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"Negras Aguas": The Poe Tradition and the Limits of American Africanism

IN *PLAYING IN THE DARK: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993), Toni Morrison argues that white American authors have used representations of blackness and Black characters—an "American Africanism" she describes as a "fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire" (38)—to structure the moral and psychological dilemmas of white characters.[1] Her claim that "No early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe" (32) has motivated Americanist scholarship seeking to situate Poe's work in the antebellum period (see, for example, Kennedy and Weisberg; Nelson; Dayan; and Goddu). In this essay, I make a case for the ambivalence of Poe's "American Africanism" as an aesthetic mode and demonstrate its use by anti-colonial and anti-racist writers from Latin America, the Caribbean, and the U.S.[2]

I begin by reading an episode in Poe's only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, in order to show that the book's designs on the anxieties of its white readers depend on a deeply ironic sense of race as an idea. From there, I turn to Comte de Lautréamont, one of the first of Poe's readers to engage his work in the context of firsthand experience with New World slavery. I conclude with a discussion of a contemporary African American novel, Mat Johnson's *Pym*, which rewrites Poe's

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[1] *Playing in the Dark* owes significant debts to postcolonial studies. Morrison's key term, "American Africanism," and her references to "the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" resonate with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (7). Likewise, her claims for the "dark and abiding presence" of a "self-reflexive" Africanism in white American writing echo Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's titular question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Morrison's claims also share some of the limitations of early postcolonial thinking by leaving little room for the possibility that non-Western modes of thought influenced works that appear to occlude them. Morrison may also have drawn inspiration from Christopher L. Miller's then-recently published and still useful *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (1985). These methodological parallels suggest that Morrison's reading can (and should) be extrapolated beyond American literature.

[2] For a critic who shares my investment in demonstrating the availability of Poe's aesthetic mode to the possibility of black emancipation, see Kennedy. Critics who have begun to look to the later nineteenth century for Black aesthetic projects that re-purpose racist imagery for their own ends include Brooks and Chude-Sokei.

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novel as a satire of racism at the dawn of a supposedly "post-racial" society. This trajectory traces uses of Poe that are less well known, but also more politically and formally radical, than the tradition charted in Morrison. The point of my analysis is not to disprove claims about Poe's racism. Rather, I argue that, regardless of his intentions, "American Africanism" provided Poe's literary descendants with formal strategies central to anti-racist and anti-colonial aesthetics.[3]

Morrison's objections to Poe are substantially formal. Her own mode of choice for representing race in America is the multi-generational family saga, which elaborates race as a figure of national tragedy. Her novels—and she has written little short fiction—build tension slowly and focus on issues involving the American national character.[4] By contrast, Poe famously wrote pieces he hoped would be read in one sitting and associated race with comedy and terror much more often than with tragedy. Morrison refers to Poe's novel as a "dehistoricizing allegory" and argues that "Poe deploys allegorical mechanisms in Pym not to confront and explore, as Melville does, but to evade and simultaneously register the cul-de-sac, the estrangement, the non sequitur that is entailed in racial difference" (69). This distinction draws on at least two crucial prior commentators. First, she recapitulates F.O. Matthiessen's exclusion of Poe from his pantheon in *The American Renaissance* (1941), where he claims Poe's stories "seem relatively factitious when contrasted with the moral depth of Hawthorne or Melville" (xii; see Erkkila). Second, and perhaps more importantly, she follows the lead of Ralph Ellison, whose narrator declares at the outset of *Invisible Man*: "No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe" (3). Carrying Ellison's premises past the end of the twentieth century, Morrison's novels explore her characters' conflicted allegiances to Black and U.S. nationalisms before and after the Civil Rights movement. Poe's work, despite its antebellum abstraction, aims squarely at white anxiety about race, a subject whose urgency shows no signs of diminishing at the present time. It does so by questioning the racial foundations of white liberal individualism through irony and horror.[5]

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838) offers an especially useful test case for Morrison's ideas. The novel purports to be the diary of a melancholy young man of Nantucket, drawn in to a life at sea by a perverse will to self-destruction. His boyhood friend Augustus convinces him to become a sailor with stories of terrifying adventures at sea:

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[3] Morrison registers the possibility of a diasporic significance for her ideas briefly in her discussion of the representation of Afro-Cubans in Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, but she does not make more than passing mention of the fact that Poe's *Pym* also represents people of African descent elsewhere in the diaspora.

[4] *Tar Baby* (1981), which centers on the fate of a romantic relationship first formed in the Caribbean, and *A Mercy* (2008), which takes place during the colonial period in what would become the United States, are partial exceptions.

