



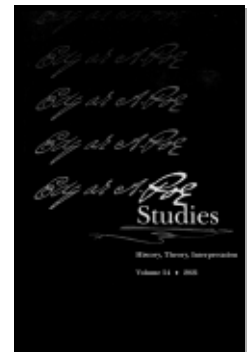
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Archipelagic Pym

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Archipelagic Pym

HESTER BLUM

ABSTRACT: Antarctica can be understood as materially continental and conceptually archipelagic. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, this article argues, is itself archipelagic both in its island-hopping content and in its narrative form: the continental form of the “novel” has no integrity for Poe. In conversation with Mat Johnson’s reimagining of Poe’s work in his contemporary novel *Pym* (2011), this article brings an archipelagic perspective to *Arthur Gordon Pym* and its fantasies of whiteness. Reading *Arthur Gordon Pym* and the great southern continent as archipelagic, it argues, centers what has been thought to be scattered, minute, and peripheral into a reoriented model of mutual sustainability, reciprocity, and loose affiliation. The disjointedness of Poe’s novel can be read as a map of the contradictory status of both Antarctica and literary whiteness in geopolitical and geophysical units of analysis. Viewing the Southern continent as an archipelago helps to clarify (if not resolve) much of *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s illogicality as a function inherent in whiteness itself.



The critical map of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* looks very different if it is reoriented to center the islands and archipelagoes otherwise on the periphery of Edgar Allan Poe’s sea narrative. Scholarly attention to the novel has focused either on its first half, which describes a young man’s improbable adventures as a stowaway on a whaling ship, after which he survives mutiny, shipwreck, and cannibalism; or on its final quarter, a white supremacist reverie in which Pym and his new shipmates explore the south polar island of Tsalal and come to a mysterious non-end that offers explanation for neither Pym’s situational survival, nor his subsequent, seemingly unrelated death. A good portion of the novel, however, is devoted more soberly to the *Jane Guy*’s voyages among a number of islands in the deep south Pacific and Indian Oceans and the northern reaches of the Southern Ocean. This section has been of scant interest to critics beyond sourcing its material in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel accounts, which Poe likely used to



Fig. 1: Real and imagined islands of the southern hemispheric journey in *Arthur Gordon Pym*; Tsatal is shown at the latitude and longitude given by Poe. Created with PinMaps.net.

pad the later chapters of his long-form fiction. Indeed, for critics who judge Poe to have botched the form of the novel, the island episodes are key evidence of his failure to sustain narrative consistency at the length of an unpracticed genre. The distance of the southern islands from the bulk of the plot of *Arthur Gordon Pym*, both in the text itself and in critical history, is consistent with the histories of these particular islands themselves: when described by northern hemispheric traveler or historical accounts, Crozet, Kerguelen (or Desolation), Inaccessible, Tristan da Cunha, Prince Edward Islands, and the phantom Auroras¹ are generally qualified by phrases such as “most remote,” “most isolated,” and “uninhabited.” All are themselves small, volcanic archipelagoes, yet they are so far from other landforms that they are denied connection to broader island chains (fig. 1).

Arthur Gordon Pym's extended attention to the *Jane Guy*'s vague transit among these little known real and imagined islands is prelude to the novel's eventual arrival at or near a South Pole of boiling, milky seas (situated by Poe in a latitude that in reality is deep in the Antarctic continent, as fig. 1 demonstrates), where in the chasm of a cataract Pym and his companion Dirk Peters encounter a huge, white human figure. How do these island episodes connect to the sensational elements of the novel's beginning and end?² *Arthur Gordon Pym* might be seen as archipelagic both in its island-hopping content and in its narrative form: the continental form of the “novel” has no integrity for Poe. By

this, I mean that the formalist failings of Poe's only completed long-form fiction can be read not just as hack work, generic inexperience, or cynicism, but instead as invitations to discern and extend new connections among the novel's contradictory elements (i.e., its preface by "Pym," prior excerption in *Southern Literary Messenger*, narrative digressions, and obfuscating endnote alluding to unsourced "daily papers," to name just a few). *Arthur Gordon Pym* is archipelagic in its loose affiliation with the presumed coherence of the form of the novel. As Mat Johnson notes about the ending of Poe's work in his own novel entitled *Pym* (2011), a brilliant extension of the Poe story, "the reaction of the reader is not to throw the book across the room, as we are tempted to do with most literary disappointments, cop-outs, and blunders. Instead, our reaction is to grip it closer. To make our own connections and conclusions where there is no material provided."³ Johnson's *Pym* joins a number of sequels to or speculative completions of Poe's work. Like Jules Verne before him in *An Antarctic Mystery/Le Sphinx des glaces* (1897), Johnson's novel takes up affiliate bits of Poe's story left dangling—Dirk Peters's fate, the "shrouded human figure," the "chasm" that opens at the South Pole—and uses them in turn to create new constellations for critical navigation of the incoherent forms of both Antarctica and literary whiteness.

This article brings an archipelagic perspective to Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* and its fantasies of whiteness, and it makes the case for considering the continent of Antarctica as itself an archipelago. Reading *Arthur Gordon Pym* and the southern continent as archipelagic, I argue, centers what has been thought to be scattered, minute, and peripheral into a reoriented model of mutual sustainability, reciprocity, and loose affiliation. Antarctica, as I propose at length below, is materially continental and conceptually archipelagic. My argument in this essay is that the disjointedness of Poe's novel is, in fact, a map of the contradictory status of both Antarctica and literary whiteness in geopolitical and geophysical understanding. Viewing the Southern continent as an archipelago helps to clarify (if not resolve) much of *Arthur Gordon Pym*'s illogicality as a function inherent in whiteness itself. The incoherent quality of whiteness in *Arthur Gordon Pym* is made diagnostically visible by Johnson in his fictional critique, *Pym*, which—as I discuss by way of this article's conclusion—is itself ingeniously pitched in archipelagic terms.



