

**PREFACE**

Return to the US “after the extraordinary series of adventures in the South Seas” (3).

Gentlemen from Richmond, Virginia¹ (including Mat Johnson, assistant professor of language and literature at Bard College) urging him to write (18th-19th century convention: see, for example, De Crevecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, 1782).

Reason? “For sociological and historical purposes they wanted me to tell my story, to enlighten them about my experience” (3).

Narrator worried:

1. He has no corroborating evidence. Does have a single, 200 year old corpse (Dirk Peters).

2. “Rant of a paranoid” (3).

3. Insecurity about his own writing (also a literary convention).

Mr. Johnson’s idea to “present these revelations under the guise of fiction” (4).

Effect?

-parallel “synchronicity” with Poe’s text
- protection from lawsuits
-“In this age when reality is built upon big lies, what better place for truth than fiction?” (4).

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¹ Poe lived in Richmond, VA and married his cousin, Virginia Clemm.
1) Compare and contrast Jaynes’s Preface to Pym’s Preface (the opening to Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*). What “level of synchronicity” does Johnson set up “with the seminal text” in his preface (4), and in what ways do his “intentions diverge” (3) from Poe’s? This question can be extended throughout the novel. (Note: To be precise, Jaynes’s phrase “intentions diverge” contrasts his interests with those of the “gentlemen” who urged him to publish his narrative. For this question, I am appropriating the phrase to contrast the interests of Johnson and Poe.)

2) Research project: Do a comparative analysis of the prefaces to 18th- and 19th-century novels and autobiographies, considering the ways in which Poe and Johnson play with the conventions.

**VOLUME ONE**

**Chapter 1**

Chris Jaynes “Americanist” (17) (soon to hit forty, 79).

Fails to get tenure for not teaching African American Literature, for low enrollments, and for not sitting on the campus Diversity Committee (and for not being accomplished in his research).

“Nobody wants to give a job for life to an asshole” (9).

“The greatest ideas are often presented to empty chairs” (8).

Follows his passion for Edgar Allan Poe (7).

Goes to Harlem, Akwaaba Ben and Breakfast.²

**Garth Frierson** from Detroit (laid off for 6 months) (7) Little Debbies snack cakes.

“Curing America’s racial pathology couldn’t be done with good intentions of presidential elections. Like all diseases, it had to be analyzed at a microscopic level” (8).

“toothless Diversity Committee” (8)

Book collector: “I had books like a lit professor has books. And then I had more books, finer books. First editions. Rare prints. Copies signed by hands long dead” (9). (substitute for not having children)

Ex-wife, **Angela**.

No books in the office.

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² Does exist in Brooklyn. Afro-centric, luxury hotel.
Garth waits in the car: “it was really cold outside, and brothers don’t like the cold” (11)—except Mathew Henson.3

“In my head, I was getting ‘gangsta,’ which I’ve always felt showed greater intent than getting ‘gangster’ in that it expresses a willful unlawfulness even upon its own linguistic representation (11).

**Confrontation with the College President = “Mr. Bowtie”**

“Usually men of power have useless fabric tied around their necks, but his was smaller, and tied at a different angle. No big phallic thing for this guy. NO, it was even worse, it was ‘Look at me, I have an itty-bitty micro-phallic tie around my neck, and yet I still have all this power over you’” (14).

-Rage

-Hope (12)—Story of the Romanticist, denied tenure, who got a permanent teaching job after groveling: “as Frederick Douglass’s narrative tells us, it is more valuable to a master to have a morally broken slave than to have a confident one” (12).4

-Fear after hearing Wagner. “What do you make of a Jew sitting in the dark listening to Wagner in this day and age?” (12).5 Changes to Mahler.6

“You were retained to purvey the minority perspective. I see nothing wrong with that” (13).

Going to the source of racism: starting with Poe. “If we can identify how the pathology of Whiteness was constructed, then we can learn how to dismantle it” (14).

Clip on tie comes off (emasculcation) (14).

Thomas Karvel—Stock of the Woods, Hudson valley school7

Issue of collecting (books, paintings)

Books on his porch, destroyed (16).

**Confrontation with Mosaic Johnson “Hip-Hop Theorist” (17)**

-advises him not to join the Diversity Committee, “It’s a slave hold” (17).

-its purpose is so that the school can say it exists

-“it’s a gerbil wheel, meant to ‘Keep this nigger boy running’” (18).

Johnson: “I’m a fighter” (18).

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3 1866-1955, African American explorer of the North Pole, with Robert Peary
4 Douglass’s *Narrative* published in 1845.
5 Wilhelm Richard Wagner (1813–1883), music and work admired by Adolf Hitler
6 Gustav Mahler (1860 – 1911) Austrian, Jewish composer
7 Mid-19th century, American landscape paintings, Thomas Karvel based on Thomas Cole? (1801-1848), or the contemporary Thomas Kinkade? (b. 1958).
“The hand in the air formed into a fist. I looked around the room, at the twenty or so white liberals taking him in on the sly. They loved it” (18).

He’s the replacement (19).

“Every good zoo need a caged gorilla . . . Even I was offended” (21).

“Poe. Doesn’t. Matter.” (21)

mini-mall kung fu punches

Tekeli-li!

Chapter 2

Tekeli-li from Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838)

Poe summary.

Augustus and Pym, stowaway. Mutiny led by African Americans and “half-breed” Crow Indian, Dirk Peters (23).

Peter’s “Negroid traits” 25
Africanist Presence (27).

Black polar bears and albatrosses (good place to discuss Melville’s Whiteness of the Whale chapter, *Moby Dick*)

Tsalal, blackness

Booker T. Washington (1856 –1915)

Pym’s elision of darkness when he and Dirk Peters are the only survivors, “We were the only living white men upon the island” (31).

Tekeli-li! (refers to something white) (31)

“It wasn’t that I was an apolitical coward, running away from the battle. I was running so hard toward it, I was around the world and coming back in the other direction” (34).

Gets a settlement for his destroyed books (34).

