if not officially, termed ‘the Anthropocene.’ The Anthropocene, as a distinct geologic epoch, is premised on the assertion that human activity has changed biological and geophysical processes to such a degree that the atmosphere, among other components of the Earth System, has entered a no-analog state: there is simply no historical precedent for the current atmospheric composition.

In an atmosphere marked by the intense intermingling of human and more-than-human forces, it is easy to lose the individual threads of human activity that make up the tangle of the Anthropocene. Moreover, if we are to accept the Anthropocene as marking *human* activity writ large, we also lose the individual threads of which humans and which human systems are ultimately responsible. The tiny bubbles locked in ice, therefore, are convoluted—a mix of networks and their effects. Understanding and tracing the social and environmental components of this mix is essential for understanding the true causes of the Anthropocene. Failure to do so would mean that any attempts made to live in the Anthropocene epoch are done made under misguided pretenses. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina provides a prescient example: one might build houses on stilts to adapt to flooding, but if the legacies of slavery, the forced removal of indigenous peoples and the drastic altering of the land- and seascape to accommodate the petroleum industry in the region are not likewise addressed, the environmental and social destruction will no doubt continue.

The Anthropocene therefore produces a complex network of factors that become subsumed into a powerful, singular narrative. Limning these networks so as to make them visible becomes just as important as drilling the ice cores that capture their impacts. As Hsuan Hsu writes, ‘literature can map these networks of atmospherically-induced transformation, tracing impalpable connections between air, aesthetics and embodied experience’ (Hsu 2017: 3) In this article, I position Mat Johnson’s novel *Pym* (2011) as a novel of the Anthropocene that traces these otherwise impalpable connections. In doing so, I aim to expand Kate Marshall’s canon of novels of the Anthropocene—novels that understand themselves ‘within epochal, geologic times and includes that form of time within its larger formal operations (Marshall 2015: 524). Marshall notes that these novels are indicative of the Anthropocene’s ‘reflective phase’ (525). However, where Marshall sees a self-reflexive *phase* of the Anthropocene through her canon’s self-aware positioning as

artifacts of a sedimentary Anthropocene, Johnson's novel demonstrates the Anthropocene itself, as a concept and as a geologic epoch, is inherently reflexive and reflective, naming both the physical and conceptual conditions of its own production. More specifically still, the Anthropocene reflects the construction of whiteness and the racial project of colonialism, forces that not only produce the set of physical changes that bring about the Anthropocene epoch, but also give rise to the concept of a universal time through which the strategies of whiteness and settler colonialism are abstracted to be simply 'human.'

In this article, I focus on the role of race (and more specifically the production of whiteness) foundational to the epoch and its subsequent literary imaginary. At its best, the concept of the Anthropocene—and its geologic referent—has the capacity to dissolve some accepted binaries between human and 'nature.' However, as scholars like Françoise Vergès and Andreas Malm, have noted, there are major issues with the term and the assumptions that underlie it: namely, it erases the social systems (racial, gendered, capitalist, settler colonial) that have structured society in such a way as to produce the set of changes known as 'the Anthropocene.' Scholars and critics have responded to such an erasure by suggesting alternative titles that more accurately reflect the epoch's true referent: Raj Patel coins 'Misanthropocene' (2013: 21); Richard B. Norgaard offers 'Econocene' (2013: 1); Jussi Parikka suggests 'Antrhobscene' (2014); Kate Raworth offers 'Manthropocene,' pointing to the gender imbalance among scientists (2014); Malm and Alf Hornborg propose 'Technocene' and 'Capitolocene' (2014); and, adding further specificity, Françoise Vergès offers 'Racial Capitolocene' to draw attention to the parallel structure of regarding both racialized labor and the environment as 'cheap' and easily exploitable (2017). These portmanteaus draw attention to the social forces behind the driving force of the epoch. I argue that this attention can be all the more keener by understanding the cultural and literary forces that have led to the very misconceptions these various alternative names seek to correct.

As literary scholars and cultural critics begin to assemble the textual archive of the Anthropocene and its atmosphere, it is imperative that this archive reflects texts that are not only deeply concerned with the physical phenomena of the Anthropocene, but also reflect the structural, social systems that have produced it. Mat Johnson's 2011 *Pym* is one such novel. In what follows, I begin by reading the novel's engagement with the Eurocentric pastoral form as a means of critiquing an environmental imagination based on ignoring the impacts of racialized, exploited labor. I conclude by engaging my own metaphor of an inverted albedo effect to consider how the Anthropocene, as both a set of physical conditions and a narrative concept, reflects whiteness.

### **Engaging the Anthropocene's Pastoral Imaginary**

*Pym* provides a reflective vision of the Anthropocene in which the whiteness and colonialism that have altered the earth system ultimately collapse in on themselves both literally and literarily. In satirical and speculative form, the novel takes literally the concept of a world and atmosphere made by humans. The novel employs a number of formal techniques of African American literature such as an authenticating preface to vouch for the veracity of the narrator's claims and tropes of Afrofuturism in which a speculative

future is imagined through a reimagining of historical events. For this essay, I focus on the novel's undercutting of the pastoral form, a form that relies heavily on Eurocentrism and has significantly contributed to the dominant American vision of the environment, its uses, and its perceived value.