Archipelagic Antarctica

Poe's narrative turn southward in *Arthur Gordon Pym* is a reflection, in part, of Anglo-Americans' great strategic, imperial, commercial, and popular interest in the polar regions in the nineteenth century.⁴ In the

eyes of Europeans and Euro-Americans, the form and content of the polar regions themselves might have been said to lack coherence, as the hydrography and geography of the Far North and South were as speculative as the question of whether a continental land mass or two would be found at high latitudes. This open-endedness can be seen, notably, in early nineteenth-century theories of an ice-free, warm “open polar sea,” which inspired both expeditionary and literary energies. William Edward Parry’s 1819–1820 British Arctic expedition, in one instance, made significant progress through the Northwest Passage, lending credence to theories (like those of Erasmus Darwin) of a warm polar sea beyond the Arctic ice. Proponents of an open polar sea believed that sea ice could only form in proximity to land—a theory itself later disproved—and reasoned that since the North Pole was far from land, it therefore could not be ice-bound. The opening line of Mary Shelley’s preface to *Frankenstein* (1820), in a literary example, mentions Darwin’s warm hyperborean thesis, and the novel’s frame narrative features sea captain Robert Walton’s mission to seek a verdant North Pole. (Walton tries “in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to [his] imagination as the region of beauty and delight.”)⁵ In the US in the first half of the nineteenth century, agitation for exploring the polar regions came principally from John Cleves Symmes, who believed the earth was hollow, open at the North and South Poles, and inhabitable inside.⁶ Symmes’s theories inspired the parodic narrative *Symzonia: A Voyage of Discovery* (1820; credited to the pseudonymous Adam Seaborn), which describes an imaginary voyage to the lands at the earth’s core. In a fantasia of relative racialism that is later echoed in Poe’s novel when the former “half-breed Indian” Dirk Peters is refigured as a white man while on the Black-populated Tsalal, *Symzonia* is occupied by humans with blinding white skin who make Seaborn and his American crewmen look “dark and hideous” by comparison. “I was not a white man,” the narrator of *Symzonia* writes, “compared with [them].”⁷ In the 1820s and 1830s Symmes’s protégé, Jeremiah N. Reynolds, successfully advocated for a polar mission that eventuated in Charles Wilkes’s United States Exploring Expedition (1838–1842), a surveying mission which reached part of Antarctica. And in turn, Poe scholars well know, Reynolds influenced elements of *Arthur Gordon Pym*, “MS. Found in a Bottle,” and “A Descent into the Maelström.”⁸

The theory of an open polar sea gave rise to other speculative fictions which themselves explored an inner Earth, accessible at the North and South Poles. Hollow Earth fiction traces its genealogy to the early modern period, if not earlier, if we include the underworlds of classical epics; its zenith, however, coincided with the polar expeditions launched in the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Hollow Earth fictions of the period include Jules Verne’s

Journey to the Center of the Earth (1864) and *An Antarctic Mystery* (1897), which was a sequel to Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*; Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1870); James De Mille's *Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888); and Edgar Rice Burroughs's *At the Earth's Core* (1914).⁹ Like Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*, the majority of these fictions represent the areas near 90° latitude as indeterminate spaces that do not track with existing political geography. Indeed, for the most part, the line between the external and internal world in these fictions is not sharply defined. Voyagers to an inner earth might notice less direct sunlight, or a change in vegetation or sea color. As in *Arthur Gordon Pym*'s ending, the lines of demarcation between land and sea, inner and outer, pole or periphery are far from clear. In its littoral vagueness, the fictional polar verge is consistent with archipelagic geographical and political affinities, rather than with hard demarcations between land and sea.

In what ways, though, is Antarctica archipelagic? This is not an obvious proposition. The great Southern continent mantles not just the South Pole, but the majority of the surface area of the Antarctic Circle, as well. It is a white monolith on globes and flat projections, with the inward-reaching Weddell and Ross Seas overlaid by great ice shelves. Only the rearing elephant tusk of the Antarctic peninsula extends notably beyond the bulk of its landform, a small archipelagic arm flung from the continent like the trailing end of a spiral galaxy. Unlike the multitudinous land, sea, and ice formations of the North American and European Arctic archipelagoes, Antarctica is not insular but continent. As a continent it is still odd, though, in the sense of archipelagic weirdness that Brian Russell Roberts describes in *Borderwaters* as inherent to watery borders and borderwaters, which “cut back and forth, zigging and zagging, mutually writing and rewriting, like islands on a map seeming to sit on top of the water while the water laps back up onto the islands.”¹⁰ Antarctic borderwater weirdness takes on different states of matter, too, as ice sheets and ice barriers confound easy delimitation between land and water. Singular, not just geophysically, but also demographically, Antarctica is the only continental landmass with no indigenous human population and no permanent human residents.