Well-known, Africanist intellectual on the news for buying a “previously unknown slave narrative” Negro Servant’s Memoir (35). (Henry Louis Gates, buys *Our Nig*, 1859 by Harriet Wilson, at an auction in 1982)


*The True and Interesting Narrative of Dirk Peters. Coloured Man. As Written by Himself Springfield, Illinois, 1837*

    Dealer says the text is not technically a slave narrative, possibly fiction (37)—True of *Our Nig* as well—as “fiction” Gates “discovers” the earliest known African American novel.

    Also, just notes for the book “parts of it are written like a journal, parts of it are just these disconnected scenes. There’s a lot of random scribbles in it too, and maps” (37) – Commentary on PYM. Or on The Narrative of AG Pym?

Peter’s narrative corroborates Pym’s. If so, “Tsalal, the great undiscovered African Diasporan homeland, might still be out there, uncorrupted by Whiteness” (39).

Intertextuality and truth vs. fiction: *PYM/Pym/Narrative of Dirk Peters*

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8) Analyze Jaynes's textual analysis. If we read the first two sections of this chapter as an argumentative essay, what is Jaynes's thesis? In other words, what does he find so compelling about Poe's novel, a work that he finds flawed and racist? What is the “emotional truth” on which Poe “stumbles” (22)?

9) Explain Jaynes’s understanding of Garth’s comment: “I like seeing the original site of the art. It’s like being able to climb in one” (36). (A concept to keep in mind for later.) Discuss the similarities between Garth’s and Jaynes’s quests.

10) Explain the allure of Jaynes’s fantasy of Tsalal. Why is he so fascinated by the idea of “a society outside of time and history” (39)?

11) Research: 18th-19th-century travel accounts that inspired Poe: e.g., Capt. James Cook and Benjamin Morrell

Chapter 3

Olaudah Equiano, 1789 (40)

Multiplication of texts

Summary of Dirk Peter’s narrative

Research into the Precipice ship log at the NY Historical Society (43).

Discovers Peters was writing the manuscript at sea (43).

Obscure because of its timing: “After a little old white lady published her lengthy melodrama about the evils of slavery in the American South in 1838, Uncle Tom’s Cabin changed the dialogue of African American literature dramatically” (43).

“Dirk Peters was never a writer. This was a work constructed by a man without talent for structure. Or for character. Or poetry” (44).

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9 Slave narrative, whose veracity was called into question by critic Vincent Caretta, who speculates that Equiano was born in South Carolina rather than in Africa (present day Nigeria) as he claimed.

10 Harriet Beecher Stowe published UTC in 1851 in serial form and in 1852 as a complete novel. She was 40 years old.
Parallel Missions:
Chris’s and Garth’s (spotting missions: Stock of the Woods, Cabana de la Chesapeake, and later Shackleton’s Sorrow.

Performs a Google search on Dirk Peters, 45

Image search, finds Mahalia Mathis, “singer, actor, poet, novelist, dancer, actress, and noted psychic person” also “Crow India, MI” (45) and hoarder (47). (Mahalia Jackson/Johnny Mathis? Both African American singers)

Meets her at her home (47).

Dirk Peters is their family secret. Mathis denies any African ancestry (49).

Gives him a letter from “E. A. P” to Peters (50).

12) Why doesn’t Mahalia Mathis include African ancestry in her list of ethnic/racial bloodlines (49)? Is she delusional or is her omission ideological or practical?

13) So far, what do you think of Jaynes’s skill as a detective? Does he tend to use deductive or inductive reasoning? Are his conclusions logical?

14) Literary references:
- Steelkilt from “The Town-Ho Story” in Moby-Dick (implied in the tale of Dirk Peters as originally a freshwater sailor on Lake Michigan). (Ishmael tells the story in Lima, Peru.)
- Uncle Tom’s Cabin, published in 1852 (not 1838). Poe’s Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym was published in 1838. This was also the year Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery.

15) Consider Jaynes’s questionable assertion: “Overnight, African American autobiographical storytelling became antiquated, and fiction, with its ability to directly manipulate the emotion of the white masses, proved a far more effective political tool” (43). What does this comment on autobiography and fiction imply about the reliability of the narrator, and how does it reflect the overall theme of the interplay of truth and fiction?

Chapter 4
Gary, Indiana—goes to a meeting of the NAACG (Native American Ancestry Collective of Gary) (52).

Simulations of Indianness (see Gerald Vizenor’s work on constructed Native American Identities, Manifest Manners and his concept of “survivance.”)

Results of DNA testing are in (Gates’s DNA world database project)
Results are disappointing, for the inclusion of African American DNA (55).
6% Native American (which is also the margin of error) (55)

Garth, claiming Seminole lineage on his mother’s side (57)

16) Discuss the thematic resonances between Jaynes’s analysis of Poe’s unconvincing description of Peters as a half-breed Indian (27) and the meeting of the NAACG in Chap. 4. (Note the pun on the NAACP.)

17) Research: The historical relationship between Native American and African Americans—in colonial times, the antebellum period, Civil Rights of the 60s and 70s, and more recent issues of Affirmative Action versus “postracial” politics.

18) Class activity: Show a segment of Gates’s PBS genealogy-research series.

19) Research: The 19th-century “ice trade,” also known as the “frozen water trade.” Relate your findings to Jaynes’s comment at the end of the chapter: “White people don’t own ice, Garth. I’m pretty sure they didn’t even invent it” (58).

20) Class project: Thomas Karvel modeled after Thomas Kinkade. Research the subject matter and style of Kinkade’s art and its relationship to theology, politics, and commercialization. Based on what we discover about Kinkade, consider the question Jaynes want to ask Garth “about his paintings . . . if there were every any black people in them, or did they look to him like a window to a Eurocentric fantasy world where black people couldn’t even exist, like they did to me” (58).

21) Research: Find definitions of “good” visual art, according to a variety of artists, critics, and scholars. How might these definitions also apply to literature?

Chapter 5

Peter’s relationship with Poe, U of VA (60)

Racist section of Peter’s narrative (62)

Poe’s pro-slavery review in the *Southern Literary Messenger* (62)

“Dirk Peters was an Uncle Tom” (63).

The *Armitage* takes Peters to Philadelphia (where Jaynes is from) (63).