My focus on the pastoral is at once in response to length considerations of this essay, and also because it clearly exemplifies what makes Johnson's novel so useful: it reimagines a form of environmental imagination, making explicit the racial and colonial underpinnings of the form, thereby drawing attention to the racial and colonial underpinnings of the environmental crisis that is 'the Anthropocene.' In short, the novel creates an allegory of the Anthropocene through an extended metaphor of a Eurocentric pastoral landscape made real in Antarctica. *Pym* then follows the impacts of that environmental imagination to assess racial formation and settler colonialism.

In Johnson's novel, the record of social activity trapped within the ice becomes a business opportunity, bringing an all African American crew to Antarctica to mine the ice for clean water in the aftermath of an obliquely referenced environmental justice disaster that has made the US public unwilling to drink tap water. The crew embarks on a mission looking for ice that has not been impacted by the most recent events of their risk society. Led by Chris Jaynes, a recently fired professor of African American Literature, the crew soon discovers, however, that the ice does house—literally in some cases—the complex interactions of race, atmospheric change, colonialism and environmental justice, all of which should be the true referent for 'the Anthropocene.'

Johnson's *Pym* does not abstract the 'anthro' in Anthropocene to a deracinated entirety, positing that all humans are equally responsible for the global risk society typified by a warming world that brings destruction to relatively unknown communities or racialized non-white Others. Instead, it firmly locates the Anthropocene within a context of racial projects and colonialism, specifically considering the ways in which the production of whiteness is responsible. It also seeks to disrupt the fantasy of ignoring racial formation in the United States' social and environmental history, which has now become global and planetary.

As Jaynes and crew search for ice, they come in contact with a group of beings called the Tekelians, a heretofore 'undiscovered' group of mythical, semi-human white beings living in a vast ice cave network in Antarctica. Following his cousin's initial descriptor and immediately setting up the Tekelians to be figured through race, Jaynes refers to the Tekelians as 'Snow Honkies,' somewhat shamefully noting in a footnote, 'I realize *honkies* is a racial slur and the Tekelians might not even technically count as human' (174). Whether or not the Tekelians are human remains unclear throughout the novel, mirroring early anthropological accounts of non-white people whose humanity has remained in question from the point of contact. The Tekelians are imperiled by the exploits of landscape artist Thomas Karvel, the self-styled 'Master of Light.' Karvel's landscapes are thoroughly pastoral, depicting a construction of whiteness so complete that Jaynes believes them to be antithetical to the very existence of African Americans and blackness more broadly. The paintings show an environment absent of labor, which Jaynes sees as wholly ignorant of the history of exploited labor that produces the fantasy of nature without work. In the novel, this imagined version of the natural world becomes physical: Karvel erects a

biodome in the image of his paintings, and it operates as a neoliberal, libertarian escape from the growing terror and atmosphere of the global risk society.

Where the biodome is initially meant to be a self-supporting ecosystem, Karvel makes a number of changes to it so that it better reflects his imaginary. This world-made-by-whiteness becomes an allegory for the Anthropocene, as the exhaust produced by the modified dome ends up melting the ice-cave network of the white Tekelians. This prompts a massive battle that quickly turns genocidal when the dome explodes, taking with it Karvel and the entirety of Tekelians. In sum, whiteness reflexively collapses in on itself under its own fantasy.

As Jennifer M. Wilks explains, the text is directly informed by Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, especially Morrison's readings of Jayne's central literary interest, Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. For Wilks, *Pym* demonstrates that 'the history of race in the United States is a constitutive element of contemporary social dynamics' for all its participants, white, black, conservative, liberal, radical or otherwise (Wilks 2016: 3). Wilks argues *Pym* suggests that 'because race and racism seem to be inescapable in organized societies, the only way to end recurring patterns of alienation, exploitation, and inequality is to end the world itself' (3-4). *Pym* thus adds to the debate regarding whether 'substantive, lasting change can best be effected through reform or revolution' by proposing what Wilks considers a 'third, even more disruptive option: apocalypse' (4). Ultimately, Wilks concludes that, 'Pym does not posit a postracial fantasy that enables its characters to escape the complications of race and history so much as it projects a multi-layered, multiracial world in which such complications might be acknowledged and worked through' (12).

I add the Anthropocene as another social context in which to read *Pym*, suggesting that the upheaval and destruction of society implicit to the Apocalypse genre is an ill fit for the Anthropocene, an epoch that destabilizes and complicates gradually rather than totally in a single event through temporally dilated processes that Rob Nixon characterizes as 'slow violence.' Much like Wilks's understanding of *Pym's* treatment of race, the Anthropocene is layered with multiple complications that must be acknowledged and worked through. Adding the understanding of the Anthropocene to *Pym* shows that the category of race, as Wilks argues, is indeed a constitutive element of contemporary social dynamics, but so too are the ways in which race has mobilized and erected various environmental visions and their atmospheric impacts. In *Pym*, this comes through an adaptation of Poe's 'Domain of Arnheim' and 'Landor's Cottage,' two works primarily concerned with physical landscapes created by the artistic visions of their respective creators. To draw attention to the whiteness of these environmental imaginings, *Pym* centers Thomas Karvel as the contemporary version of Poe's Ellison and Landor, but pays close attention to the dependency on whiteness that drives such environmental imaginations. Karvel is a thinly veiled figure of Thomas Kinkadee, the self-styled 'painter of life' who built an empire on his pastoral landscapes and romanticized European cottages, complete with special editions featuring Disney fairytales and princesses, equally steeped in Eurocentric visions.<sup>1</sup>

