



Deontologising the Nonhuman: *Arthur Gordon Pym*, Contemporary Literature, and the Limits of the Human

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INTRODUCTION: THE NONHUMAN AT PEAK HUMANITY

One way to understand the present is as the time of “peak humanity.” If the global population stood at one billion in 1800, there are currently 7.7 billion humans alive (the projection is that there will be 11.2 billion in 2100). This expansion of the human is actively crowding out other species: humans and the animals they eat consume about 95% of what the biosphere produces, which leaves only 5% of global food for wild animals (Smil 2013). The human is also an “infrastructure species” that increasingly mobilises nonhuman stuff to the point that the material habitat humans have created—roads, cities, cropland—is now “some five orders of magnitude greater than the weight of the human beings that it sustains”; this amounts to 4000 tons of transformed earth per human

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being (Purdy 2018, n.p.). Our planet, then, is a thoroughly humanised one that is being remade as “an integrated piece of global infrastructure” (Purdy 2018, n.p.). We are now famously living in the Anthropocene : a time when our species has been revealed as a geological power player, when human action has touched every aspect of the biosphere, and when the whole planet has been irrevocably affected by human interference.

Why then is “the nonhuman” suddenly a thing? Why the so-called non-human turn (Grusin 2015)? The phrase “peak humanity” expresses a certain anxiety over human domination. Like the cognate phrase “peak oil,” it expresses a sense that we have reached a moment of maximum accumulation that inevitably precedes a trajectory of terminal decline. Any suggestion of species pride is undercut by an awareness of exhaustion and depletion. On the one hand, the technological prowess of humankind has come to assert itself as a significant force; on the other, human life itself is caught in the processes of erosion and disintegration that it has unleashed. The focus on nonhuman agency might then be a way of reckoning with such anxieties over the fate of the species. Still, it is remarkable that the notion of the *nonhuman* is increasingly replacing or complementing terms like the *inhuman* and the *posthuman* in our critical vocabularies. Although the terms are at times used interchangeably, the *inhuman* primarily evokes concerns with the horrors and evils that seemingly all too human individuals and institutions are capable of; it resonates with the fascination with trauma, the Holocaust, and deconstruction that dominated critical theory in the 1980s and 1990s. The *posthuman*, for its part, names a more exhilarating—if typically ambivalent—focus on the promises of technology and materiality to transform human nature that emerged in the 1990s and the 2000s. In comparison, the *nonhuman* seems to point to a more sedate concern that avoids both abjection and ecstasy, both the lurid and the sublime. It merely recognises the formative role of agents that happen not to be human without investing these agents with too much affect. This more sober tenor makes discourses of nonhuman agency a productive place for enquiring into the plurality of different forces that constitute Anthropocene life.

One reason to foreground complexity and plurality in our engagement with the nonhuman is that “peak humanity” afflicts different nonhumans in very different ways. For at least some nonhumans, the news is bad: as journalist Elizabeth Kolbert (2014) has documented, we are now witnessing the sixth mass extinction event in the history of the earth, a process of biological annihilation that disproportionately affects mammals, birds,

amphibians, and fish; at the same time, agricultural monocropping is eroding biodiversity in a way that also affect plants, fungi, and less charismatic animals. For other nonhumans, the situation is not nearly so dire: if we think of, for instance, iPhones, tsunamis, algorithms, cancers, and YouTube videos, we can note that these nonhumans proliferate as never before. Such random lists of things—also called “litanies”—are a key feature of some of the most prominent theoretical tendencies in our dealings with the nonhuman world; we find them in Graham Harman’s *object-oriented ontology* as it evokes, for instance, a place “amidst coral reefs, sorghum fields, paragliders, ant colonies, binary stars, sea voyages, Asian swindlers, and desolate temples” (2015, 3), as well as in Jane Bennett’s *vibrant materialism*, which famously describes the American electrical grid as “a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood” (2010, 25). The point of such deadpan lists is clear: they underscore these theorists’ so-called flat ontologies, in which no single thing is more important than another; and, especially in the case of object-oriented ontology, they evoke a world without humans, as if to double the point that human life is entirely unexceptional in the midst of a plurality of nonhuman agencies.