[5] My thinking on Morrison has been significantly informed by Thorsson. For Poe's work in relation to anxiety, see Elmer. Whalen shows that Poe used an "average racism" to avoid committing himself to a political stance on slavery that would have limited his opportunities as a journalist, a trick that perhaps helped his work travel well in the Americas (3), and Rowe connects Poe with pathologizing discourses of identity that would emerge later in the century: "Long before the modern psychiatrist promised to cure patients by understanding the psychic logics of their stories, Poe played with the gendered and racialized 'bodies' he believed were effects of the language of which he was the master" (100). Whatever Poe's actual intentions, later writers have used his destabilizing effects to critique fixed ideas of ethnic difference.

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It is strange, too, that he most strongly enlisted my feelings in behalf of the life of a seaman when he depicted his more terrible moments of suffering and despair. My visions were of shipwreck and famine; of death and captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown. (*Poetry and Tales* 1018)

The novel goes on to satisfy its protagonist's every masochistic desire in a grisly parody of quest romance, a sublimely absurd and encyclopedic excursus on mishaps at sea. Pym starts as a stowaway, emerges to mutiny, survives a shipwreck and shark attacks, is forced into cannibalism, encounters vicious savages, and escapes only to float into uncharted waters. Because he undertakes his adventures out of a primary need to feel danger and not in the interest of civilizing ideals or material gain, Pym represents Atlantic exploration and trade as an effect of the white male death drive. Furthermore, as Morrison suggests, the "barbarian hordes" have a special role in dramatizing Pym's fantasies of heroic destruction.

Pym's acknowledgment of his adolescent motivations contrasts with his claim, in the preface, that the narrative was composed at the request of "several gentlemen in Richmond, Va., who felt deep interest in all matters relating to the regions I had visited" (1007). *The Southern Literary Messenger*, where the novel was first serialized, had in fact featured articles about South American politics that were concerned with the possibilities of expanding plantation holdings there, and Poe himself reviewed reports of an Antarctic expedition for the popular Southern periodical. Pym's youthful perversity thus served the rather more adult business interests of Southern gentlemen. The narrative does not, however, promise a commercial paradise full of easily exploitable natives.

In the later episodes of the novel, after being saved from shipwreck, Pym convinces the captain of his new vessel, the *Jane Guy*, to explore the southernmost reaches of South America and the outlying islands of Antarctica, where they discover inhabitants on the island of Tsalal. Suggestions of the connection between Tsalal and the slave system of the American South abound: Pym mentions that the peaks of Tsalal bear "a strong resemblance to corded bales of cotton," and the explorers attempt to form a kind of plantation for the harvesting of local seafood, *biche de mer* (1133). However, the novel also frustrates readers looking for structural or aesthetic features of the slave-holding American South. Improbably, Poe surrounds the "black" natives of the island with Arabic and Egyptian cultural markers, and, by positing Tsalal as an uncharted island culture, the novel anachronistically recalls contact literature, conflating African and Native American experiences of European colonialism. These "factitious" aspects of the novel (to borrow again from Matthiessen) make the terrors of New World settler colonialism seem familiar to antebellum readers.

Several events on the island of Tsalal "evade and simultaneously register the non sequitur that is entailed by racial difference," as Morrison has it. At key moments in the novel, Poe uses allegories of misrecognition to disrupt his readers' sense of stable racial identity. Thus, the leader of the tribe on Tsalal, Too-Wit, throws himself on the floor with his face in his hands to avoid his own reflection in a mirror aboard the Jane Guy, while the explorers discover that they cannot see their reflection in the island's freshwater streams, which run with purple water:

At a small brook which crossed our path (the first we had reached) Too-wit and his attendants halted to drink. On account of the singular character of the water, we refused to taste it, supposing it to be polluted; and it was not until some time afterward we came to understand that such was the appear-

> ance of the streams throughout the whole group. I am at a loss to give a distinct idea of the nature of this liquid, and cannot do so without many words. Although it flowed with rapidity in all declivities where common water would do so, yet never, except when falling in a cascade, had it the customary appearance of limpidity. It was, nevertheless, in point of fact, as perfectly limpid as any limestone water in existence, the difference being only in appearance. At first sight, and especially in cases where little declivity was found, it bore resemblance, as regards consistency, to a thick infusion of gum arabic in common water. But this was only the least remarkable of its extraordinary qualities. It was not colourless, nor was it of any one uniform colour—presenting to the eye, as it flowed, every possible shade of purple; like the hues of a changeable silk. This variation in shade was produced in a manner which excited as profound astonishment in the minds of our party as the mirror had done in the case of Too-wit. Upon collecting a basinful, and allowing it to settle thoroughly, we perceived that the whole mass of liquid was made up of a number of distinct veins, each of a distinct hue; that these veins did not commingle; and that their cohesion was perfect in regard to their own particles among themselves, and imperfect in regard to neighbouring veins. Upon passing the blade of a knife athwart the veins, the water closed over it immediately, as with us, and also, in withdrawing it, all traces of the passage of the knife were instantly obliterated. If, however, the blade was passed down accurately between the two veins, a perfect separation was effected, which the power of cohesion did not immediately rectify. The phenomena of this water formed the first definite link in that vast chain of apparent miracles with which I was destined to be at length encircled. (*Poetry and Tales* 1140–41)