Spruce Street (compare with Benjamin Franklin’s arrival in Philadelphia in his *Autobiography*)
22) Research: Poe and Pym are *doppelgänger*. Find out about the history of literary doubles and twins. What other examples of doubling do you see in *PYM*?

23) Research: Find an issue of the *Southern Literary Messenger* in which a section of Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* was published. What else is in that issue? What are the subjects of the essays, stories, and poetry?

24) Analyze the excerpts of Peters’s writing. Extend Jaynes’s analysis. What more can you say about the language and details of Peters’s account of his Antarctic adventure with Pym, his quest to find Poe, and his personal interaction with him?

25) Examine the theoretical work of Gerald Vizenor on Native American identity and “post-Indianness.” Are there parallels to be made to post-racialism in this novel?

26) Research the other 18th and 19th century literatures referenced in or related to *PYM* (Equiano, Irving, Franklin, Wilson, Stowe, etc.). How do these texts affect the structure and themes of *PYM*? Why engage this earlier literature at all?

**Encounter between Virginia Poe and Dirk Peters**

Poe refuses to write Peters’s adventures.

“Edgar doesn’t like Negroes” (64).

**Encounter between Peters and Poe in a bar.**

“Who is your master?” (65).

“Poe, of course, was a southerner of the planting class” (65).

Crumpled pages as proof (66)

Longitude 3.34, Latitude 34.3, Morter’s Point on the Ross Ice Shelf (67)

“I knew this in my heart: that if I found the right place at those coordinates and launched a vessel from it at the right time of the month, that regardless of global warming or centuries, the path to the isle of Tsalal would still be viable. That just as it did for Dirk Peters, the current would pull me to the island, and to discovery” (68).

Book settlement plus a year’s severance for not suing the college allow him to take the journey.

**Captain Booker Jaynes** (Booker T. Washington) (68)
Chapter 6

“Booker Jaynes was probably the world’s only civil rights activist turned deep-sea diver” (70).

“He sat in the back of the room staring intently at the front door, Malcolm X style, which considering we were in an organic juice bar was a little heavy for the scene” (71).

Twin Towers Bombing rally (72)

Booker Jaynes: “What the hell has this country come to, that people won’t rally against injustice? What the hell is wrong with a society that won’t even bother marching anymore?” (72).

“I marched at Selma, I marched in Mississippi, I marched in Montgomery. I know how to march” (73).

Antarctic Drinking Water scheme, “Government is giving huge tax breaks for using minority owned businesses” (73).

All black, “skeleton crew,” “I don’t trust white people” (74), says Booker Jaynes.

Thomas Karvel Emporium of Artistry

Chris takes a picture of Shackleton’s Sorrow to tempt Garth to join him (75).11

Search for a Crew

“two water treatment guys from Queens who ran what they called an ‘Afro-Adventure Blog’ on the side” (75-6). Jeffree and Carlton Damon Carter, lovers.

‘He’s my muse,’ Carlton Damon Carter nearly whispered into the microphone. ‘I’m his lens’ “ (77).

Dayton Dirty Water Disaster (77)

Angela Bertram, has not talked to her in seven years. Her second husband, David, was a lawyer (“corporate acquisition contracts, 80). She used to do art (80) worked with her ex-husband (a lawyer herself).

“[E]volution had hardwired women to be attracted to ambitious, successful providers, as it had predisposed men to physically fit women capable of bearing healthy young. So I gave her this. It was not Angela Bertram’s fault, it was evolutionary reality” (78).

A second lawyer, her third husband, entertainment lawyer, Nathaniel Latham. “A special guy who needs this. Someone very important to me” (81). Chris sees him as “Me but chewed up, digested, and shit out again. This guy. Like me but bloated and stupid and going bald where I was going gray” (84).

11 Ernest Henry Shackleton, (1874-1922) led three Antarctic expeditions. During one (1914–17) his ship became trapped by the ice and had to stay until the spring thaw.
Garth also entranced about spotting Karvel in Antarctica.

Package from the “Mathis Estate” contains the remains, severed head, of Dirk Peters (82-3).

“I would redeem him. . . . I would find Tsalal. . . And there, on the highest mountain, I would bury Dirk Peters in the ground, on the island of blackness that he, a black man, had discovered and, by leaving Pym behind, had preserved from the predations of white supremacy, colonialism, slavery, genocide, and the whole ugly story of our world. This was Dirk Peters’s legacy. Even if he was an Uncle Tom” (83).

22) Research: Matthew Henson, African-American polar explorer.

23) Research: The history of social and political activism in Union Square, New York.

24) Research: Ernest Shackleton’s expedition to Antarctica.

25) Read Booker T. Washington’s “Atlanta Exposition Address.” In what ways does Booker Jaynes resemble (or not resemble) his namesake?

26) Discuss the muse/lens (77) relationship of Jeffree and Carlton Damon Carter. How does this pairing of acting and documenting complement the themes of the novel?

27) Mini-research: Rufus Griswold. Why would Mahalia Mathis say that her family dug up Peters to “hide his bones from Rufus Griswold”?

28) Analyze Jaynes’s “scientific” rationalization of why his relationship with Angela failed, and his misreading of her feelings when she agrees to join the expedition to Antarctica (81). Do you admire Jaynes’s optimism, or do you see him as mildly delusional?

29) Why does Booker Jaynes know how to march, and why does he collect the tools of slavery? What comment might Johnson be making on his character and his generation of civil rights leaders?

VOLUME II

Chapter 7

“Antarctica felt to me like nothing. Frozen nothing. Nihilism in physical form” (90).

Truck accident (91) “In the space where we had just been standing, there was now nothing. Nothing: not the drill, not the ATV it was attached to, not the ground it sat on either” (92).

November Three Bombings (92) (preponderance of terrorist events)

Detroit, Houston, DC
Karvel's *Mississippi Mist* painting helped Garth’s ears stop ringing (92).

“‘Goddamn global warming.’ Garth leaned forward to get a better view. ‘Ain’t our fault. It was all them Escalades in the ghetto’ “ (93).

Chris’s “manly act” of going into the ice hole (94).