In this chapter, I argue that the methodological promise of the category of nonhuman agency is not well served by a tendency to unify these different agencies in the all too monolithic category of *the* nonhuman. The very term seems to give a stable and unified identity to things that are in fact implicated in very different ways in the multidirectional traffic between the human and its others. Indeed, if the category of the nonhuman is supposed to cover such different things as threatened animal species, human bodies exposed to carcinogenic substances, and iPhones, what do we really gain by it? Moreover, the nonhuman, I argue, sounds too much like *the* inhuman and *the* posthuman to capture the more capacious and unruly dynamics in which human and nonhuman agents are entangled. In the next section, I explore the problems with what I call the “ontologisation” of the nonhuman by briefly touching on three episodes in the history of critical theory: a dialogue between Paul de Man and Neil Hertz on the alleged inhumanity of deconstruction; Theodor Adorno’s critique of Martin Heidegger’s “jargon of authenticity” (1964); and the overlap between different contemporary discourses about the nonhuman world such as object-oriented ontology, new materialism, and material

ecocriticism. This idiosyncratic genealogy of our contemporary discourses of nonhuman agency brings currently fashionable materialisms in dialogue with a no longer fashionable dialectical materialism and an arguably even more obsolete line of deconstructionist thinking. Cumulatively, these three episodes problematise the tendency to talk about *the* nonhuman as a stable ontological category and instead propose a more dynamic and multidimensional account in which complex and ethically charged processes of de-, re-, and inhumanisation compose, refract, and reorder the relations between human and nonhuman elements without ever coming to rest in a stable, robust reality we can call *the* nonhuman.

A second argument I pursue in this chapter is that literature is one place where the unhelpful robustness of the nonhuman can be unsettled and replaced by more dynamic processes of de-, re-, and inhumanisation. To illustrate this point, I turn to a cluster of texts that are intertextually related. I focus on Edgar Allan Poe's only (and notoriously problematic) novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, and its partial rewriting in two contemporary novels, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) and Mat Johnson's *Pym* (2012). On a *formal* level, all three of these novels try out different generic templates—the adventure story, the shipwreck narrative, or magic realism—in their attempt to capture the nonhuman (for Poe and Johnson, that nonhuman reality is explicitly Antarctica). *Thematically*, they feature different strategies for streamlining the relation between the human and nonhuman: the island, the lifeboat, geoengineering, multispecies communities, and the biodome. On both the formal and thematic levels, nonhuman reality refuses to be stabilised, as the novels shuttle between different generic templates, only to end up finding themselves entangled in complex and ethically charged movements of humanist recuperation and aggressive dehumanisation. Ultimately, I argue, such dynamic entanglements tell us more about the relation between humans and their others than a starry-eyed focus on the nonhuman per se does.

THE NONHUMAN IN THEORY: THREE SNAPSHOTS

Promoting the nonhuman risks misrepresenting an intrinsically unstable and unruly reality as if it were a fixed, permanent, and ontologically robust one. This risk has been negotiated at different moments in the history of critical thought, even if contemporary critical thought, which is marked by a return to the object-world and to the materiality of the world, often disavows the particular genealogy I sketch below. Indeed, even if

ecological thinking has overcome the aversion to theory that marked it in the 1990s, the theoretical traditions it invokes are rarely that of deconstruction (the deconstructionist ecocriticism of people like Claire Colebrook, Tom Cohen, and Timothy Clark is an exception) and the Frankfurt School (in spite of dutiful acknowledgements of the precocious account of the dialectic between nature and history in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and a recent special issue of the *Adorno Studies Journal* on "Adorno and the Anthropocene" [Flodin and Johansson 2019]). In order to begin to unsettle that orthodoxy, I first turn to two moments in those traditions.