Critics have long been drawn to this passage, even before Poe's interest in race became a primary concern. Maria Bonaparte, in her classic Freudian analysis of the novel, associates the purple stream with what she takes to be Poe's dominating theme: the loss of "a body whose blood nourished us even before it was time for milk, that of the mother who sheltered us for nine months" (332). Gaston Bachelard places the stream at the heart of a long reading of Poe's water imagery and concludes that "for so scarred a psyche everything in nature which flows heavily, painfully, and mysteriously is like blood accursed, like blood which bears death" (*Water and Dreams* 59). Morrison herself does not discuss the stream in detail, but it confirms an important aspect of her analysis, namely that "African Americanism" can appear in "darkness" of any sort, that the objectification of Black people in American literature does not take place exclusively in racist caricature, but also, for instance, in the setting.[6]

The environment of the later pages of the novel is suffused with the kind of racial allegory Morrison describes—the white wasteland of Antarctica as well as the black island of Tsalal. However, the dense complexity of this allegorical stream also points to the ambivalent function of Poe's American Africanism. On the one hand, the stream seems the product of "environmental racism"—eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century ideas about the natural determination of racial characteristics—most prominently the effects of the sun on the body, work ethic, rational intelligence, and creativity—in which water plays a comparatively insignificant role. On the other, the way the description turns water to blood refers to proto-genetic and sentimental racialist thinking as it took shape in the 1830s. Thus, the instability of the image of the stream, and the unease it would have set off in the antebellum reader, depends on the way Poe's description juxtaposes competing ideologies involving racial difference (see Jordan and Frederickson). Poe further implies that the bloody stream mirrors the alienation of an interracial body politic: that "these veins did not commingle; and that their

[6] Jorge Luis Borges offers a brief reading of the stream in a programmatic early essay entitled "Narrative Art and Magic" (1932): "The novel's secret theme is the terror and vilification of whiteness. . . . White is anathema to these natives, and I must admit that by the last lines of the last chapter it is also anathema to the appreciative reader" (78).

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cohesion was perfect in regard to their own particles among themselves, and imperfect in regard to neighbouring veins."

The stream also plays on philological associations within the history of the word "race" itself. When used to describe a contest of speed, "race" is related etymologically to the flow of water. The OED cites a variety of early Scandinavian roots: "Old Icelandic *rás*, Norwegian regional *rås*, Swedish regional *rås*: running, rush (of water), course, channel, way running, rush (of water), course, channel." Poe's stream thus reanimates and literalizes the etymology of "race" in the fictional present of the *Narrative*. Leo Spitzer has argued, furthermore, that the concept of "race" actually descends from the Latin *ratio*, the root for Poe's keyword "ratiocination." Spitzer discards the possibility of the word's Arabic origin (*ra*, meaning "head"), which would have tantalized Poe, but, in either case, the association of race with thinking has a suggestive and unsettling effect. In the image of the stream the fixity of "race" as a social body, a linguistic construct, or a philosophical category contrasts with the flow of purple water: the stream is only "racial" in the context of a comprehensive uncertainty about the stability of race as an idea. The threat of violence implied by Pym's probing knife finds a correspondence in the Latin word *rasus*, meaning scratch or scrape, which also forms part of the history of the word "race." Poe might even have been thinking of Heraclitus, whom Plato claimed "is supposed to say that all things are in motion and nothing at rest; he compares them to the stream of a river, and says that you cannot go into the same water twice" (*Cratylus* 402a).[7]

If the instability of race as a category is a key trigger of the "fears and desires" Morrison associates with "American Africanism," the possibility of Black revolution is another (17). According to Morrison, Pym's experimentation with the purple water of the stream allows Poe to "signal" his protagonist's "modernity," a key function of the Africanist presence (52). Poe also raises the possibility that Black subjects will become agents of political action and intellectual intervention. Indeed, by noting a similarity between the consistency of the stream and watered-down gum arabic, an African export used to control the viscosity of ink, Pym seems to figure Black origins for the materials of graphic communication and literary knowledge in a story which elsewhere makes sensational use of Arabic writing and Egyptian hieroglyphs.