Antarctica really being blue (95)

Sees a shawled figure (96).

“Tekeli-li!” (96).

30) Compare the financial motivations of Jaynes and Garth as they pursue their fantasies in the Antarctic. (See pages 88 and 90.)

31) Research conspiracy theories and analyze the footnote on page 89.

32) Explain the irony in Jaynes’s description of Antarctic as “frozen nothing . . . Nihilism in physical form,” given what he and the rest of the crew expect to find there (90).

33) Consider Jaynes’s sexualized language of drilling (90) with his explanation of “the rape of Tsalal’s natural resources” (30) in Poe’s narrative. See Annette Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land*.

34) Research the science behind Jaynes’s statement, “The Antarctic gives the impression of being white, but really it’s blue” (95). Why is this a significant detail thematically?

35) Why does Jaynes shout “Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!” (96)? (See pages 31-32 and 66.)

36) What do you make of the preponderance of terrorist and/or natural disasters referenced in the characters’ past? What kind of world does the Creole Crew leave behind?

Chapter 8

TV news and a world in chaos (97).

“White folks” Captain Jaynes’s dog (99) with old slave bonds as a collar (100).

Booker Jaynes collects black memorabilia—“remnants of slavery: chains like this one, bills of sale, sale adverts, runaway notices, cages, neck spikes, face masks, the like. . . .vintage hogshead barrel that he’d filled with various cat-o’nine-tails” (100).

“I’m collecting evidence” (100). Why is Booker Jaynes collecting “evidence”? What else does this kind of collecting lead to in Booker’s personality?
Theme of collecting (Garth’s paintings and snack cakes/Chris’s books)

“I would address my obsessions, and no longer let delusions of massive pale monsters get the better of me” (103).

Jeffree says, “let me show you how a real man gets it done” goes into the chasm (104).

Giant footprints and a series of channels.

Booker: “Hell, looks like we got a snow honky problem. You’re the expert” (108).

| 37) What do you make of the chaos on TV? Do you think it might be a real or simulated apocalypse? |
| 38) Why does Jaynes call his cousin “Race Man”? Discuss the differences between Chris Jaynes’s and Booker Jaynes’s attitudes toward race. |
| 39) If you have read Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, explain the implied allusion to Crusoe’s discovery of the footprint in the sand, and the ways in which *Pym* plays on themes in Defoe’s novel. |
| 40) There is a fair amount of male posturing in this chapter. How do the characters in this novel perform what they imagine to be a “real man”? What intersections do you see between constructions of gender and race? |

Chapter 9

Booker: “what the hell is it? . . . Some kind of monkey? Some kind of Neanderthal? Or just men, the CIA or something?” (110).

The racialization of the snowmen.

Angela’s (“the little woman” 119) critique of Garth (111) seems to “deflate” the “big man.”

Naming rights/Ownership/Intellectual Property and “the Jeffree Tube” (111-113).

Creole Mining Company (114)

Chris gets angry at Garth’s fantasy for making his own less real (122).

First encounter with 6 “mountainous creatures. Their white robes hung loosely around them, and while they stood frozen by the sight of us, those robes continued to sway” (122).
“In a slow, deliberate imitation of my own nervous chatter, the creature spread his colorless lips, revealing an alabaster tongue as devoid of blood as his skin was, his “Tekeli-li” is what he told me” (129).

**Chapter 10**

Description of the snowmen (124-5).

“What I at first glance had assumed to be horrific masks proved instead to be their actual faces. The color, or lack of it, was striking. Albino, it seemed clear, but their eyes contradicted that. Looking into them as they stared intently back at my own, I realized that I had never truly seen pale blue eyes before. I had seen blue but never in this shade, the lightest possible variant, which had more in common with the snow around us than with any accepted form of ocular pigment. These darting, acute, haunting orbs bobbed over noses that were so long and pointy I assume they served some sort of evolutionary purpose that was at that moment unclear. The nostrils were cavernous stretches of ovals, from which gusts of steam—the sole visual evidence that these were actually hot-blooded creatures—pulsed. Also from the holes in their noses came hair, straight and brittle, that fed into their beards, thick corn silk completely devoid of coloring, pouring out of their ponchos. The only pigment attached to them was a yellowing around the mouths and noses, presumably from feeding or bodily fluids” (125).

Footnote on page 131 “they all pretty much looked the same to me. Same skin color, same hair color, same hair texture. All the same.”

Racialized description (compare to the earlier descriptions of black characters)

Bob Hope reference (126) “Yum Yum” in order to connect on the animal level.

Little Debbie negotiation: “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHMMMMMMMMMM” (127).

Descending into wetter ice (129) and encountering thousands of creatures (130).

Elder male creature (Khun Knee 146) approaching Booker Jaynes as an elder (131). Notice this elder does not go to the whitest member (Chris) as Pym does.

Language and communication (131-32).

Introduction of “sausage nose” (132)—“massive phallus beneath his robe. . . .nose was freakishly massive; gray, long, and lumpy, the poorly packed boudin” (132). (sausage)

Entry of Arthur Gordon Pym, child-like and corpse-like (133). Caucasian, over 200 years old (134).

Says to Chris, “have you brought these slaves for trading?” (134).

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12 Bob Hope, (1903 – 2003), American Comedian on stage, TV, and film.
41) In what ways does Nathaniel’s analogy between “intellectual property rights and the Internet” (118) relate to other ideas about ownership in the novel?

42) Compare the interaction between the crew of the Creole and the six “mountainous creatures” (122) with other accounts of first contact—whether in travel accounts of the New World such as Christopher Columbus’s letters or of the “dark continent” in Richard Burton’s Travels in West Africa, or in alien encounters in films like Close Encounters of the Third Kind or Avatar.

43) If you have read Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, compare Marlow’s impression of the “natives” at the Outer Station with Jaynes’s impression of the Tekelians: “What I at first glance as assumed to be horrific masks proved instead to be their actual faces” (125).

