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Patrick Pride
Rhode Island College

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Patrick Pride

Dr. Jalalzai

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Tsalal: The 19th-Century American Nightmare

Abstract

In “Tsalal: The 19th Century American Nightmare” I examine Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* through Toni Morrison’s theory that an African presence exist in 19th-century American literature. In “Black Matter(s)” Morrison argues that this African presence in 19th century literature expresses the fears of American society. Thus, I examine *The Narrative of Gordon Arthur Pym* in order to see how blackness symbolizes the fears of 19th-century America.

Tsalal: The 19th-Century American Nightmare

One of the major political issues in 19th-century America was the issue of whether slavery should exist in America or not. Abolitionists and anti-abolitionists argued about the issue of slavery throughout the early part of the 19th century, and by 1861 America erupted into a civil war mainly because of the issue of slavery. The Northern Union believed that African-Americans should be granted freedom, while the Southern Confederate states fought to keep Africans enslaved. The United States literally split into two separate countries for four years because of the issue of whether African-Americans should be granted freedom or not, and yet up until Toni Morrison wrote “Black Matter(s)” in 1992, the prevailing thought about 19th-century literature was that it lacked an African presence. In “Black Matter(s)” Morrison:

wonder[s] whether the major, much celebrated themes of American literature- individualism, masculinity, the conflict between social engagement and historical isolation, an acute and ambiguous moral problematic, the juxtaposition of innocence with figures representing death and hell- are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanistic presence. (310)

Morrison herself does not fully realize that there is an Africanist presence in American literature until she begins her writing career. When Morrison starts writing she notices that in early American literature “Americans chose to talk about themselves through and within...[a] choked representation of an Africanist presence”(312).

Morrison notices an Africanist presence often in gothic romance literature. Romance literature in America embraced American fears of, “being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness; of boundarylessness, of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; of absence of so-called civilization; of loneliness, of aggression both external and internal”(Morrison 314). These fears derived from immigrants who were coming from Europe to America in order to gain freedom. In literature these American concerns are described through the utilization of darkness. Darkness was used to describe the fears of America because the lack of freedom that the black slave population possessed embodied the American fears. Morrison goes on to state that Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay, “The American Scholar”, also assisted in the creation of an Africanist presence in American literature. In Emerson’s essay he attempts to convince Americans to create an American identity by separating creative works that are uniquely American instead of based on European ideals. In “The American Scholar” Emerson states, “Perhaps the time is already come...when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids, and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence...draws to a close” (1855). However, this American identity that Emerson helped craft not only separated Americans from Europeans, it also furthered the racial difference between blacks and whites in America. The racial difference which emerged from Emerson created “a huge trove of signs, symbols, and agencies for organizing, separating, and consolidating identity along valuable lines of interest” (Morrison 315).

In Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, one can see that Morrison has a point when she states that 19th-century literature has an Africanist presence. Throughout the story there are many instances when the narrator mentions darkness, and this darkness seems to have an Africanist cast which embodies American fears. Poe’s novel revolves

around the narrator's, Arthur Gordon Pym's, journey. Pym is a young man who is in search of an adventure, so he accompanies his friend, Augustus, on a whaling ship. Augustus has to hide Pym at the beginning of their journey, and by the time Pym is able to come out of hiding there has been a mutiny aboard the ship. Eventually, everyone on the ship dies except for Pym, and one of the mutineers, Dirk Peters. Pym and Peters are rescued by a British ship the *Jane Guy*, and this ship sets sail for the Antarctic. However, on their way to the Antarctic the *Jane Guy* discovers a place called Tsalal where the color white is non-existent and all the inhabitants are black. Leslie Fielder states "Poe's realm of refuge and escape seems finally a place of death rather than one of love: the idyllic American dream turned nightmare..."(393). Thus, one can see that in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, American fears are embodied in the Africanist presence of the darkness in the natives of Tsalal.