The Anthropocene is one such environmental vision, and *Pym's* engagement with race and the complications of a post-race fantasy demonstrate the epoch's physical and

conceptual roots in colonialism and whiteness. The novel's engagement with the Anthropocene begins with a derivation of the very methods used to substantiate the Anthropocene's existence. Part of the dating method that geologists use to track changes in the Earth System, specifically in regards to atomic proliferation and levels of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>, is to examine the makeup of gasses trapped as bubbles in Antarctic ice (Waters et al. 2014). Evaluating which isotopes of a given element are present in the ice gives a record of when that ice was formed, as certain isotopes of carbon and oxygen only occur before or after certain events. In the case of attempting to designate the start of a new epoch, the proliferation of these isotopes can be accepted as stratigraphic markers of a new geologic period, data needed to substantiate claims of the new epoch such as the Anthropocene (Waters et al. 2014). The ice becomes a record of history, capturing a time in which the impact of colonial conquest, nuclear proliferation, the industrial revolution or an era of fossil fuel extraction had not yet begun.

In *Pym*, drilling for old ice is used for commercial means, instantiating a confrontation with whiteness through global environmental disasters and risks that operate in the background of the novel. Throughout the novel, a number of vague and ill-defined catastrophes inspire and make possible Jaynes's presence in Antarctica to discover Pym, the Tekelians and Thomas Karvel's pastoral dome. Following his denied tenure, Jaynes is tipped off to the existence of what seems to be a previously unknown slave narrative—a work that Jaynes is sure will resurrect his career. The document turns out to be the manuscript of Dirk Peters, Arthur Gordon Pym's companion who, until now, everyone presumed was fictional. This prompts Jaynes's deep desire to go to Antarctica, which is only possible through contacting an estranged cousin, Booker, a civil-rights activist turned deep sea diver and the only one Chris Jaynes knows who can be trusted and can captain a ship. Booker is able to secure a contract with the '\_\_\_\_ Cola Corporation' to mine Antarctic ice as a resource for drinking water. Of the plan, Jaynes explains, 'No one drank tap water since the Dayton Dirty Water Disaster; the clean stuff was worth as much as petroleum. The ice down there was centuries old, formed long before the modern world began collapsing' (74). The Dayton Dirty Water Disaster is never explained beyond what the name implies, which anticipates the environmental justice issue of Flint, Michigan's leaden public water and invokes past environmental justice issues like the 1969 Cuyahoga River Fire in Cleveland. In the shadow of manufactured risk produced by the modern world, pre-Anthropocenic ice becomes a marketable commodity as valuable as one the Anthropocene's main fuel sources, petroleum. Thus, the novel embeds the risk society into the atmospheric and geologic record, a very definition of the Anthropocene, and ties it to African American social justice movements.

Throughout the novel, the figure of Karvel is deeply intertwined with the production of whiteness and the fantasy of Eurocentric pastoral environments that disregard labor and, as a result, planetary boundaries. Karvel, his painting and his biodome embody a notion of not just a human-altered environment, but an environment that has been produced through a project, and projected image, of whiteness.

Karvel and his work are a focal point for extended conversations about aesthetic worth, fictional worlds, real economic downturns, climate change, terrorism and health, braided together in a thoroughly modern conception of the landscape of risk. Karvel is the

favorite artist of Jayne's best-friend Garth Frierson, an ex-bus driver from Detroit who has a deep affection for Little Debbie Snack Cakes. Garth's choices in art reflect his choice of snack: devoid of substance, overly saccharine, excessively artificial yet wholly palliative, and really white. The cakes and the paintings are frequently connected throughout the book as a way for Garth to comfort himself amid the many ills of the world.

However, the succor of both Karvel's imagined environment and the cakes is fleeting, mirroring the short-term-comfort-versus-long-term-peril that marks the slow violence of the Anthropocene age and its numerous environmental and social injuries. With climatic change, present and future populations are paying the true cost of, among other things, the burning of fossil fuels without regard for their climate altering emissions. As Frederick Buell explains, oil was even often considered emancipatory at the beginning of the oil boom, allowing work to be done by engines, rather than enslaved or exploited labor (Buell 2014). The idea of work without labor is one of the hallmarks of the pastoral mode of environmental thought. But to account for the true cost of oil, one must now weigh oil's benefits against such things as the impacts to the people and environment of the United States' Gulf Coast and the Athabasca tar sands, the violence in the Niger Delta, and the mass extinction of species and economic and social disruption of a radically altered climate. This tension between immediate gratification and delayed cost—both environmental and social—is central in the novel, made visible and knowable as Jaynes and Garth debate the merits of Karvel's pastoral mode.

The debate has its premises in the way each character values forms of environmental imagination and their ideological roots. Following Jaynes's denied tenure, Garth convinces Jaynes to indulge him in 'Karvel spotting,' the cultural practice among Karvel's fans of finding the exact locations from which Karvel painted his pastoral landscapes. This provokes the first of many disagreements between Garth and Jaynes about the merit of Karvel's work, and in his defense, Garth offers that the paintings 'make you all peaceful just looking into that world' (Johnson 2011: 15). The distinction between his own world and 'that world' indicates that Garth acknowledges the constructed depiction of the Karvel's environment. What's more, this construction would be wholly deconstructed were they to find the exact location from which Karvel supposedly painted. The practice serves as a kind of ground-truthing, in which the realities of the environment are held up against the way they are imagined and depicted. As Jaynes and Garth eventually find out, there's nothing peaceful about standing in Antarctica, particularly not when they are running from their enslavers while dragging a frozen corpse behind them.