44) Research: Mythical creatures like bigfoot and the yeti. The Teklelians literally have big feet and Jaynes refers to one of them as “the main yeti” (128). What

45) Class activity: Watch the film, The Truman Show, on the theme of simulation, for an interesting twist on Jaynes’s comment, “it took a while to realize that the blue sky we now saw far above us in the cavernous space was a distant frozen ceiling” (129), and for later chapters with this theme. (See especially, 140)

46) Compare other literary passages depicting whiteness with Johnson’s depiction (“The Whiteness of the Whale” in Moby Dick and Huckleberry Finn’s description of Pap in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn). What kinds of political or philosophical implications are inherent in such descriptions?

Chapter 11

Chris’s appearance and background: light-skinned “mulatto in a long line of mulattoes” (135).

“I’m a black man who looks white” (134).

Bully named James Baldwin.13

Dynamics of literary lineage and paternity? Signifyin again. Chris could not read Baldwin until college.

Hiding out in the library with Mrs. Alexander who was “not much darker than me but was armed with a mouth full of ghetto to make up for it. She couldn’t get enough of my story” (136).

Issue of performing race. What is “ghetto” here?

Equiano as “first black nerd” (137).

Discovers slave narratives (Mary Prince, Harriet Jacobs, Solomon Northrup) (138).

Issue of genre—How is or isn’t PYM a slave narrative in the subsequent volumes? What’s the relationship between the slave narrative and the captivity narrative?


Pym sees the monsters as “perfection incarnate.” “You, sir, are in the presence of the Gods” (140). “Tekeli-li is Heaven” (141).

“They’re just crackers,” Captain Jaynes returned” (141). “ugly, big-headed honky albinos” (142). Vikings, punning on “white folks/White Folks,” smell in the rain (142).

Pym checking Jeffree’s gums to see about the “beast’s health” (144) for which he almost gets slapped “upside his head” (144).

Later, Booker Jaynes also suggest checking the Tekelians’ mouths for missing teeth, as well as hair falling out and the taste of their sweat (148).

Where has he learned all this? What does it indicate about the master/slave dialectic? (see Hegel’s dialectical model).

Current Nantucket property values tempts Pym back home (145).

Booker Jaynes not offended by Pym because “in my cousin’s head, this was how all white people were” (145).

Directed to “Go” by the elder, but Nathaniel wants to take two creatures, male and female (146).

Replication of early contact dynamic of taking back native specimens (see Christopher Columbus’s Narrative of the First Voyage; also examine Pocahontas as Rebecca Rolfe in England).

Pym believes this means they want to make slaves of the Tekelians. Chris says, “Never as slaves. . .more like ambassadors, to be put in our legal care for the duration of the tour. We’ll pay well” (147).

Reconstruction logic rather than slave logic?

They get Krakeer and Hunka (148) in return for Little Debbies, “sweetmeats.”

Booker Jaynes calls the creatures “snow monkeys” (153).

Chris finally tells Pym he’s an “octoroon” (149), a word Pym recognizes.

Image of Pym being carried in a shawl by the large creatures (Old Man of the Sea from The Arabian Nights? and/or The Odyssey?).
No signal from the outside world (151). Black screen.

Email, subject line: ARMAGEDDON (152).

Stranded (theme of shipwreck, lost at sea).

Cannot pay the debt immediately, so the Creole crew is taken into slavery.

The power of the Tekelians, “horrifically muscled and veined biceps and triceps that seemed as hard and heavy and white as marble” (155).

47) Research: The “Yanomamö tribe” (140). What socio-anthropological controversies seem relevant to the crew member’s ideas about how to document and market their discovery of the Teklelians?

48) Research: Historical accounts of indigenous “specimens” (147) transported from exotic locations to the metropolis. See, for example, Russell Potter’s “Esquimaux’ on Display”: [http://www.ric.edu/faculty/rpotter/eskimos.html](http://www.ric.edu/faculty/rpotter/eskimos.html). (For those who have read Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, compare Trinculo and Stephano’s idea to make their fortune by exhibiting Caliban with Nathaniel and Angela’s marketing schemes.)

49) Analyze the dual-identity presented on the title page and frontispiece to Olaudah Equiano’s narrative: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Jaynes asks, “What blacker form could there be than African America’s first literary son?” (138). What do you think Jaynes means by this? Why might the blurring of national, racial, and cultural identities also appeal to Jaynes?

50) The library is an important site of discovery in African-American and postcolonial fiction and nonfiction. What does Jaynes discover in the library, and how is his experience with books similar to that of the narrators of authors such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Paula Marshall, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, or Jamaica Kincaid?

51) Why do you think Jaynes waited until now to include a section about his childhood and meeting Garth? Does it change your attitude toward the characters?

52) Trace the theme of mulattoes in literature and history. The “tragic mulatto” figure in 18th and 19th century American literature. Examine other mixed race writers (Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Nella Larsen, etc.). Could also extend the discussion to other kinds of ethnic mixings.

53) Think about the politics of skin color. What does darkness or lightness mean in the “Black is Beautiful” era (135) vs. 19th century vs. 21st century?
Vol III

Chapter 12

“I am bored with the topic of Atlantic slavery. I have come to be bored because so many boring people have talked about it. So many artists and writers and thinkers, mediocre and genius, have used it because it’s a big, easy target . . . aren’t there other stories to tell?” (159).

No amount of reading prepared Chris to be a “f***ing slave” (160).

Garth has an “epic preslavery pig-out” on Little Debbies (161) and pays off his portion of the debt with them.

“Garth had bought his freedom” (162).

Tables are turned as Chris is owned by Krakeer. Renames him “Augustus” (163). Augustus is the name of Pym’s friend in Poe’s novel.

Description of Augustus as a slob (163). “Augustus was also probably the only Tekelian I could whup” (164). Augustus is a “lazy boss” who could not be bothered to give him work (165).

Introduction of the Krakt (“like porridge in consistency, or a mushy rice pudding, composed entirely of squashed animal fat” 165).

The only thing Chris takes is The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (167) and a bronze, 19th-century letter opener (which he gives to Angela as a weapon.)

The “Lovecraftian horror” of Tekelian plumbing system (167).

Jeffree gets blinded in the left eye by sausage nose as he tries to escape: “it was violence itself” (171).

Hunka in a Farah Fawcett pose (172).  