African American culture itself suggests other meanings for the stream. River imagery occupies a fundamentally important place in nineteenth-century African American culture, with the crossing of the Jordan River auguring emancipation in typological comparisons between biblical and American chattel slavery. Partly

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[7] Cf. a passage in "Self-Reliance," first published a few years after *Pym*, in which Emerson contrasts the weakness of civilized men with the physical strength of primitives:

> What a contrast between the well-clad, reading, writing, thinking American, with a watch, a pencil, and a bill of exchange in his pocket, and the naked New Zealander, whose property is a club, a spear, a mat, and an undivided twentieth of a shed to sleep under! But compare the health of the two men, and you shall see that the white man has lost his aboriginal strength. If the traveller tell us truly, strike the savage with a broad axe, and in a day or two the flesh shall unite and heal as if you struck the blow into soft pitch, and the same blow shall send the white to his grave.

This thought experiment relies on a biological absurdity equal to Poe's black water. Although Emerson intends its casual violence to reveal that the self-regarding civility of his white middle-class audience is weak and coddled, like Pym, he fails to recognize his own barbarism and, as Morrison suggests, displaces the violence of colonial encounters into philosophical debate.

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for this reason, Baptists had had well-known success in proselytizing among Southern slaves (see Sobel and Butler). Melville Herskovits has connected the success of the Baptists with what he claims was a substantial presence among New World slaves of Dahomean priests of "river cults" who, "more than any other group of holy men . . . were sold into slavery to rid the [local African] conquerors of troublesome leaders" (232). Nat Turner would have been the most ready-to-hand icon of slave revolt while Poe was writing *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and Turner himself had felt a call to baptism during one of the spiritual visitations he experienced through the late 1820s:

> [T]he Spirit appeared to me again, and said, as the Saviour had been baptised so should we be also—and when the white people would not let us be baptised by the church, we went down into the water together, in the sight of many who reviled us, and were baptised by the Spirit—After this I rejoiced greatly, and gave thanks to God. (*Narrative* 11)

The revulsion, confusion, and millennialist anxiety felt by whites at the spectacle of slaves taking the sacrament animate Poe's image of the stream. Read within these historical contexts, Poe's image emblematizes an environment increasingly articulated by Black people.

Like Melville in "Benito Cereno," Poe focuses on a Black man's deceptiveness in planning his people's revolt. That people of African descent (thought to be subject to uncontrollable sentiment) could dissimulate struck American Renaissance writers as an apocalyptic irony. The Southerners watching Turner conduct an unofficial baptism must have felt similarly confused: what could it mean that the slaves wanted so badly to become good Christians? In short, the image of the stream in *Pym* does not finally resolve racist anxiety or flatter white self-regard, but instead oscillates between terror and irony. Later writers have taken up this ambivalence with more polemical aesthetic ends in mind.

Blackness and French Symbolism in South America

To demonstrate how Poe's compressed, ironic, and imagistic representation of race could work in anti-racist aesthetics from outside of the U.S., I turn now to another nineteenth-century author whose work has had a significant influence on African diasporic literature. Although much less popular than Poe, Comte de Lautréamont's work resonates more specifically within the tradition of left radical writing that extends from French Symbolism to Latin American modernismo, surrealism, and Négritude. Paul Verlaine named Poe and Lautréamont among the *poètes maudits*, the bedeviled aesthetes of Parisian Symbolism, and the canonization of both writers depended substantially on the function of Paris as what Pascale Casanova has called the "Greenwich meridian of literature" (87). However, accounts of the *poètes maudits* often gloss over the specifically New World contexts of Poe and Lautréamont's work. Indeed, as Betsy Erkkila has noticed, French interpretations of Poe as a proto-modernist require that he be "cleansed of his blackness and his history" (Kennedy and Weisberg 68). Whereas Americanist scholarly interest in Poe has begun to correct this mistake, a dearth of knowledge about Lautréamont's life has made it easy to overlook the importance to his writing of his upbringing in Uruguay as the son of a French consular official (where he was born Isidore Ducasse). Fellow French-Uruguayan poet Jules Supervielle nonetheless thought of his work as "plus Uruguayen que Français" (Lefrère 278).

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Rubén Darío made perhaps the first direct comparison between Poe and Lautréamont when he cited both as key non-Hispanic influences on Hispanophone poetry in his collection of essay portraits *Los raros* (1896): "Ambos tuvieron la vision de lo extranatural, ambos fueron perseguidos por los terribles espíritus enmigos, 'horlas' funestas que arrastran al alcohol, a la locura, o a la muerte . . . Mas que Poe fué celeste, y Lautréamont infernal" (*Los raros* 191; "Both had vision of the supernatural; both were persecuted by terrible enemies of the spirit, doleful 'hordes' that drive a man to alcohol, madness, or death . . . but Poe was celestial, while Lautréamont was infernal," *Selected* 431). For Darío, this distinction had to do with the two poets' respective suitability for the postcolonial aesthetic education of Latin America. He writes of Lautréamont that "No aconsejaré yo a la juventud que se abreve en esas negras aguas, por más que en ellas se refleje la maravilla de las constelaciones" (189–90; "I will not advise our youth to drink from those black waters, however much they might see the marvels of constellation reflected in their depths," *Selected* 430). In contrast, Darío conceives of Poe as "un Ariel hecho hombre" ("an Ariel-made man") and emphasizes his delicacy, exacting mind, and strength (22; 404)—an antidote to the Caliban of American materialism and industrialism. Darío thus sets the geopolitical Poe of Morrison and the New Americanists alongside the mysticism and literary gamesmanship that critics have long suggested made his work internationally popular (Levine and Levine 121). But, despite Darío's reservations, Lautréamont can be read in similar ways.