Jaynes' response to Garth, that Karvel's paintings 'looks like the view up a Care Bear's ass,' thoroughly deflates the romanticism that Garth holds dear (15). While Garth is obviously offended, his defense of the paintings' environmental imagination comes from his understandings of their utility in confronting the global and local risks that typify the Anthropocene: 'I got stress! [...] The whole world's hell. The world is pollution and terrorism and warming and whatever, I don't know, whatever gets dropped next' (15). Here, Garth articulates a kind of atmosphere, per Neel Ahuja's understanding. Ahuja writes that atmosphere 'has a double valence: it signals both the interspecies intimacy structured by geophysical forces of the earth and the ambient sense of crisis, withering and extermination that intensify as the underside of neoliberal freedom' (Ahuja 2015: 367).

Garth's stress is the product of this infinitely altered atmosphere of crisis, exemplified in the novel by a number of ill-defined but omnipresent catastrophes such as 'November 3 Bombing' and 'Dayton Dirty Water Disaster.' To navigate the underside of neoliberal freedom, Garth activates a number of coping mechanisms, one of which is calming himself by eating a Little Debbie Snack Cake. However, even the palliative ingestion of the snack cake becomes dangerous, as Jaynes notes that his stress and consumption of the cakes renders Garth 'a home experiment in type 2 diabetes' (15).

Where the Snack Cakes threaten Garth's physical health, the artificiality of the Karvel paintings produces what Jaynes sees as threatening to the very existence of African Americans. In the paintings, Jaynes sees an environment and atmosphere that are not just absent of African Americans but are entirely impossible for them: 'It wasn't just that there were no black people present, it was also that Karvel's world seemed a place where black people couldn't even exist, so thorough was its European romanticization' (184). Jaynes continues, noting that the painting's 'overwhelming quaintness, its thatched roofs and oversaturated flowerings [create] a world that had more to do with the fevered Caucasian dreams of Tolkien and Disney than with any European reality' (184).

The 'European reality' invoked here is one that Jaynes, a few lines earlier, situates in a legacy of colonialism, assuring that reality is typified in its racist roots. Drawing a comparison to the fact that 'there are no blacks in the paintings of Vermeer either,' Jaynes explains that he 'didn't get the same feeling from his work – and Vermeer was Dutch, the old, scary Dutch West Indian kind of Dutch, too, not the modern happy-go-liberal version' (184). Jaynes's first-person interior monologue and dark humor reveal his navigation of both high and low culture, positioning the two against one another but tying them together through their treatment of 'blacks.' Such affiliations demonstrate the historical continuity of erecting whiteness by way of omitting blackness. The difference between the two paintings, however, is that Vermeer's paintings omit black bodies, whereas Karvel's pastoralism omits blackness in its entirety, foregrounding instead a constructed environmental imagination and romanticization of White European identity that believes itself entirely devoid of black influence, and labor in particular.

Such a disregard for the sources and injustices of labor—either human or fossil fuel—is a constitutive element of an ideology that allows for climate change and environmental degradation. Karvel's paintings extend the pastoral tradition of erasing blackness from the land, thereby decoupling race and labor from landscape and leisure. The pastoral genre traditionally envisions nature as a place that does not require work. Jaynes's evocation of the Dutch West Indies, however, calls forth the exploited labor of enslaved peoples. Imagining an environment without labor, in Jayne's approximation, also means envisioning a land without the contributions and presence of those who did the work, namely Indigenous peoples who, through racial projects, were made exploitable as a means of justifying their mistreatment and enslavement. As Raymond Williams explains of the genre, the pastoral romanticizes landscapes, turning them idyllic, by removing the laborers from imaginary, which consequently allows for the exploitation to be concealed and continued (Williams 1975: 32). Paul Outka demonstrates that this practice intensifies in Early American literature, adding in the racialization of labor through slavery. Outka's work shows how such literature employs the pastoral form as a justification of slavery,



viewing slaves as a form of animal labor that existed harmoniously in pastoral landscapes (Outka 2008). This, however, requires that the slave labor be *seen* as gross human exploitation, but Jaynes notes the absence of both black people and black influence in Karvel's pastoral worlds, a reflective blindness that has its roots in the strategy of whiteness.

As George Yancy points out, '[w]hiteness sees what it wants to see and thus identifies that which it wants to see with that which is. The power and privilege of whiteness obfuscates its own complicity in seeing a 'reality' that it constructs as objective' (Yancy 2004: 10). Whiteness and the pastoral are powerful strategies of occluding oppression and justifying such an occlusion as natural. The pastoral form continues long after the rise of transcendentalism and sublimity that Outka traces as its replacement, evident, among other places, in the paintings of Thomas Kinkade, the basis of the character Thomas Karvel. In *Pym*, Jaynes identifies the pastoral and subsequently reads an environment in which black people cannot exist because their labor, bodies and being have been imagined away. The result is an entirely artificial notion of the natural, which is the foundation of *Pym's* engagement with the Anthropocene, which, in Yancy's words, obfuscates its own complicity in seeing a reality that it constructs as objective.