Booker Jaynes, “We will do what our people have always done: we will wait for our chance. And we will endure” (173).

B. Jaynes seems at peace.

“There was relief in his voice. As if man’s worst fears in life had been realized and justified all in the same moment” (173).

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Chapter 13

Nathaniel Latham as Morehouse Man—“entrepreneurial optimism . . . near-religious belief in the self and a refusal to acknowledge that any obstacle could thwart him. The Morehouse Man is a uniquely American creation and shares the young nation’s traditional certainty that the days ahead will be greater than the days behind” (174).

Nathaniel wants Chris to watch out for Angela, “I don’t like what’s mine f***ed with” (175).

Angela’s masters live in a “palatial fortress” (176).

Angela’s “not made for this life . . . I went to Spelman, Christopher. I am a soror of Delta Sigma Theta” (178).

The increasing oddity of Augustus (178-79).

White beetle infestation “in the cramped hovel of the insulin-fueled ice monkey I called Augustus” (180).

Beetle over-consumption and “over-breeding” (metaphor for human excess) (181). Chris considering writing an academic paper on them (181).

Imagines Augusts walking to Stevie Wonder’s “Superstition”*15 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhw_zbvxvb4

Tekelians had an underground route to the Creole Mining Company camp (182).

Reunited with Garth, who “snuggled next to White Folks” (183).

No black people in any of Karvel’s paintings. “Just makes me feel at home” (184).

“With its overwhemling quaintness, its thatched roofs and oversatured flowering, this was a world that had more to do with the fevered Caucasian dreams of Tolkien and Disney than with any European reality” (184).

Similar delusions with African Americans going back to Africa hoping to find “Wakandian fantasy civilization hid just beyond the palm” (184).

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*15 Stevie Wonder (1950-) soul, R & B, pop music artist.
Wakandian Warrior—Marvel Comics character?

Is Chris looking for this in Tsalal?

Augustus, white vomit from being too warm (186). Speaks “cold” (186).

Teaches Augusts the words: hot, walk, ice, good, bad (187)  [Robinson Crusoe]

Sleeps, clothed with Angela. Dreams of finding the Tsalal Eden with her (189).

55) Research: Look up the website of Morehouse College as context for Jaynes’s assessment of Nathaniel Latham. What does a “Morehouse Man” mean to Jaynes? Consider Jaynes’s view of Nathaniel as the “usurper” (175) and Jaynes’s fraught history with academia. (See PYM, 174-75.) Also, look up Spelman College, Angela’s alma mater, and Delta Sigma Theta (178).

56) Respond to the tale of Garth’s individual barter for his freedom, with Pym as mediator (161-62). Do you think Garth was justified in buying his own freedom? Should he have tried to negotiate on behalf of his friends?

57) Read Chapter 3 of The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and then consider the irony in Jaynes’s remark: “if you have to suffer the indignity of being a possession, it’s an even worse insult to be be the possession of a pauper? (176).

58) Analyze Jaynes’s description of the “white beetles” (180-81) as an extended metaphor for colonialism.

59) Evaluate Jaynes’s and Garth’s criteria for “art” in their conversation on pages 184-85.

60) Explicate the paragraph that begins, “When this is over, I’m going to buy a mansion in Oak Bluffs . . .” (188). (Do a little research on the history of African Americans on Martha’s Vineyard.)

61) If you have read Jack London’s White Fang, consider the thematic effect of numerous allusions to dogs and dog sledding (“with Augustus as my lead dog” [181]), and White Fang’s view of white men as “gods.” Some resonances include race, power, slavery, freedom, loyalty, savagery, civilization, etc.

Chapter 14

Legacy of “starvation in American slavery” seen in stereotype of blacks as thieves (190).

Diarrhea as mutiny (191)

Sees something skip, “Tekelian pickaninnies” (192).
Sound of tap shoes, “A white girl, no older than four years by my estimate, whistling and skipping with curly chestnut hair billowing out of her blue summer bonnet. All that protected her from the freezing air was a blue and white, checkered sundress, but she seemed fine. . . . She whistled along, pausing only to take a bite out of the Swill roll [Little Debbies] snack treat in her lovely little hand, the pastry’s delicate chocolate covering falling like ebony snow to the ground” (192).

Little Debbie--Little Eva (Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin)\textsuperscript{16}--Shirley Temple

“This was a girl whose feet didn’t touch the ground. . . . Skip, Little Debbie. Dance! If it would help, I would be her beige Bojangles” (192-3).\textsuperscript{17}

Ice icon, object of worship, 10 feet tall (194).

They are going to war to fight “The Melt” (196).

Nathaniel no longer well-groomed, swollen ankle (195).

Chris convinced of their impending “genocide” (196).

Pym drinking what tastes to Nathaniel like “fermented whale piss” (198).

Chris sold to Sausage nose, “the great warrior Barro” (200-01).

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62) Class activity: Watch Shirley Temple dance with Bill “Bojangles” Robinson on the stairs in The Little Colonel (1935). Also, view Louis Armstrong (Satchmo) singing in the Suzy Cute Doll TV commercial TV (1964). Is this conflation of Bojangles and Satchmo a detail that Johnson deliberately makes Jaynes muddle? Describe the similarities between these productions, and the thematic significance of each for PYM. (See PYM, 191-93.)

63) Consider the sinister implications of the “spectacle,” of “Tekelians standing around in a circle” (194). Jaynes’s recounts, “I hoisted myself just high enough to see past all of those cloaked hoods that were getting in my way” (194). If you have read James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, does the scene in PYM evoke the horror of the lynching witnessed by the J. W. Johnson’s narrator? The lynching scene in Mat Johnson’s graphic novel Incognegro would make another unsettling comparison.
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\textsuperscript{16} Note the African American singer “Little Eva” (1943-2003) in these reversals and counter-images.

\textsuperscript{17} BoJangles a.k.a. Bill Robinson (1878-1949) actor, dancer.
Chapter 15

“Captain Jaynes was a member of the baby boomers, the last generation of African Americans to fight race war directly” (204).

Booker Jaynes and Hunka together (207).