Antarctica might also be understood as archipelagic relative to global maps, which preserve what Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens call a “bias toward the continent”: it is far-flung, outlying, relegated to the margins, and, indeed, wildly distorted on most two-dimensional projections of the globe, if not missing altogether (as it was for hundreds of years of mapmaking in modernity, when the theory of a southern continent had not yet been confirmed by navigators, who first sighted it in 1820).¹¹ Antarctica is to the mapped globe as the archipelagic states of Alaska and Hawai‘i, are to the continental United States: distorted, displaced, radically out of scale. As El Glasberg has

astutely observed, Antarctica's exclusion from the map of Euro-American histories of territorial expansion reflects both "imperialism's ability to reconstruct space and time by connecting distant places and fragmenting formerly coherent territories," and "the failure of imperialism to structure knowledge of the last continent into other than a Eurocentric map."¹² The biases inherent in the Mercator projection (1569) in its radical ballooning of northern hemispheric land masses and diminution of equatorial and southern ones are well-known, but of less political concern has been the projection's even greater deformation of Antarctica (once it consistently made its way onto maps), which appears on a Mercator map as an infinite ridgeline that never resolves into the roughly circular polar continent. The Mercator organizes the Earth into a horizontal plane, rather than a vertical or polar three-dimensional form (fig. 2). Of the many corrective maps created in the last half-millennium, one standout, the Goode homolosine projection (1923), seeks to preserve relative consistency for temperate and tropical regions—but visually breaks into pieces both Greenland (the northernmost large landmass in the Arctic) and Antarctica, which

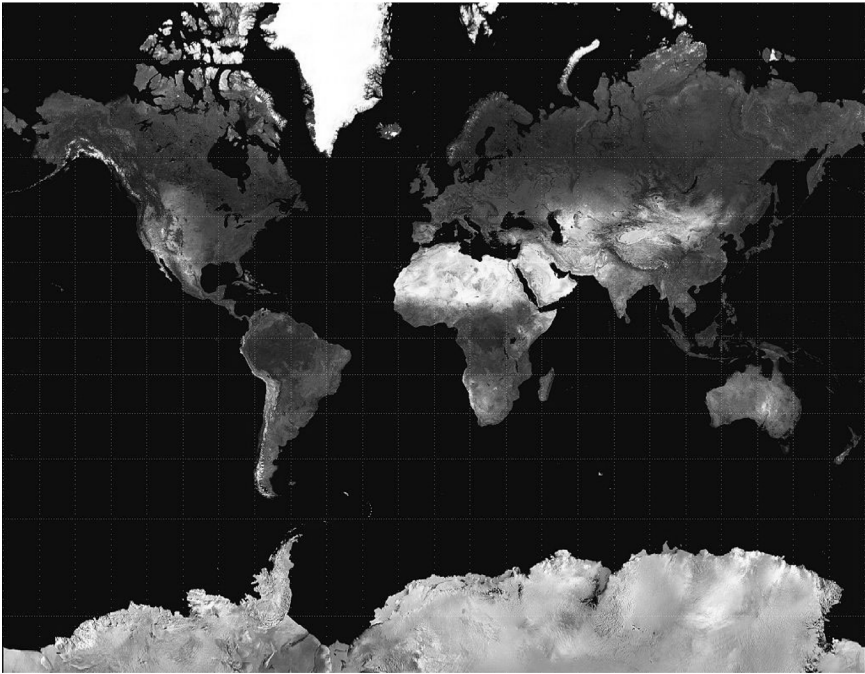


Fig. 2: Mercator Projection. Mdf, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mercator_projection#/media/File:Mercator_projection_Square.JPG.

shows up as a series of inverted Mt. Fujian snow caps on the projection's southern reaches (fig. 3). Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion Projection (1943)—which evocatively presents the globe's landmasses as archipelagic in their connection, as Roberts and Stephens have demonstrated—is a rare example of a two-dimensional map that presents Antarctica in proper shape and proportion. Yet the standard Dymaxion map centers the North Pole and casts Antarctica as a final link in an incomplete chain (fig. 4).

If the growing field of archipelagic studies seeks a perspectival reorientation away from marginalizing oceanic and island spaces and toward recognizing

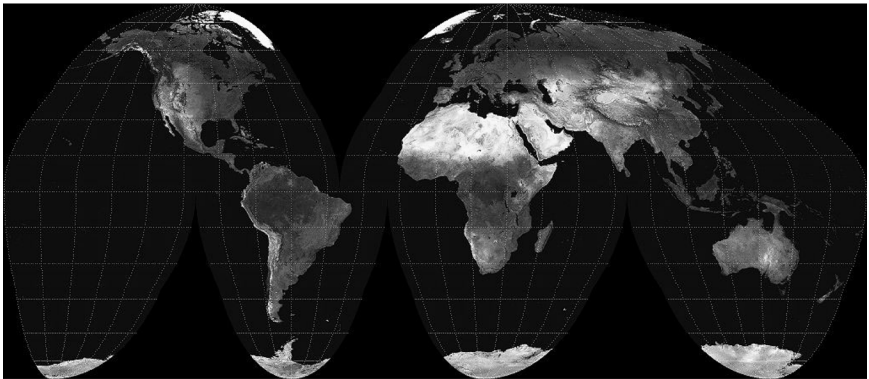


Fig. 3: Goode Homolosine Projection. Mdf, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Goode_homolosine_projection_SW.jpg.