Significantly, the cakes' and the paintings' threats to black bodies come through their invocation of whiteness. When Jaynes returns home after his failed attempt to get his job back, he finds all of his books, including many rare first editions, left on his door step, soaking in the rain. Seeing him distraught, Garth offers him one of his cakes, 'Come on, take a bite of the white girl. It will make you feel good' (15). The whiteness of Karvel and Little Debbie are, to Garth, a way of curing stress. To Jaynes, however, they are merely evidence of the foundational problem of whiteness and its role in creating a risk society, typified by the Anthropocene and made manifest by the overt resurgence of black labor in the form of slavery. The Little Debbies are a confectionary possibility only because of colonial slavery in service of the sugar trade. The exploited labor and justification of humans as chattel is then romanticized in the paintings, which deny and occlude any vestige of the violence that makes idyllic leisure possible.<sup>2</sup>

Through the invocation of the pastoral as a lens that blinds its users to the presence of African American labor and the construction of ideal landscapes, *Pym* partially demonstrates what Mart Stewart typifies as African American connection with the environment, but not without complication. Stewart explains that African American environmental politics are defined by the qualities of 'the pursuit of collective rights, the tendency to see community in broad terms that include both humans and non-humans, [and] the connection of environmental concerns to the world of work and production rather than to lifestyle choices and consumption' (Stewart 2006: 20). Certainly, the explosion of the Karvel Dome, in which Jaynes and Garth had been earning their keep by farming, demonstrates 'a connection of environmental concerns to the world of work and production rather than to lifestyle choices and consumption.' But such a reading is necessarily selective, and it requires that we only consider the lifestyle choices and consumption of the Karvels, and not those of Jaynes and Garth, or even other African Americans. Both Jaynes and Garth live lives of consumption. Moreover, their connection to work and production—at least in the way that Stewart conceives of work and

production, referencing the legacy of slavery and sharecropping—is relatively limited. Furthermore, their successful attempt to entirely eliminate a group (species?) of previously unknown Others suggests that they are not overly concerned with ‘the pursuit of collective rights’ and barely ‘see community in broad terms that include both humans and non-humans.’

This is not to say that Stewart is wrong in his assessment; rather, the Anthropocene produces a set of conditions that troubles naturalist understandings of African American environmentalism that rely upon relatively firm boundaries of environment and human, natural and non-natural. When Jaynes and his crew encounter the Tekelians, the novel once more reasserts the reality of slavery and all it produced. When Jaynes and Garth lose the ice drill used for harvesting clean water down a crevasse, Garth eschews blame: ‘Goddam global warming ... Ain’t our fault. It was all them Escalades in the ghetto’ (92). In their attempt to recover the drill, the crew comes face to face with the Tekelians. To alleviate the tense confrontation, they throw one of Garth’s Little Debbies to the Tekelians, who devour it. The crew then immediately begins conspiring on plans to get rich on their ‘discovery’ of these humanoids. Mimicking the racial project of the nineteenth century, which saw individuals from around the world so thoroughly de-humanized through racial projects that they were exhibited in zoos, the crew’s plans include an ill-fated plot to take two of the Tekelians back for display purposes in exchange for a few barrels of Little Debbie Snack Cakes. However, once the crew is no longer able to travel because of what may be a total Armageddon in the rest of the world the Tekelians demand that they pay for debts with 100 years of slavery (153). Garth, however, is able to avoid slavery by buying his freedom with his remaining personal stash of the snack cakes.

The ability to trade lives for sugar is due in part to the fact that the Tekelians survive solely on a diet of smashed seal fat and thus have never tasted sugar. As Jaynes observes, ‘The international sugarcane trade that fueled the colonial world—these beings had obviously missed that’ (127). Through the absence of black culture, labor and presence in their world, the Tekelians become whiteness by virtue of the absence of blackness. This inverts Poe’s description of the Tsalalians; the Tekelians work as a racial comparator in *Pym* as darkness works as a racial comparator for whiteness in Poe’s work. As a result, the Eurocentric pastoral form is forced to reckon with the reality of racialized labor, and the novel then ties the manufactured landscape—what Yancy calls ‘white world-making’—to the Anthropocene’s world made by humans.

### **Reflecting the Whiteness of the Anthropocene**

*Pym* reinserts race into the deracinated, universalizing Anthropocene as its characters understand the construction of race alongside their unpacking of environmental imagination. This engagement comes by way of the novel’s adoption of Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, in which she argues that certain nineteenth century White authors use an imagined form of blackness to engage ideals of freedom and erect a White identity grounded in this sense of freedom (Morrison 1992). Morrison argues that using a constructed version of blackness allows these authors to explore the fear and nervousness of a newly achieved American freedom. Crucially, however, the imagined blackness

separates the characters from the White authors and presumed audience, allowing these authors to evade the fact that it is slavery that gives them the economic power to become free (59).