Biographers believe, on the basis of a ship's manifest, that Lautréamont sailed to Montevideo the year before the publication of his most important work, *Les chants du Maldoror* (1868–69). Early in that work he sets conflicts over national sovereignty in the Southern cone as his background in a passage that Darío would later quote as marking the emergence of an authentic Latin American poetic voice:

> La fin du dix-neuvième siècle verra son poète . . . il est né sur les rives américaines, à l'embouchure de la Plata, là où deux peoples, jadis rivaux, s'efforcent actuellemente de se surpasser par progrès materiel et moral. Buenos-Ayres la reine du Sud, et Montevideo, la coquette, se tendent une main amie, à travers les eaux argentines du grand estuiare. Mais, la guerre éternelle a placé son empire destructeur sur les campagnes, moissone avec joie des victimes nombreuses. (78)

> The end of the nineteenth century will see its poet . . . he is born on American shores, at the mouth of the Rio de La Plata, where two peoples, once enemies, try to outdo one another in material and moral progress. Buenos Aires, queen of the South, and Montevideo, the flirt, offer each other a friendly hand across the silvery waters of the great estuary. But eternal war has imposed his destructive rule over the fields and joyfully harvests his many victims. (my translation, here and throughout)

Despite Darío's reading, Lautréamont disturbs the straightforward Romantic connection between the poet and his land. By alternating the future tense ("La fin du dix-neuvième siècle verra son poète") and the passé composé ("il est né sur les rives américaines"), he obscures whether his is this messianic native Latin American voice or merely its prophesy. The book as a whole famously exacerbates this problem by confusing author (Isidore Ducasse, son of a French consular official in Uruguay), pseudonym (Lautréamont, a decadent aristocrat), and persona (Maldoror, a shape-shifting, blasphemous projection) in a manner that troubles any attempt to discover authorial intention.

Lautréamont's upbringing could never have provided an unproblematic sense of Romantic nationalist belonging to Latin America. A creole in the sense that he

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was born in the New World of European parentage, he witnessed as a young boy part of the Guerra Grande (1839–51), a decade-long siege of Uruguay, and the city of Montevideo in particular, by the Argentine caudillo Juan Manuel de Rosas. Whereas for Rosas's liberal successor, Domingo Sarmiento, the French residents of Montevideo became "heroic foreigners who have clung to" the walls of the city "like the last entrenchment of European civilization left within the limits of the Plata" (235), with the city itself, in Alexandre Dumas's words, "the new Troy" (1), for Lautréamont the complex of transnational interests in mid-nineteenth-century Montevideo ("la coquette") provided the material not for an epic but for a discontinuous series of prose-poems.[8]

In one episode, Maldoror sits in contemplation by the sea, watching a "great warship" set sail just as dark clouds gather on the horizon and wondering whether he will ever meet anyone to love: "I was looking for a soul who resembles me, and I had not been able to find her." As the storm becomes violent and the anchor chain tears through the ship's side, Maldoror takes pleasure in its destruction, transforming Pym's perversity into a more explicitly aristocratic gourmandizing:

> Celui qui n'a pas vu un vaisseau sombrer au milieu de l'ouragan, de l'intermittence des éclairs et de l'obscurité la plus profonde, pendant que ceux qu'il contient sont accablés de ce désespoir que vous savez, celui-là ne connaît pas les accidents de la vie . . . Ô ciel! comment peut-on vivre, après avoir éprouvé tant de voluptés! (117–18)

> Whoever has not witnessed a ship go under in the middle of the intermittent lightening and profound darkness of a hurricane, while the souls on board are overcome with that you know, knows nothing of the accidents of life . . . O Heaven! How can I go on after having tasted such delights!

Maldoror stabs himself in the face repeatedly as "a basis for comparison" with the castaways' pain and curses the dying in loud shouts. Seeing a strong young man swimming toward shore, Maldoror shoots him to ensure the completion of the scene. When a group of sharks appears, Maldoror gives himself over to grisly humor, calling the castaways an "eggless omelet." Maldoror's perversity is thus more self-conscious than Pym's; if Poe contrives to give Pym what he desires, Maldoror cultivates his own strange fantasies.