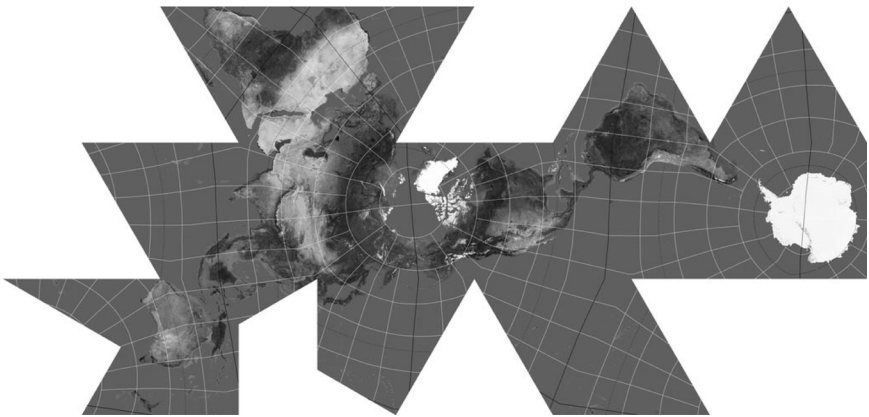


Fig. 4: Dymaxion Projection. Justin Kunimune, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=Dymaxion+Projection&title=Special:MediaSearch&go=Go&type=Fig>.

the “totality of their relationships,” in Epeli Hau’ofa’s words, then Antarctica’s archipelagic potential extends to its political organization as well.¹³ The past half century has seen a program of largely multi-national and loosely collaborative research in the Southern continent. The Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) (1961-) sets aside the region as a preserve of science and peace, banning military activity on the continent; and, while seven nations of the fifty-four signatories have made territorial claims in Antarctica, those claims are generally not recognized by other states (Russia and the US, notably, have not made territorial claims but reserve the right to do so). The political connections between non-Antarctic states tend to be bilateral; yet, by definition, all relations among visiting scientific researchers in a non-sovereign Antarctica are constellated among dozens of partners. Even the political definition of Antarctica extends beyond the usual terms of oceanic and archipelagic state boundaries and territorial waters as determined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); Article VI of the ATS defines Antarctica as “the area south of 60-degree South Latitude, including all ice shelves,” which includes the South Shetland archipelago as well as South Orkney Island.¹⁴ While these conditions are not without their complications and exploitative elements, it is seductive to imagine that Antarctica could be a model for humans on other continents in reorienting an internationalist perspective away from sovereignty claims and resource extraction and toward collaborative research programs.



Southern Literary Archipelagoes

While polar hollow earth fiction of the nineteenth century privileged or exploited indeterminacy, polar-oriented geopolitics did not. Writing in the *American Quarterly Review*, Jeremiah Reynolds imagined that at the South Pole an “anchor might be cast on the axis of the earth, our *eagle* and *star-spangled* banner unfurled and planted, and left to wave on the very pole itself.”¹⁵ The durability of colonial strategies of flag-planting and place-naming were not lost on Reynolds, who continued: “the British have long taken the lead, in maritime discovery. . . . Are there no discoveries to be made by Americans, that shall perpetuate the names and memories of our own distinguished citizens, statesmen, patriots, sages, and heroes?”¹⁶ In his *Southern Literary Messenger* review of Reynolds’s polar expedition proposal, written around the time he was composing *Arthur Gordon Pym*, Poe echoes this nationalist logic: “the enterprize [*sic*], courage and perseverance of American seamen are, if not unrivalled, at least unsurpassed.” Poe challenges American sailors to “pus[h] their adventurous barks into the high southern latitudes, to

circle the globe within the Antarctic circle, and attain the Pole itself; yea, to cast anchor on that point where all the meridians terminate, where our eagle and star-spangled banner may be unfurled and planted, and left to wave on the axis of the earth itself!" (*Writings*, 3:73). But even as Poe rehearses the usual tropes of imperial and colonial possession, he uses archipelagic-inflected language throughout his *SLM* review, referring to the proposed expedition in language of a constellation of affiliation. Both men and ships should be abundant and confederated, Poe writes: "This body of men should be carefully selected, and made sufficiently numerous to secure the great objects of expedition. These lights of science, and the naval officers, so far from interfering with each other's fame, would, like stars in the milky-way, shed a lustre on each other, and all on their country!" Rather than a singular venture, a lead "frigate would form the *nucleus*, round which the smaller vessels should perform the labors" of South Polar exploration (*Writings*, 3:71). It is worth noting that a common global projection of the earth from 1830 included a hint of some of the Antarctic archipelagic islands, but nothing of the continent itself (fig. 5); a non-continental vision of the South Pole may, therefore, have been geographically as well as conceptually available to Poe. Indeed, the only mention of Antarctica as a potential landmass and not just as an oceanic region in *Arthur Gordon Pym* comes as Pym urges Captain Guy to continue to head South from the fictional Bennet's Islet, which Poe locates at 82°50' S latitude: "So tempting an opportunity of solving the great problem in regard to an Antarctic continent had never yet been afforded to man," Pym proclaims (129).