*Pym* draws heavily on Morrison, and Jaynes's academic project is, in many ways, a re-constitution of Morrison's. Morrison concludes that for the authors she studies '[w]hiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable' (Morrison 1992: 59). Similarly, Jaynes theorizes that whiteness is 'refusing to accept blemish or history. Whiteness isn't about being something, it is about being no thing, nothing, an erasure' (Johnson 2011: 228). What's more, Jaynes immediately ties this blank whiteness to the physical environment, explaining that whiteness covers over 'the truth with layers of blank reality just as the snowstorm was now covering our tent, whipping away all traces of our existence from this pristine landscape' (228). Here, race is read onto the landscape and vice versa, which aligns with Ahuja's discussion of atmosphere. As Ahuja explains, drawing on Renisa Mawani and Franz Fanon, 'the effects of carbon pollution – disability, disease, forced migration, and sometimes death – can catalyze the emergence of xenophobic fears about economic and ecological interconnection' (Ahuja 2015: 371). In the novel, the landscape becomes perfectly pristine at the moment blackness is eradicated from it, covered by processes that are presumed to be 'natural,' the very ideological fantasy that drives Karvel and his pastoral landscapes. The Anthropocene can, and should, be understood as the moment in which the refusal to accept the history of violence endemic to neo-liberal modernization is no longer possible, owing to the fact that the exploitation of the earth has transgressed critical planetary thresholds. This means that the firm boundaries previously in place between human and nature melt away. However, in positing a universal *Anthropos* as the genesis, the concept of the Anthropocene covers over its own origins in much the same way that whiteness occludes itself.

In the novel, melting human/nature boundaries produces a conflict in which whiteness collapses in on itself, allegorized through the destruction of Karvel's biodome, which is made in the image of his Eurocentric fantasy of his paintings, alongside the destruction of the Tekelians' homeland, melted away by the exhaust produced by Karvel's manufactured world. From the beginning, the Antarctic world in which Karvel has crafted his ideal vision is racially encoded. When Jaynes tries to convince Garth to accompany him in search of the remains of Dirk Peters, Garth replies, 'You on your own there, dog. Ain't nothing for black folks down there in the cold' (58). Jaynes' rebuttal is equally encoded, implying that Garth's understanding of the place not offering anything to black folk necessarily means the space is white: 'White people don't own ice, Garth. I'm pretty sure they didn't even invent it' (58). When Garth realizes that there is potential to meet the actual Karvel, who he believes may be living down there, he relents and becomes excited about the prospect.

As it turns out, Garth is right. Karvel *is* hiding in a secret bunker in Antarctica, and it is that secret bunker that will ultimately save them both from slavery at the hands of the Tekelians. Following a lengthy escape across the ice away from their enslavers that ends with Garth crashing their snowmobile into a snowbank, Jaynes regains consciousness to find himself in the '*Dome of Light*,' Karvel's name for his bio-dome in the snow. The dome

is a physical manifestation of Karvel's painting, complete with Karvel's signature scrawled across the ceiling. Following the extended exposure to slave labor in a frozen tunnel-scape, Jaynes finds the lush gardens, warmth, flowing waters, soft ground and perfumed air to be supremely beautiful. In fact, Jaynes finds it to be 'too beautiful, too perfect, for my mind to wrap around' (232). It's at this moment that he sees a large signature on the sunset sky above him, and he realizes that 'this was not my heaven, this was Garth's. This was my hell. I was trapped inside a Thomas Karvel painting' (234). The voices he hears are looped playbacks of conservative radio programs hosted by Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly, all playing simultaneously in various parts of *The Dome of Light*.

As a biodome, *The Dome of Light* entirely ignores and refuses its external contexts. As such, it operates with the same strategy of whiteness, becoming a central metaphor in the novel. As Wilks explains, 'Karvel believes that he has created a postracial paradise unsullied by the legacies of slavery and inequality that haunt the United States' (10). The dome, however, demonstrates the simultaneous construction of nature and race, meaning that the very possibility of Karvel building his dome relies upon white privilege and aesthetic conceptions of the environment that erase the presence of racialized Others. Karvel, multi-millionaire environmental imagist, explains that he retreated to Antarctica for its seclusion and the possibility to recreate everything that's great about America, which ultimately means constructing America as a neo-liberal ideal fully steeped in ideologies of settler colonialism and the liberating promise of the free market (241). To do so, Karvel evokes the concept of *Terra Nullius*, the fantasy of open space that propelled Euroamerican expansion, updated with libertarian values:

A man who lives a life worth living, he's a hunter. 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 ... Had to come down here to do it too. As blank as the morning snow. 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)

Karvel's motivation, and indeed the possibility of his endeavor, comes from the imagination of an empty space in which one can reimagine life in the image of fantasy, conveniently ignoring the enslaved labor and genocide that made such spaces possible. Mirroring both the rhetoric of 19<sup>th</sup> century westward expansion and the contemporary rhetoric for opening drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and testing nuclear bombs in the desert of Nevada, Karvel imagines Antarctica as empty. The emptiness is not just physical, however. Karvel also believes it to be a place without history or stain, a reprisal of Jayne's observations on whiteness. He makes no attempt to consider his own presence in the land, made possible by the romantic ideals of Eurocentric pastoralism and the systems of capitalist accumulation and the culture industry that provide him his means. By building a space upon the ability to forget history and imagine blankness, the bio-dome manifests whiteness's predilection for erasure into a physical landscape.

For Karvel, who constructs a space he believes to be absent of history and government intervention, this is an opportunity to create the space as an ideal America, but it is one that must necessarily be built upon a foundation of white supremacy's inability to recognize itself and its contexts. Of the recordings of Beck, Hannity, O'Reilly, and Limbaugh, Karvel remarks that it 'keeps me grounded. [...] Makes this hallowed ground, the way I see it. Makes it America. America without taxes, and big government, and terrorist bullshit' (236). The space thus serves as a neoliberal and racial fantasy of America divorced from the systems of oppression and violence that have made it possible.