In what follows, Maldoror begins to feel a particular kinship with a large female shark whose viciousness stands out from the rest. He swims into the carnage, drives off the other sharks with a knife, and makes love to her:

> Deux cuisses nerveuses se collèrent étroitement à la peau visqueuse du monstre, comme deux sangsues; et, les bras et les nageoires entrelacés [. . .] tandis que leurs gorges et leurs poitrines ne faisaient bientôt plus qu'une masse glauque aux exhalaisons de goémon; au milieu de la tempête qui continuait de sévir; à la lueur des éclairs; ayant pour lit d'hyménée la vague écumeuse, emportés par un courant sous-marin comme dans un berceau, et roulant, sur eux-mêmes, vers les profondeurs inconnues de l'abîme, ils se réunirent dans un accouplement long, chaste et hideux! . . . Enfin, je venais de trouver quelqu'un qui me ressemblât! . . . Désormais, je n'étais plus seul dans la vie! . . . Elle avait les mêmes idées que moi! . . . J'étais en face de mon premier amour! (122–23)

[8] Uruguayan historian Setembrino Ezequiel Pereda titled his classic work on the period *Los Extranjeros en la Guerra Grande* (*Foreigners in the Great War* [1904]). Lautréamont learned Spanish in Uruguay as a boy, and critics have largely ignored the multi-linguistic admixture in his work. In the passage cited by Darío, for instance, he plays on the use of the French word for silver in the naming of Argentina. Throughout the decadent bestiary of *Maldoror,* Ducasse substitutes New World for Orientalist exoticisms (jaguars, armadillos, and eagles all appear). He also learned English during his childhood in this transnational context and was reading Poe (perhaps in Baudelaire's translations) by his teens at Lycée Louis Barthou in Pau (Lefrère 223).

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Two sinewy thighs tightly clasp the viscous skin of the monster like two leeches; and arms and fins interlace . . . while their throats and breasts make one glaucous mass with seaweed breath . . . having the foamy waves for a conjugal couch, borne upon the undertow like a cradle, and rolling over one another towards the unknown depths of the abyss, they join together in a long, chaste and hideous coupling! . . . At last I found someone who resembled me! . . . I was no longer alone in life! . . . She had the same ideas as I! . . . I was face to face with my first love!

This episode elaborates an extravagantly ironic premise: that Maldoror's lust for violence, however cultivated, makes him the ideal mate for a shark. Here the authorial confusion of the earlier passage takes the shape of an odd shift from third to first person, creating the effect of post-human delirium ("they join together . . . At last I had found someone"). At the same time, the narrative confusion appears to afford the narrator a long-sought stability, an equivalent coupling with a ferocious predator, outside the restrictive conventions of grammatical consistency and the human body.

These events are likewise shrouded in the allegorical darkness Morrison finds structuring U.S. literature of the nineteenth century. Elsewhere in the book, Lautréamont suggests his shark persona has a historical analogue in the Middle Passage, claiming "avoir vécu un demi-siécle sous la forme de requin dans les courants sous-marins qui longent les côtes de l'Afrique" (173; to have lived half a century in the form of a shark along the submarine currents of the African coast). Maritime historian Marcus Rediker has pointed out that these sharks served as instruments of terror for slave-ship captains seeking to manage their cargo along the Middle Passage (36–40). He also notes that the idea may have come from some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century West African peoples who cast criminals into shark-infested waters as part of their systems of legal judgment (368). Slave life in the Southern cone changed rapidly during the Guerra Grande in ways that also shed light on Maldoror's violence. The Argentine *caudillo* Rosas promised to emancipate slaves who fought on his side and exploited this tactic so thoroughly that he nearly wiped out the black population of Argentina through his imperialistic adventuring. The president of Uruguay, Joaquín Suárez, followed suit by abolishing slavery in 1842 and conscripting the emancipated men into the army (Rout 185–205). African slaves thus represented a significant portion of the "numberless victims" of what Lautréamount earlier described as the region's "total war."

The scene makes explicit the sexual violence of New World racial formation as well. Leo Bersani characterizes the shark sex scene as "the tenderest love scene" of the book: "the ultimate gluing of the self to another form, a plunging into 'unknown depths' where each viscous form of being may slip chastely if repulsively into other forms of being" (214). Maldoror blasphemously insists on the immaculate character of their relations and recalls the origins of Aphrodite, who according to Hesiod was "formed in foam" (9). The "glaucous" color of their "hideous coupling" refers to the waxy white coating on dark plants and fruits like plums and grapes; in light of Morrison's gloss on darkness in Poe, sex with sharks offers an allegory of miscegenation. (*Playing in the Dark* concludes with a discussion of Ernest Hemingway's use of the image of a "nurse shark" to describe black female sexuality as "predatory" and "devouring" in *To Have and Have Not* [85]). But, unlike Hemingway, Maldoror insists that his love draws from his identification with the shark's violent eroticism. Lautréamont thus "plays in the dark" much more outrageously than Poe or Hemingway by going to great lengths to represent