But even though for Poe and Reynolds the southern hemispheric seas may "aboun[d] in islands, reefs and shoals unmarked upon any chart," in Poe's words, the oceanic far south does not allow for the coexistence of Euro-American explorers and Indigenous islanders. Poe maintains in his *SLM* review that the "savages in these regions have frequently evinced a murderous hostility—they should be conciliated or intimidated" (*Writings*, 3:68). Such language has a long history both in the polar regions and throughout global colonialism. (The scarcely-veiled racist allegories of Poe's treatment of the fictional island of Tsalal in the novel have been the most visible and most commented-upon aspects of *Arthur Gordon Pym's* racial imaginary, but this essay does not recapitulate this scholarship.¹⁷) And the specificity of Poe's white supremacist vision of a warm, lush South Polar region in *Arthur Gordon Pym* is itself not anomalous; such fantasies include speculative novels such as *Symzonia* (1820), as mentioned above; late-nineteenth-century hallucinations of a white race occupying a hollow earth; and the conspiracy theories of Nazi submarine bases (or underground cities) in Antarctica that have circulated since World War II. Antarctica has been a site for such fantasies to a far greater extent than the Arctic. This is

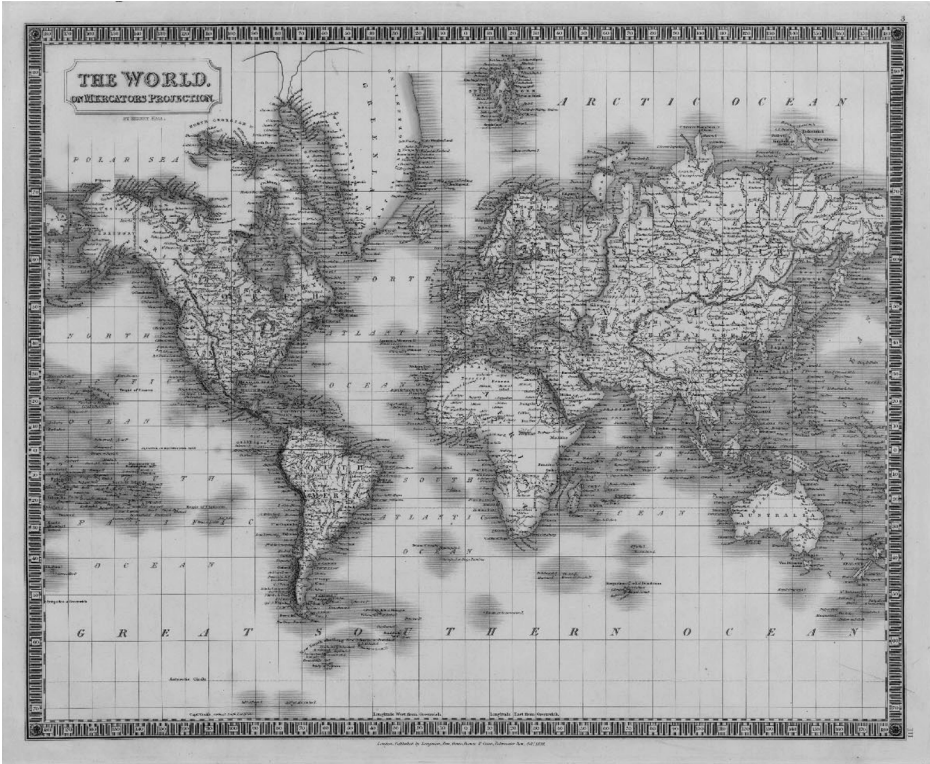


Fig. 5: Sidney Hall's "The World on Mercator's Projection." London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown & Green, 1829. Courtesy of David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries.

in part because the absence of an aboriginal human population in Antarctica has made it easier for some to imagine the South as a blank space for white European exploration—unlike the Arctic North, which has sustained Inuit, Sámi, and other Indigenous populations for thousands of years and which has been subjected to sovereignty and resource claims by nation-states for over half a millennium. The Antarctic continent was not glimpsed until 1820 and not seasonally occupied by humans until 1898, and, thus, its availability for mystification was not compromised by actual knowledge.

In *Arthur Gordon Pym*, Augustus, the white youth who serves as Pym's principal companion in the first part of the novel, is supplanted by Dirk Peters, initially described as a "half-breed Indian"; this transition happens in concert with the novel's progression from the northern to southern hemisphere. Peters had previously traveled in the South Pacific, the reader is told, and engages

Pym in the project of further southern exploration, which aligns with the ambitions of their new ship's captain, as well. Pym is initially not sure what to make of this itinerary—"It was Captain Guy's intention to make his first stoppage at Kerguelen's Land—I hardly know for what reason," he notes—but soon his narrative account settles into the descriptive prose of the typical nineteenth-century traveler (109). In approaching Kerguelen or Desolation Island, for example, Pym shifts from detailing historical encounters with the island to extolling the brilliance of its "verdure":

It was first discovered in 1772, by the Baron de Kergulen, or Kerguelen, a Frenchman, who, thinking the land to form a portion of an extensive southern continent, carried home information to that effect, which produced much excitement at the time. The government, taking the matter up, sent the baron back in the following year for the purpose of giving his new discovery a critical examination, when the mistake was discovered. In 1777, Captain Cook fell in with the same group, and gave to the principal one the name of Desolation Island, a title which is certainly well deserves. Upon approaching the land, however, the navigator might be induced to suppose otherwise, as the sides of most of the hills, from September to March, are clothed with very brilliant verdure. (111)

Poe's characterization of Kerguelen's rich vegetation and the island's possible archipelagic link to "an extensive southern continent" is consistent with hollow earth and open polar sea imagery; Symmes, too, had promised that an expedition to the polar verge would discover "warm and rich land, stocked with thrifty vegetables and animals."¹⁸ The *Jane Guy* proceeds on an irregular path through the south Atlantic and Indian Oceans, at which point the real islands fall off Poe's map and Pym and his companions head for a series of imaginary archipelagoes.