The sight of it traumatized Chris.

Chris wants to run with Garth. Tries to convince Booker, who will not go: “You can’t run from Whiteness” (209). “We stay, and we struggle. Because the struggle is who we are” (210).

“You got Stockholm syndrome or something” (209).

Takes Pym with him—“If Pym was the destroyer of my dreams, then I would be the destroyer of the dreamer” (211).

Also takes Dirk Peters’s bones (wants to bury him in Tsalal, 223)

64) Read Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “The White Man’s Burden” and Ernest Crosby’s parody, “The Real White Man’s Burden.” Then, consider the irony of Jaynes’s comment, “I’ll carry him [Pym]. He’ll be my burden” (215).

Chapter 16

Pym loves krakt, “a staple of the very heavens” (218).

Garth leading them to the spot.

Pym says, “This end is judgment, I fear. For your theft of yourself” (224).

Pym refuses to hear anything negative about the Tekelians. “That is how they stay so white: by refusing to accept blemish or history. Whiteness isn’t about being something, it is about being nothing, nothing, an erasure. Covering 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” (225).
65) If you have read *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, compare Poe’s tale of cannibalism on the *Grampus* (the dismasted hulk of the whaling ship, on which Pym and Augustus are stranded at sea) with Pym’s suggestion to Jaynes and Garth that they draw straws (224). Cannibalism is usually seen as an act that separates savagery from civilization, and it’s a staple of many desperate tales of survival, both “true” and fictional. Other examples for comparison, and likely sources for Poe, are Samuel Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*.

66) Research: The Donner Party and/or the shipwrecked *Essex*. Consider elements of heroism and (self)sacrifice, as well as terror.

67) Research: Lawrence Oates, whose last words were said to be, “I am just going outside and may be some time” (224).

**VOLUME IV**

**Chapter 17**

Jules Verne’s response to Poe’s *Pym – An Antarctic Mystery, or The Sphinx of the Ice Fields* (229).

H. P. Lovecraft’s in *At the Mountain of Madness* (230).

Various readings of the conclusion of Poe’s novel. Poe looking for a sequel vs. exhausted by writing, vs. end as metaphor and stupid (since narrator says he’s back in the US earlier), vs. dead end into whiteness and “an overwhelming worship of whiteness” (232).

68) Read Jules Verne’s *An Antarctic Mystery, or The Sphinx of the Ice Fields* and/or H. P. Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness*. What do you think inspired these authors to revisit Poe’s *Narrative*? Compare and contrast their imaginative revision with Johnson’s *PYM*.

69) If you have read *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, respond to Jaynes’s four critical evaluations of the ending of Poe’s novel (230-32).

**Chapter 18**

“I woke up dead” (233). Hell. “I was trapped inside a Thomas Karvel painting” (234).

“This is Eden, dog . . . You standing in *Dome of Light*” (234).

In the 19th century, Republicans as the anti-slavery party were associated with blackness.

Albino Easter bunny hops by *(Alice in Wonderland)*.

Conservative commentators: Rush, Beck, O’Reilly, Hannity (236).

Pym out on the ice?

Teeth marks from Pym trying to eat him (237).

Karvel: “All that PC nonsense, it made men soft. Hell, the Lesbos are stronger than most of the men nowadays. Me, I love it down here. You make your own reality in this place” (237).

The rapture/Armageddon (238).

Meal of “brown bunnies with Kraft mac and cheese, ‘Jiffy’ mix muffins, and heaping portion of Betty Rocker roasted garlic and cheddar mashed potatoes” (239).

Mrs. Karvel. – “perpetually stressed” (244). “This is the deal. Either you guys got to figure out a way to grow us all some new food or you tell me how the hell we can get out of this goddam fishbowl” (245).

They get a tour of the biodome in while they’re wearing Karvel’s too small pajamas (240).

Simulations are too real (240-41). See postmodern theorist, Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*.

The dome is “without history” and “stain” or “Big Brother.” (241)

Splenda, Kool-Aid (Jim Jones) (242).

“Our interior tour reveals that this house had no back” (242).

**Chapter 19**

Scents piped in, paint, and steroids, miles of tubing (247). Theme of tubing/tunnels/hidden pipes.

“All the animals were white” (247).

Mrs. Karvel does all the work, turns off the faucet for the waterfall (Ziploc bags/Swiffer). 248-9
In the hidden room, she rolls and smokes joints (255). “Look, I take care of in here. I always have
taken care of in here in our home. And you’re supposed to take care of what’s out there. That’s the
way it’s always been. That’s the pact. So get outside and shoot them” (262).

Commentary on traditional gender roles?

Karvel: “what I’m creating is the land itself” (251). “There is only one look. There is only one
vision” (251).

Request to grow coconuts (252).

Rat poison boxes.

Discovery by the Tekelians (259).

70) Explicate the Easter bunny/Welsh rarebit anecdote (235).

71) Karvel tells Jaynes, “I kept painting all of these pictures, trying to create a perfect world. One
day . . . I realize: I don’t just want to look at this world, I want to live in it” (241). Using
specific details from Karvel’s world, analyze Karvel’s idea of perfection. Would you like to live in
such a world? Why or why not?

72) What other models of simulated worlds do you see in Karvel’s art? Explain. (Disneyland would
be one example.)

73) Analyze the humor and irony in specific details of the Karvelian landscape.

74) Discuss similarities and differences in Jaynes’s quest to live in Poe’s world, Garth’s quest to
discover Karvel’s world, and Karvel’s creation of his own world.

75) Research: Thomas Kinkade, the inspiration for Karvel.

76) Karvel’s name also calls to mind Carvel Ice Cream. View the Carvel website and analyze the way
the company presents its products. Why would this name be an apt choice for the fictional
Karvels?

77) Jaynes goes from one form of slavery under the Tekelians to another in the Karvel’s world. In
what ways are Jaynes and Garth’s new living and working arrangements modeled after a 19th-
century Southern plantation?
Chapter 20

Shoot out against the Tekelians (263). “They were so convinced that their supposed whiteness camouflaged them against the snow, they seemed to think they were invisible” (263).

Need to make a break for Tsalal (268).