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New World nation building as a shipwreck and New World racial formation as a bestial erotic blood rite.[9]

Finally, the episode perverts models of heroism from the war-ravaged Montevideo of Lautréamont's Uruguayan youth in cryptic details. The Rio de la Plata estuary was a notorious trap for ships—indeed one of Guiseppi Garibaldi's exploits in Montevideo, recorded by Dumas, was to save the passengers of a foundering ship (4). For his part, Maldoror takes a much different leap into the churning harbor, and Lautréamont concludes the canto with a fantasy of Black retributive violence:

> Il est temps de serrer les freins à mon inspiration, et de m'arrêter, un instant, en route, comme quand on regarde le vagin d'une femme . . . Le crocodile ne changera pas un mot au vomissement sorti de dessous son crâne. Tant pis, si quelque ombre furtive, excitée par le but louable de venger l'humanité, injustement attaquée par moi, ouvre subrepticement la porte de ma chambre, en frôlant la muraille comme l'aile d'un goéland, et enfonce un poignard, dans les côtes du pilleur d'épaves célestes! (129–30)

> It is time to apply the brakes to my inspiration and to pause for a moment en route, like when one looks at the vagina of a woman . . . The crocodile will not change one word of the vomit escaping from underneath his skull! Too bad if some furtive shade, inspired by the praiseworthy goal of avenging a humanity unjustly attacked by me, surreptitiously opens the door of my room, brushes against the wall like a sea-gull's wing and plunges a dagger into the side of the plunderer of celestial wrecks!

Here, the unapologetic, oft-cited line "The crocodile will not change one word of the vomit escaping from underneath his skull" contradicts the rectitude of a scandalized reader who would act on "the praiseworthy goal of avenging a humanity unjustly attacked by me." The "furtive shadow," an unmistakably "Africanist presence" with a penchant for violent revenge like Poe's Too-Wit, acts as both the imagined opposition to Maldoror's indulgences and its mirror.

Elsewhere in the book, Lautréamont emphasizes the blackness that lies at the heart of his project, claiming he will clarify his moral system in later works: "ce n'est que plus tard, lorsque quelques romans auront paru, que vous comprendrez mieux la préface du renégat, à la figure fuligineuse" (221; Only later, when a few novels have come out, will you begin to understand the renegade preface with the sooty face). By constantly mystifying the differences between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist, *Les chants du Maldoror* is able to embody both crime and its judgment, lurid excess and stoic reticence. Lautréamont plays ironically on the incoherent association of whiteness with good and blackness with evil: the furtive shade's vengeance is "praiseworthy" and Maldoror's attacks on humanity are "unjust."

Among Lautréamont's most careful readers were the Negritude poets. Responding in particular to the moment quoted above, Léopold Sédar Senghor titled his first book of poetry *Chants d'ombre* (1945). In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire called for a "materialist and historical interpretation" of Lautréamont (66) and compared Maldoror to Balzac's great figure of evil under high capitalism: "Take Vautrin, let him be just back from the tropics, give his the wings of the archangel and the shivers of malaria, let him be accompanied through the streets of Paris by an escort of Uruguayan vampires and carnivorous ants, and you will have Mal-

[9] Imani Perry's suggestion that "post-racialism" might more effectively be thought of as a "Latin-Americanization" of U.S. race relations has special significance for thinking about Poe, Lautréamont, and Johnson's respective imaginary South Americas (7). In my view, Poe and Lautréamont's ironic, ambivalent, and compressed depictions of New World racial identity are apt precedents for contemporary Black aesthetic practices that fail to fit into more traditionally U.S. nationalist paradigms.

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doror" (66). The comparison to Vautrin parallels the equally anachronistic association European surrealists drew between Lautréamont and Lenin, but neither exactly qualify as "dehistoricizing allegory," to return to Morrison's phrase. Césaire here reads in Lautréamont's reversals a performance of white bourgeois self-annihilation. In another essay Césaire claims that *Les chants du Maldoror* is "beautiful as a decree of expropriation," that it draws out the sublime cruelty of colonial rule, which it disrupts with the "liberating force" of "humor" (Kelley and Rosemont 78; see also Kelley). The Negritude poets thus celebrate in Lautréamont what Morrison decries in Poe: alternately terrifying and ironic images of New World race relations.