In the novel, Captain Guy hopes to confirm the existence of the rumored Aurora Islands and then head north up the coast of South America, but a tip he receives at Tristan da Cunha and Inaccessible compels him "to steer to the southward, in the hope of falling in with some small islands said to lie about the parallel of 60° S., longitude 41° 20' W." As Pym's account continues, "In the event of his not discovering these lands, he designed, should the season prove favorable, to push on towards the pole" (120). This trajectory gives Poe an opening to fill out the narrative with an account of various South Polar voyages, largely drawn from the writing of Jeremiah Reynolds, whom Poe salutes in *Arthur Gordon Pym* for his "great exertions and perseverance" in pushing

for a US expedition to the far south. The turn to the uncharted and fantastical in the novel's itinerary sees Poe doubling down on the warmth and verdancy of the South Pole, such as in his citation from the travels of Benjamin Morrell: "I have several times passed within the Antarctic circle, on different meridians, and have uniformly found the temperature, both of the air and the water, to become more and more mild the farther I advanced beyond the sixty-fifth degree of south latitude" (123). At 82°50' S latitude—which, in reality, is far up on the Antarctic continental landmass—Poe's fictional voyagers encounter a sea that is "perfectly open" and "mild," "pleasant" temperatures. Pym is confident that when they encounter land they will "not find it the sterile soil met with in the higher Arctic latitudes" (129). After Pym and Peters survive a duplicitous attack in which they are briefly buried alive on Tsalal, they seize a captive and a canoe and travel south for three weeks (long enough to position them at or near 90° S) in increasingly hot seas, showered by white ash. "The heat of the water was now truly remarkable," Poe writes; soon, as the temperature increased, "the hand could not longer be endured within it" (172, 174). The portion of the narrative supposedly written by Pym concludes, famously, with a sensational image of apocalyptic whiteness:

March 9. The white ashy material fell now continually around us, and in vast quantities. The range of vapour to the southward had arisen prodigiously in the horizon, and began to assume more distinctness of form. I can liken it to nothing but a limitless cataract, rolling silently into the sea from some immense and far-distant rampart in the heaven. The gigantic curtain ranged along the whole extent of the southern horizon. It emitted no sound.

March 21. . . . The summit of the cataract was utterly lost in the dimness and the distance. Yet we were evidently approaching it with a hideous velocity. . . .

March 22. . . . And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow. (174–75)

The cataract's appearance is consistent with the great barrier of ice seen on many approaches to Antarctica, although the indistinctness of its properties are more resonant with hollow earth fictions of the polar verge.¹⁹ Antarctica, in Poe's vision, is no monolith, but a hazy progression of archipelagic destinations.

As I have been arguing, to read *Arthur Gordon Pym* archipelagically is not just to recognize the non-continental aspects of the vision of Antarctica offered by Poe and other contemporary hollow earth writers. To read the novel archipelagically is also to shift critical perspective from the central figure of Pym's whiteness—and, by extension, the whiteness of US literary study—to the seemingly peripheral but, in fact, constitutive figures of Blackness and Indigeneity to US literature. This is a spatial version of Toni Morrison's transformative argument about US literary whiteness in *Playing in the Dark*. Thinking of Poe's novel as archipelagic also helps to synthesize its internal inconsistencies (and its jumble of narrative styles and pretensions) as less a failure of continental novel form, and more a suggestion for reading the inconsistencies more generously and relationally. The novel's bewildering conclusion suggests that *Arthur Gordon Pym* is a linear narrative that ends with the narrator's death (indeed, the white figure has been read as a metaphor for the blank page, or the death of further explanatory writing). Yet Pym survives and returns home, only to die in other, unnarrated circumstances, according to an endnote: "The circumstances connected with the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym are already well known to the public" (176). The promise of resolution that the form of the endnote should offer is betrayed, whether as faux-documentary or as a matter of fictional consistency: and Dirk Peters, supposedly alive and living in Illinois, will not communicate further. Poe's repression of any possible account of the novel's events as told by Dirk Peters is consistent with nineteenth-century white supremacist silencing of Indigenous and Black witnessing or testimony as both legal fact and literary conceit.²⁰



Pym Underground

Into this abyss of interpretation steps Mat Johnson's *Pym* in searing comic fashion: the conceit of his novel is that Dirk Peters was a real-life sailor who was both Indigenous and Black, and that he wrote his own narrative of his adventures with Pym entitled *The True and Interesting Narrative of Dirk Peters. Coloured Man. As Written by Himself. Springfield, Illinois 1837*.²¹ The discovery of Dirk Peters's narrative inaugurates a present-day voyage to the Antarctic by a Black liberal arts professor named Chris Jaynes who has recently been denied tenure, in part for his insistence on teaching Poe and theories of whiteness, not just African American texts. On an expedition to Antarctica comprised exclusively of Black participants, Jaynes encounters in an Antarctic hollow earth both the giant, shrouded, humanoid figures of Poe's novel's conclusion—Jaynes calls them "snow honkies"—and a pickled Arthur Gordon

Pym himself, who has survived for 150 years by drinking the fermented urine of the inner earth humanoids. In a racial and geographical reversal of Poe's novel's end, Johnson's Black narrator and companion kidnap Pym (who had previously tried to enslave the members of Jaynes's African American Antarctic expedition) and sail north from Antarctica to arrive at a warm Black utopia: seemingly, the island of Tsalal.