Not just a fantasy space made real, the dome serves as a literal bunker from the atmospheric ills brought on by the various violent campaigns that have produced the Anthropogenic risk society. Karvel built his dome as a response to these events and an anticipation of the Armageddon that may be occurring at that very moment. Justifying the wealth and privilege that allows for his isolation, Karvel claims, 'I knew this was coming, end of the world, been saying it since the sixties. I got out because I love it too much, really. But I'll never leave the U.S. of A. God bless America' (236). Thus, Karvel's dome is a manifestation of his neoliberal and libertarian views of an idealized America. As the manifestation of a European romanticized pastoral, it also constructs a landscape that has chosen to forget what Morrison calls the 'Africanist presence' that gave rise to the construction of whiteness. Where Morrison argues that certain nineteenth-century authors create 'American Africanism' as a way of distinguishing their freedom as white men from the enslavement of African Americans thereby creating Whiteness as a presumed manifestation of freedom, Karvel's America does away entirely with the Africanist presence. Instead, it is a space of only whiteness.

Moreover, in his neoliberal, libertarian exclamation of his idealized America absent taxes and big government, Karvel remains completely disengaged from the fact that the bio-dome is the product of the tax-payer funded, big government program that is NASA. Given this oversight, it is not at all surprising that he fails to see the irony in his prideful boast that 'NASA contracted for these things to colonize Mars someday' (240). The bio-dome is a technology of settler colonialism, taken to its interplanetary extreme.

In its construction, design and disregard for its environmental contexts, the dome is an allegory for modern American life, its ideological roots and its associated environmental perils. Unsatisfied with the stock specifications of NASA's bio-dome, however, Karvel began making 'improvements.' Driven by his understanding that 'God created nature. I just improved on it,' and 'Nature was created to serve man,' Karvel begins make changes to the hermetically sealed, self-supporting bio-dome to better align with his personal vision of an idealized (read: white) space. The first thing to go was the natural lighting and solar heating: 'On the original plans, the whole roof was supposed to be glass. They tried to tell me I had to keep it that way. But the sky, that's my big thing, my signature' (252). So the glass was replaced with a 'real Thomas Karvel heavens glowing above,' which subsequently required artificial light, which requires both an energy source and, since there's no solar heat coming through the painted sky, a heat source. Karvel claims to rectify this by sparing no expense for solar panels covering the roof. In reality, however the solar panels got nixed in a redesign in favor of using the roof's real estate for additional satellites to ensure that the conservative radio programming signal is never lost. As Mrs. Karvel explains of her

husband's delusions, 'The solar panels there, they're just so our accountant could get us a tax break. Mostly, this whole place runs on gas. Tommy likes to forget that' (258). Of course, there's no contingency plan in place for eventually running out of gas. In favor of true sustainability that would actually allow Karvel to continue to exist in place on his own, he has given essential roof space to satellites, guaranteeing a constant reproduction of his ideological foundation. The dream/fantasy of American self-sufficiency is of course dependent upon various exploited energy sources and a refusal—or inability—to acknowledge their impacts.

The novel exemplifies how the exploitation of cheap energy—be it fossil fuels, slavery or poorly compensated labor—has fueled dominant American life. Karvel's inability to attend to the exploitations' inherent violence produces both environmental and social destruction. The exhaust from Karvel's bio-dome is pumped directly into the Antarctic ice, demonstrating what Peter Sloterdijk has termed 'air conditioning,' referring to the production of a localized atmosphere that impacts social activity (Johnson 2011: 277; Sloterdijk 2009). Karvel's air conditioning in the biodome, a process that focuses exclusively on his own comfort and well-being with a complete disregard for its externalities, is causing the collapse of the Tekelians' home, prompting a massive military operation in which the Tekelians rally to declare war against *'The Melt'* (Johnson 2011: 195, emphasis in the original). True to the novel's parodic form, which ironically engages whiteness and the pastoral for the purposes of undercutting their power, the great uprising that occurs between the community marginalized by the exhaust of an American fantasy and the perpetrators of the fantasy unknowingly (and then knowingly and unsympathetically) pumping the destructive exhaust, is not an uprising based on the racial *differences* that created the problems to begin with. Instead, the injury comes to two entities, Karvel and the Tekelians, linked by their whiteness.

The process of racialization, in which social differences and hierarchies are mapped onto the body, positions certain people and communities as inherently more violable or expendable.<sup>3</sup> In the United States, and most of the Western world, those in power are White. Of course, this is not by coincidence, but rather by design. As Morrison and Jaynes explain, whiteness is fundamentally defined by the categorization of otherness used to locate the distribution of economic, environmental and social ills. To be white is to refuse 'to accept blemish or history' (228). In the case environmental ills like climate altering emissions, such blemishes can only be shifted and never eradicated. Those who are not white, then, bear the burden of that blemish. In *Pym*, however, the effect of Karvel's creation of whiteness, which justifies the fantasy of being able to avoid the consequences of a lifestyle well beyond planetary boundaries, ultimately falls upon the novel's other marker of embodied whiteness: the Tekelians. When the biodome explodes, taking Karvel and the entirety of the Tekelians with it, whiteness in many forms collapses in on itself.