On the island of Tsalal all the inhabitants look the same. When first arriving at Tsalal, Pym describes the natives he encounters in the following way:

They were about the ordinary stature of Europeans, but of a more muscular and brawny frame. Their complexion a jet black, with thick and long woolly hair. They were clothed in skins of an unknown black animal, shaggy and silky, and made to fit the body with some degree of skill, the hair being inside, except where turned out about the neck, wrists, and ankles. (Poe 196)

When the natives bring the crew of the *Jane Guy* to their village Pym states:

There were a great many women and children, the former not altogether wanting in what might be termed personal beauty. They were straight, tall, and well formed, with a grace and freedom of carriage not to be found in civilized society. Their lips, however, like those of the men, were thick and clumsy, so that even

when laughing, the teeth were never disclosed. Their hair was of a finer texture than that of the males. (Poe 204)

Lastly, when Pym and Peters examine their captive Tsalalian, Nu-Nu, Pym writes in his journal that Nu-Nu's teeth "were black. [Peters and Pym] had never before seen the teeth of an inhabitant of Tsalal" (241).

As one can see the only major differences between the inhabitants of Tsalal is gender, and some natives who seem to be soldiers wear clothes while the others are naked. Pym gives the impression that all the male Tsalalians look exactly the same, and all the female Tsalalians look exactly the same. Pym does not point out any native who looks different from the rest. Even when analyzing Nu-Nu's teeth the tone that Pym uses when stating that Nu-Nu's teeth are black gives the impression that he assumes that all Tsalalians teeth are black. There is no individuality on the island of Tsalal. All the inhabitants look exactly the same. Thus, Poe utilizes an Africanist presence in order to emphasize the American fear of a nation having no individuality.

Also, from the passage describing the Tsalalian women one can see that Pym considered Tsalal an uncivilized society because he says, "They were straight, tall, and well formed, with a grace and freedom of carriage not to be found in civilized society" (Poe 204). Also, throughout his time in Tsalal, he states that the natives are "savages" and "barbarous". Therefore, first he states that the women would not exist in a civilized society. Then he calls the natives barbarians and savages; barbarians are usually not found in civilized societies. Thus, the fear of an uncivilized society is found in Tsalal.

Another American fear presented on the island of Tsalal is the fear of being outcast. Upon arriving at Tsalal Pym states, "It was quite evident [the natives] had never before seen any of the white race- from whose complexion, indeed, they appeared to recoil" (Poe 197). Hence,

Pym's statement that the natives recoiled at the sight of white people gives the impression that the Tsalalians are outcasts from the rest of the world because they do not know whiteness. Also, Pym states that the Tsalalians do not totally understand some of the technology which the crew of the *Jane Guy* possesses which is another example of how the Tsalalians are separated from the rest of the world.

At the end of the story when Peters and Pym escape from Tsalal with their prisoner, Nu-Nu, they enter a land of complete whiteness. Upon entering this land Nu-Nu dies. The death of Nu-Nu symbolizes how powerless the Tsalalians are because Peters and Pym who are "white" men survive in a land that is all black, yet when a Tsalalian enters a land of all white he or she immediately dies.¹ Sure, the natives of Tsalal killed all of the crew of the *Jane Guy* other than Pym and Peters, but the power that the natives of Tsalal had in their own land does not compare to the power of the land where everything is white because the Tsalalians had to fight in order to kill the crew of the *Jane Guy*. In the land of whiteness all Nu-Nu had to do is enter the land and he immediately dies. Thus, the death of Nu-Nu symbolizes the power of whiteness over blackness.

Overall, when examining Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Gordon Arthur Pym of Nantucket*, one can see that he uses an Africanist presence in order to present American fears. Poe makes the appearance of the natives of Tsalal all the same in order to express that there is no individuality on the island. Then Poe makes the inhabitants seem uncivilized by calling them "barbarous" and stating that they could not live in a civilized society. He also takes the Tsalalians' lack of civilization a step further by stating that they are outcasts of the world because they have never seen whiteness before, and they do not understand some of the

¹ Dirk Peters is actually Native American. However, at this point in the story he seems to be identified more as a white man. (See Mat Johnson's *PYM*.)

technology which the crew of the Jane Guy possesses. Lastly, Nu-Nu's death symbolizes the power that whiteness has over blackness. Therefore, through by examining Poe's novel through the lens of Toni Morrison's "Black Matter(s)" one can see that the natives of Tsalal represent the fears of 19th-century America.

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