Johnson theorizes how the archipelagic relations of whiteness to literary study and whiteness to polar exploration structure Poe's novel. His plot points are hardly outlandish in the context of Poe's own version of Pym's story, and reading Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* in constellation with Johnson's *Pym* brings the Poe novel's archipelagic ripples into wider oscillation. Johnson's *Pym* takes up aspects of Poe's novel that rhyme with the archipelagic: the marginalization of Black literature and literary criticism; crypto-mapping of (and signifying on) geographical givens; the collectivities and new constellations that emerge from marginalization; the conventions of appendage and editing of found manuscripts; and, perhaps, most piercingly, the reorientation of perspective from monolith to verge or hollow, especially as a function of the formation of a Black hydro- or subterranean, a literal underground.²² Johnson reads these scattered, constellated, confused bits in an ingenious way: by excavating Peters's account, reanimating Pym, and locating him in an Antarctic hollow earth. Johnson recenters Peters and white supremacy from the periphery to the core of any retelling of Arthur Gordon Pym's adventures. In the final sentences of Johnson's novel, the character Pym (whom Jaynes has taken captive in his flight from the blank whiteness of the Antarctic hollow earth) literally drops dead at the sight of a welcoming island populated by "brown people." Jaynes closes his account with a further reorientation of the perspective of the historical white "explorer" by noting that "this, of course, is a planet on which such"—that is, brown people—"are the majority" (322).

The greatness of *Arthur Gordon Pym*, Jaynes tells, "lies more in the ongoing reaction to its cliffhanger ending, this flaunting and confounding literary challenge, than to the work itself" (229). Jaynes breaks down in choose-your-own-interpretation fashion how critics—as well as the unauthorized sequels by Verne and H. P. Lovecraft—have understood the ending. The interpretation that Johnson's theoretical project in *Pym* builds from is the final one:

Just as Poe's vision of the blackness of Tsalal is perfectly horrific, his vision of this complete whiteness of his Antarctica is perfection itself. How then, as a writer of stories based on conflict (as all tales are), can Poe go forward with the narrative? "And then we got there and everything was just absolutely without flaw in every way" does not make

for a gripping story. Or even a feasible story. So, this theory states, the narrative reaches a dead end. It can go nowhere. Conflict, the basis of all storytelling, itself has been negated by an overwhelming worship of whiteness. (231–32)

By displacing whiteness from the center of Poe interpretation, polar exploration, and the continent of Antarctica, Johnson's *Pym* articulates what is archipelagic about the Antarctica of Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* and how those relations are clustered geographically, textually, and speculatively. Blackness and whiteness are made interchangeably central and peripheral in both novels, as well as in broader Americanist scholarly discourse. Hau'ofa's foundational archipelagic formulation of a "sea of islands" aims to unpin continental centrality from scholarly cartographies and instead center more diaphanous and inclusive affiliations. Johnson's *Pym* identifies in Poe's novel an analogous move: the disjointedness of white Arthur Gordon Pym's travels creates opportunities to bring into relief Dirk Peters's experience as a Black and Indigenous traveler and polar explorer. White supremacist visions of Antarctica may seem, like the continent itself relative to the other lands on Earth, to be an outlier ideology in cultural and literary history. A reorientation of Antarctica from periphery to node of connection allows us to see how central and yet how incoherent white supremacy is both to western modernity and to academic conversations about Poe and US literature.

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Notes

¹ The three supposed Aurora islands to which Poe devotes some attention in *Arthur Gordon Pym* were allegedly located between the Falklands and South Georgia islands; they were charted by a Spanish hydrographic vessel in the eighteenth century, and cited in other eighteenth-century Spanish accounts, but never located in the nineteenth century or later. See Henry M. Stommel, *Lost Islands: The Story of Islands that Have Vanished from Nautical Charts* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1984).

² The island episodes are nevertheless highlighted in the novel's discursive subtitle, which promises an account of "the brief cruise of the latter vessel [the *Jane Guy*] in the Antarctic Ocean; her capture, and the massacre of her crew among a group of islands in the eighty-fourth parallel of southern latitude; together with the incredible adventures and discoveries still farther south to which that distressing calamity gave rise." Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), [1]. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

³ Mat Johnson, *Pym* (New York: Random House, 2011), 33. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text; to avoid confusion, I refer to Poe's novel as *Arthur Gordon Pym* throughout this essay.

⁴ On nineteenth-century polar exploration and its cultural effects see Hester Blum, *The News at the Ends of the Earth: The Print Culture of Polar Exploration* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2019); Siobhan Carroll, *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750–1850* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Lisa Gitelman, "Arthur Gordon Pym and the Novel Narrative of Edgar Allan Poe," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 47 (December 1992): 349–61; Elena Glasberg, *Antarctica as Cultural Critique: The Gendered Politics of Scientific Exploration and Climate Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Jen Hill, *White Horizon: The Arctic in the Nineteenth-Century British Imagination* (New York: SUNY Press, 2007); William E. Lenz, *The Poetics of the Antarctic* (New York: Garland, 1995); Michael F. Robinson, *The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006); and Francis Spufford, *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).

⁵ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Text*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁶ On Symmes and his adherents, see Hester Blum, "John Cleves Symmes and the Planetary Reach of Polar Exploration," *American Literature* 84, no. 2 (2012): 243–71.

⁷ Adam Seaborn, *Symzonia: A Voyage of Discovery* (New York: J. Seymour, 1820), 107, 110.

⁸ In the *Southern Literary Messenger* Poe favorably reviewed a speech Reynolds gave to the House of Representatives on the subject of polar exploration, and he was even reported to have cried Reynolds's name on his deathbed. The interest Poe took in Symmes's theories, in fact, has been the reason for the majority of critical attention to Symmes to date. See in particular Gretchen Murphy, "Symzonia, Typee, and the Dream of U.S. Global Isolation," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 49, no. 4 (2003): 249–83; Jared Gardner, *Master Plots: Race and the Founding of an American Literature, 1787–1845* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998), 116–19; and Lenz, *Poetics of the Antarctic*, 43–46.