Augustus and the Creole Crew arrive “Right on CP Time” (270).

Analyze the significance of product placements—from Little Debbie Snack Cakes to Cheetos, Swiffer, and Powerbar.

The image of the gray fingers struggling to reach through the door is familiar to horror and zombie film fans (269). Discuss the effect of this scene and the reversal of expectations when Jaynes recognizes that they are Augustus’s fingers.

Chapter 21

Nathaniel as sell out (his role all along?) (271).

Angela seems to have regrets (272).

Heat from the fan melting Tekelia (274).
Pym representing the “albino hominids” (276). Demand to cease “your great fire, and the fans to blow their heat into the corridors of Heaven” (277). Plus the return of the slaves (278).

Poison as Kool-Aid (theme of extinction and genocide) (279).

“But dogs, you can’t just kill people. It’s not right, it not how you’re supposed to do things” Garth (280). Question of ethics in this context.

Karvel responds, “There are no rules here” (280). Are there rules in war and survival? Return to the theme of cannibalism in Poe’s Pym.

“It was so easy to let that xenophobic element within me, that part inclined to dehumanize those different from myself, have its way” (282). Major theme in the book?

Connection to the children. “They were hideous, but they were young in the way that’s familiar across species: clumsy, endearing, trusting, innocent. But Mrs. Karvel recovered” (284).

Chris had not made this connection with the children before.

89) If you have read James Fenimore Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans, consider the irony of Nathaniel as “interpreter to the Tekelian army” (271). Also, Jeffree is a self-proclaimed “tracker” (273), which could suggest a frontiersman like Cooper’s “white Indian” Nathanial Bumppo (but also slave trackers in the South, the patrollers, predecessors to the Ku Klux Klan). In the context of the American frontier, in what ways could the “vanishing paradise” allude to the myth of the “vanishing Indian”? Consider the idealization of the Indian way of life, like vision of Africa as a “Wakandian fantasy civilization” (184).

90) To help you pursue the above question further, read it through the lens of Renato Rosaldo’s “Imperialist Nostalgia.”

91) What are the advantages and risks in “trying to be one of them” (272). Is Nathaniel a traitor? If so, to whom?

92) Pym consistently defends the Tekelians, but the narrator refers to them as “his [Pym’s] masters” (278). In what ways is the Jim Jones allusion relevant to the characters’ belief in strange Gods and unquestioning acceptance of certain ideologies?

93) Analyze the gendered power dynamics of pairs of characters: Thomas & Mrs. Karvel, Hunka and Booker Jaynes, Angela and Nathaniel or Jaynes, and Jeffree and Carlton Damon Carter.

94) Do a feminist analysis of the female characters. How does this novel present the intersections of gender and race?
Chapter 22

They ate without utensils—“I was witnessing an act of genocide” (285).

See passage, reference to Europeans selling infected blankets to the Indians (286).

Pym did not eat the food (287).

Augustus dies (291) as in Poe’s Pym.

Sausage nose goes into the dome of color/heat/etc. (293).

The child he’s with dies (294).

95) What is your response to Jaynes’s confession of his own complicity in genocide?

Chapter 23

Garth dresses as Sausage Nose to delay discovery (theme of disguise and farce in 19th century romances, like James Fenimore Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans and Catherine Maria Sedgwick’s Hope Leslie).

Including the use of teeth-whitening paste (298).

Garth, too white (not enough gray) (299).

Booker Jaynes and Hunka. He has kept the poison food from her (300).

Nathaniel tries to get them to surrender.

Vitiligo: skin whitening (301).

Discovery and a wave of killing. Booker dies first. “Can’t we just form a circle?” (303).

Hunka gets her throat cut (303).

Angela runs to Nathaniel—escapes Chris because of “years of step aerobics, spin classes, and Bikram yoga” (304).

Little Black Sambo reference (melting) (306).

Pym in the sailboat with bourbon (307) and Dirk Peter’s bones.

Series of explosions (parallel to the explosions in their other world).
96) Compare Garth’s performance as Sausage Nose with Pym’s ghostly disguise in Poe’s *Narrative*.

97) Research: the history of black face (as context for the irony of Garth in white face).

98) Research: poison as a form of slave rebellion. (Booker Jaynes says, “If it was that simple, slavery would have been over by the seventeenth century” [300].)

99) Research: “Little Black Sambo” and explain the irony of Jaynes’s wanting to see the Tekelians “pooled like butter on the floor” (306).

100) If you have read William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” discuss the creepy humor in the similarities of names: Garth Frierson and Emily Grierson.

**Interlude**

Back to the Poe and Peters text discussion (with Verne) (312).

101) What is the purpose of the Interlude at this point in the novel?

**Chapter 24**

Journal format on their sailing away.

Blackened Oreo smile scares Pym (318).

Things get blacker as they near Tsalal (birds).

Dog in the water (319).

“On the shore all I could discern was a collection of brown people, and this, of course, is a planet on which such are the majority” (322).

**Author’s Note**

Sudden disappearance of Mr. Jaynes (exact parallel to Poe’s novel).

Garth survives and is in Michigan.

Loss of the last three chapters.
102) Read Poe's famous poem “The Raven” as context for Jaynes's musings about color, Karvel's pigeons, and white doves.

103) Read Herman Melville’s chapter in *Moby-Dick* on “The Whiteness of the Whale.” In what ways does Melville challenge Poe’s color symbology? And in what ways does Johnson emulate Melville’s analysis of symbolic whiteness?

104) Research: the early-19th-century polar theories of Jeremiah N. Reynolds and John Cleves Symmes, Jr. (Influences on Poe.)

105) Compare the last chapter of *PYM* with the ending of Poe’s *Narrative*. Analyze the ways Jaynes's narrative appropriates and revises Poe’s text to present an alternate view of race.

106) Compare the “Author’s Note” at the end of Johnson’s text (in the paperback edition) with the “Note” that concludes Poe’s *Narrative*. What purpose does it serve in Poe’s text and what does it add to the overall effect of Johnson’s novel?

**Excerpt from Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym***

Chapters 18, 19, 20, 21, 22

The Tsalal sections.