Conclusion: On the New Dark Irony

Anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist aesthetics in the wake of Poe and Lautréamont have come to seem increasingly apt at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For some writers, the ambiguously comic terrors of the Poe tradition capture the rhetorical contortions of a supposedly "post-racial" America, and Poe's tendency to "evade and simultaneously register" rather than "confront and explore" (Morrison 69) racial ideology may have new utility when formulating anti-racist aesthetics for the twenty-first century. Mat Johnson's *Pym* (2011) is one example. The protagonist is an English professor, Christopher Jaynes, denied tenure at the outset of the novel for refusing to play the institutional role of "black academic." Jaynes had focused his scholarly attention on Poe, about whom he wrote a monograph entitled "Dancing with the Darkies," a joke Johnson directs at Morrison (7). After his career is derailed, Jaynes decides to follow a lead from an antique book dealer that suggests Poe's novel was not fiction and musters a crew to head to Antarctica to investigate. The journey is partly funded by a water-privatization firm, and an environmental disaster back home extends it indefinitely. The crew is made up of an array of characters designed to flout African American stereotypes—a Morehouse man, a Civil Rights relic, and two extreme sports internet video celebrities—who are quickly enslaved by a group of "prehistoric snow honkies," the Tekelians (160). Whereas the climax of Poe's novel occurs on the Black island of Tsalal, Johnson sets his in the white wastes of Antarctica. Throughout, Johnson transforms the setting and temporality of Poe's novel with an exact sense of both his source materials' mechanics and Morrison's interpretation.

The image of a black brook comes up a few times. At one moment, Jaynes and his ex-girlfriend huddle together for warmth during their enslavement in Antarctica, and he fantasizes about Poe's Tsalal, now re-imagined as an island utopia: "The two of us, spooned together, the heat of the sun above and the warm sand beneath us. Lying there drunk on purple water" (189). This fantasy presents an image of the stream as a postcard for a Black promised land, thus inverting the terrors Poe associates with Black rebellion. Instead of finding this idyll, however, Jaynes and his friends escape the snow monsters and enter the home of a famous landscape painter named Thomas Karvel, a thinly veiled parody of Thomas Kinkade, whose mall shops advertise him as "America's most collected living artist." Karvel has built an "artificial paradise" out of a temperature-controlled biodome in the middle of the frozen waste. Like a pop Kubla Khan, Karvel's retreat

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mimics the idealized landscapes he sells at suburban malls. A river that "tastes like grape Kool-Aid" (242) runs through the football-field-sized fantasy garden, and a series of hoses feed the brightly colored plants:

> Each hose contained water with a different color ink. There was pink water to make pink bushes pinkish, purple water to make the purple flowers more purplectic, red water to make the red flowers appear to bleed the new blood of the vegetative world. And even to call it water is not truly accurate, because there was not only an ample amount of paint in these concoctions, but also a good amount of steroids, to keep the plants in perpetual bloom. (247)

In Johnson's rewrite, Poe's stream becomes an amalgam of artifices (visual in the case of the paint, bio-muscular in the case of the steroids). While the Tekelians figure whiteness as a prehistoric barbarism, Karvel fantasizes a multi-colored, self-contained techno-paradise. Like Pym, Karvel has a boyish lack of self-awareness; his wife runs around ensuring that the painter never deals with the pesky mechanical problems of his small world ride. However, he has none of the dread that distinguishes so many of Poe's characters; Karvel's whiteness does not fear the other colors it controls. Johnson's rewrite thus marks possibilities upon which Poe never dwells: an idyllic Black dream world and an unnaturally multicolored refuge in a white wasteland.

I began by suggesting that the Poe tradition has an anti-racist element that complicates Morrison's account of "American Africanism," and I have shown that Poe's compressed, ironic allegories can support critiques of New World racial formation. By way of conclusion, I offer a short anecdote: Uruguayans claim Francophone poets born in Uruguay (including Lautréamont, Supervielle, and Jules LaForgue) as a part of their national literary tradition, and a monument in Montevideo marks this canonization in the plaza Ituzaingó. It represents a ship in churning waters, with a Parisian coat of arms and an inscription reading "Fluctuat nec mergitur" ("It floats but it does not sink"). The motto can be traced to Seine riverboatmen of the classical era; here, it also stands for the postcolonial republic of Uruguay. When looking at a bobbing ship, Poe and Lautréamont saw something very different: the money-hungry aristocrats and owners on shore, crazed sailors at the wheel, slaves in the splintering hold below, and the shiver of sharks in its wake. Pym's self-destructiveness and Maldoror's violence satirize whiteness and the projected darkness by which it is defined. Black authors like Cesaire and Morrison have taken up this critique and have forged new nationalisms in response. Johnson's twenty-first-century novel returns to Poe's antebellum focus, the anxieties of whiteness, now divided between Arctic brutality and antiseptic fantasy. His rehearsal of Poe's antics sounds like Heraclitus: "you cannot go into the same water twice."

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