### **Coda: An Inverted Albedo**

By way of conclusion, I offer my own metaphor as a means of understanding what Johnson's novel makes visible about the Anthropocene. Climate change—and by extension, the Anthropocene—is partially a function of atmospheric gas trapping reflected

light and heat that is reflected in a process called the albedo effect. The albedo effect refers to the amount of light reflected back into the atmosphere as a result of a surface's whiteness ('albedo' is Latin, meaning 'whiteness'). Larger amounts of whiteness reflect more solar radiation. Reflecting solar radiation—that is, bouncing it back towards its source—prevents that solar radiation from being absorbed in the form of heat. This is a good and necessary process if one values maintaining stable global temperatures. The process of reflecting heat, however, changes under the altered atmospheric compositions that instantiate climate change. With the change in atmospheric composition, that reflected solar radiation is instead trapped, unable to escape, and eventually bounced back again onto the land, ice, sea, air, causing more warming, which melts ice, which reduces its capacity to reflect solar radiation. This begins a positive feedback loop: absorbed solar radiation causes more melting, meaning less whiteness, which means less reflection, which means more absorbed warming, more melting and so on and so forth.

Where the albedo effect refers to whiteness's ability to reflect solar radiation, I argue that the Anthropocene is typified by something of a metaphorical inverted albedo. In the Anthropocene, what is reflected is whiteness itself. The Anthropocene, as a concept, narrative, and set of geologic processes, reflects the racial strategy of whiteness back to its source. The social and economic injuries produced by white supremacy combine to destabilize the very economic and social systems that have produced the Anthropocene by way of threatening the material bases of colonialism and racism.

In addition to the lenses that stratigraphers, Earth System scientists, ecosocialist and social scientists focusing on capitalism employ, scholars should consider the Anthropocene through lenses of alternative epistemologies. Through the altered atmosphere, among other elements of the Earth System, the Anthropocene is an epoch in which marginalized communities endure social and environmental violence without personally interacting with those responsible for the harm. Such is the case with Karvel and the Tekelians, and so too with the peoples of Native Alaskan Villages, the Maldives, and coastal Bangladesh, to name just a few. In the Anthropocene it is a distinct possibility that those perpetrating the injustices and violence are, in fact, entirely unaware of the existence of the individuals whose lives they are making unlivable.

*Pym's* engagement with the Anthropocene demonstrates that the fantasy of American history is not only built upon fantasies of racial difference and colonial justification for exploitation; it is also built on an attendant disregard for the non-human world. The construction of a hegemonic racial and settler colonial force thereby requires that whiteness be constructed out of certain forms of engagement (or disengagement, as the case may be) with the willingness to ignore and/or transgress planetary boundaries atmospheric and otherwise. This is evident in both the set of physical conditions that create the Anthropocene and also in the narrative conception of the Anthropocene as a universal time that has been produced by humanity writ large. At its root, the physical changes that mark the Anthropocene are the product of white supremacy and colonialism; systems that accumulate and redistribute resources with little regard for their social or environmental impact. So, too, is the implicit inference that these actions are the product of a universal *Anthropos* and not a reflection of white supremacy and colonialism.

Following cultural critics who have begun to engage the epoch, I therefore suggest we engage the Anthropocene as both epoch and episteme—it is both a set of physical changes to the Earth System *and* a concept that organizes those changes into a compelling narrative. As Dana Luciano notes, the Anthropocene is a well-told story that ‘relies on conscious plotting and the manipulation of feeling’ (Luciano: 2015). But as Jason Moore notes, it is perhaps too easy a story, ‘because it does not challenge the naturalized inequalities, alienation and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production’ (Moore 2014).

*Pym* ensures that the racial and settler colonial roots of the Anthropocene aren’t abstracted to reflect a universalized *human* impact. Instead, the novel demonstrates how the production of whiteness, including strategies of settler colonialism, undergirds the so-called *world made by humans*, thereby resisting what Aaron Vansintjan diagnoses as a ‘blanket humanity, a blanket history, a blanket geological record inherent to the Anthropocene concept’ (2016). The novel does this by decentering Eurocentric racial projects embedded in the pastoral form, and reflects the source of the social and environmental degradation back onto itself.

In doing so, it demonstrates the inherent reflectivity of the Anthropocene, as both a narrative and an epoch. As an epoch meant to denote an era of human alteration, the social systems that gave rise to an altered earth now threaten the very resources upon which those social systems were built. As a narrative that attempts to explain those changes, the term reflects the tendency to codify the specific social system of whiteness as representing all of humanity, therefore refusing to accept the blemish. Whiteness, in other words, is reflected both in and through the Anthropocene: it is the cause for its physical being, and the cause for the obfuscating narrative that refuses to accept blame.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Micki McElya (2011) writes, Kinkade’s ‘images operate as potent and penetrating conservative propaganda. His vision of nostalgic nationalism bathed in God’s light is widely representative of the suburban, racial, sexual, and economic politics of the Right. His images reflect longing for a mythic American past of simpler times and intimate communities free from the anxieties of alienation, diversity and economic or social inequality, while at the same time promoting whiteness, normative heterosexuality, Christianity, middle-class aspirations, and free-market radicalism as the core of ‘American values’ (57).

<sup>2</sup> The gendering and sexualizing of Little Debbie also satirizes colonialism’s reliance on sexual domination and patriarchy, themes that also pervade the novel and warrant their own analysis.

<sup>3</sup> I take this definition of racial formation from Omi and Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States* (2014).



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