⁹ For a lively if uneven history of hollow earth theories and fictions, see David Standish, *Hollow Earth: The Long and Curious History of Imagining Strange Lands, Fantastical Creatures, Advanced Civilizations, and Marvelous Machines below the Earth's Surface* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Books, 2006), and Peter Fitting, *Subterranean Worlds: A Critical Anthology* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Brian Russell Roberts, *Borderwaters: Amid the Archipelagic States of America* (Durham, N. C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2021), 32.

¹¹ Brian Russell Roberts, and Michelle Ann Stephens, "Introduction," *Archipelagic American Studies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2017), 12.

¹² Elena Glasberg, *Antarctica as Cultural Critique: The Gendered Politics of Scientific Exploration and Climate Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 16.

¹³ A key text for theorists of archipelagic relations has been the essay “Our Sea of Islands” by Tongan writer Epeli Hau’ofa. The continental exceptionalism of white western conceptions of space has figured the islands of the vast Pacific as “tiny, isolated dots.” For Hau’ofa and other Oceanians, the islands are neither small nor remote, but instead interconnected, forming a “sea of islands” presuming association: “There is a world of difference between viewing the Pacific as ‘islands in a far sea’ and as ‘a sea of islands. The first emphasizes dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centers of power. Focusing in this way stresses the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships. [. . .] Continental men, namely Europeans, on entering the Pacific after crossing huge expanses of ocean, introduced the view of ‘islands in a far sea.’ From this perspective the islands are tiny, isolated dots in a vast ocean. Later on, continental men—Europeans and Americans—drew imaginary lines across the sea, making the colonial boundaries that confined ocean peoples to tiny spaces for the first time. These boundaries today define the island states and territories of the Pacific.” “Our Sea of Islands,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 152–53.

¹⁴ “The Antarctic Treaty,” signed December 1, 1959, Article VI, Secretariat for the Antarctic Treaty, <https://www.ats.aq/e/antarctic treaty.html>. Elizabeth DeLoughrey has found the polar and oceanic regions to be figuratively consistent with “extraterrestrial” spaces. DeLoughrey, “Satellite Planetaryity and the Ends of the Earth.” *Public Culture* 26, no. 2 (2014): 257–80.

¹⁵ Jeremiah N. Reynolds, *Remarks on a Review of Symmes’ Theory, which Appeared in The American Quarterly Review* / by a “Citizen of the United States” (Gales & Seaton, 1827), 72.

¹⁶ Reynolds, *Remarks*, 73.

¹⁷ On race in *Arthur Gordon Pym*, see in particular Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the American Literary Tradition* (New York: Vintage, 1992); J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg, eds., *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001); David Faflik, “South of the ‘Border,’ or Poe’s Pym: A Case Study in Region, Race, and American Literary History,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2004): 265–88; and Teresa A. Goddu, “The Ghost of Race: Edgar Allan Poe and the Southern Gothic,” in *Criticism and the Color Line: Desegregating American Literary Studies*, ed. Henry Wonham (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1996).

¹⁸ John Cleves Symmes, “Light Gives Light, to Light Discover—’Ad Infinitum,”” St. Louis: April 10, 1818. His now-rare usage of the word “thrifty” indicates that vegetables would flourish.

¹⁹ An example of this rhetoric comes from an essay on Antarctic history by a British Antarctic expedition geologist in 1911, which engages in fantasies of future tourism on the southern continent as part of a disquisition on climate change. “By indirect evidence,” Thomas Griffith Taylor writes of the area near the Ross Ice Shelf, geologists can determine that “Victoria Land has at times been very much warmer than at present and also very much colder. . . . What is to be expected in the future in this region? It may

be that increased climatic severity will lead to a recrudescence of the Barrier ice.” Yet since it “seems possible still warmer conditions supervene,” Taylor continues, Antarctica could eventually play host not just to rugged explorers, experienced with hardship, but to “effete” tourists: “Forests will cover the slopes of the Western Mountains. In the moraine-fed troughs of the Ferrar and Dry Valleys will dwell a white race, depending partly on the fertile glacial soil, but chiefly on tourists from effete centres of civilisation. . . . The less energetic will proceed in the comfortable steamers of the Antarctic Exploitation Company to the chalets of Beardmore.” “A Chapter on Antarctic History,” *South Polar Times* 3, no. 1 (1911): 8, 14–15.

²⁰ We see similar silencing taken up in Amasa Delano’s unreliable white narration in Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” some years later.

²¹ Pym presents Dirk Peters’s narrative as generically consistent with other personal narratives by Black writers in the US. As Johnson writes, noting that early African American literature beginning with Equiano was dedicated only to “convincing its reader of the moral necessity of abolitionism,” the primary conversation in African American literature is “the African descendent explaining to the European descendent about how white people’s actions are affecting the lives of black people.*

*(Negatively)” (40).

²² Katherine McKittrick describes the underground as “a black geography that reframes spatial knowledges.” McKittrick, “‘Freedom Is a Secret’: The Future Usability of the Underground,” in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007), 102. For a superb recent reading of nineteenth-century Black Underground subcultural forms, see Lara Langer Cohen’s “The Blackness of Darkness’: Mammoth Cave and the Racialization of the Underground,” *History of the Present* 11, no. 1 (April 2021): 2–22.