In March 1983, arch-deconstructionist Paul de Man devoted the last of six Messenger Lectures at Cornell University to Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The Task of the Translator." De Man mines Benjamin's essay to locate the insight that "it is not at all certain that language is in any sense human" (1986, 87). Language, for de Man's Benjamin, is a place where human meaning goes to die and where intention dissolves in a material process that is rigorously indifferent to human designs. This is a clear example of the infamous "anti-humanism" of so-called French Theory and of deconstruction—a posture that resonates with that of present-day materialists and object-oriented ontologists. De Man's deadpan posture can be described as "sado-dispassionate" (2002, 41–45), to adopt a term of the Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood: it projects a calculated indifference to moral considerations; it feigns emotional neutrality in order to studiously sideline ethical and existential concerns as merely sentimental. De Man makes it clear that "the sufferings" (*Wehen*—a German term that primarily connotes labour pains, a gendered meaning that de Man discusses but discards) Benjamin talks about are "certainly not subjective pains, some kind of pathos of a self": they "are not in any sense human" (1986, 85).

In the discussion following the talk, Neil Hertz, then a professor of romantic literature at Cornell, objects to de Man's equation of everyday events of misunderstanding and miscommunication and the all too sublime category of the inhuman: "all of those instances" de Man adduces, he remarks, "add up to what's beyond your control as an individual user of language, but they don't quite add up to the inhuman" (95). The reason Hertz feels the inhuman is an inadequate category here is that it inflates something quotidian and prosaic into something grandiose and ineffable: "the word 'inhuman' keeps pulling in the direction of the mysterious [...] in a mode of the substantiation and the individuation of something that's

the Inhuman, like *the* Sublime” (95). As “a major term,” “a singular noun” (95), the inhuman misrecognises the diversity and everydayness of linguistic difficulties. Hertz’s point, in other words, is that there is a fairly straightforward and prosaic *nonhuman* dimension to language—we all stammer, we all tell jokes that misfire, we all mispronounce and misunderstand—and that de Man (and a whole deconstructionist way of looking at language with him) makes a double mistake: first, he *inflates* that pedestrian fact to the status of a metaphysical mystery, and, second, he “substantiates” it, turning a nonhuman dimension of speech into a distinct category (95), giving it a consistency and allure it does not quite deserve. Hertz’s concern is emphatically not with the difference between the inhuman and the nonhuman, as he does not interfere when de Man’s rambling response to his intervention uses “inhuman,” “non-human,” “nonhuman,” and “dehumanized” interchangeably (96); his concern is with the turn away from a messy, mundane reality to a mysterious realm that promises a homogeneity and stability that is illusory at best. What emerges from this dialogue, then, is a tension between a plurality of encounters with the limits of the human and the false stability of a category that aims to transcend that reality. For Hertz, deconstruction should be more attentive to the former and not subsume a plurality of instances, however banal and unexciting, under the latter.

The process of mystification that Hertz objects to can, in a more philosophical context, also be called “ontologisation.” Ontologisation names a process in which things are divorced from the contexts and conflicts in which they emerge and presented as self-contained and stable. Contemporary materialisms and object-oriented ontologies participate not only in a “nonhuman turn” but also in what has been called the “ontological turn” (a term especially prevalent in the field of anthropology and also associated with the sociological work of Bruno Latour and developments in the field of philosophy [Holbraad and Pedersen 2017]), which is marked by a shift of focus from the social and linguistic construction of things to their self-evident materiality. This ontological turn is often also a turn *away* from mediation, struggle, and intervention, and a turn *to* descriptions of the world as it is, which risks ending up naturalising the state of affairs it describes. The term “ontologisation” is a useful one, in that it reminds us that the turn to an ontological perspective is a process, and thus something that can be challenged and changed—even if the rhetoric of ontology (think of the litanies I discussed before), by cherishing the materiality of bodies, affects, and things, tends to bracket the fact that

all things develop through ongoing processing of historical making and becoming.

One of the key documents in the critique of ontologisation is Theodor Adorno's 1964 book *The Jargon of Authenticity*. In this critique of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Adorno takes issues with the tendency to present things as more glamorous and more authentic by removing them from the messy contexts in which they emerge. In a 1960–61 lecture course on Heidegger, Adorno repeatedly names Heidegger's key procedure "the ontologization of the ontic" (2018, 84; also 2003, 103). For Heidegger, a plurality of (ontic) beings is necessary for (ontological) being, but this necessity dematerialises the things that make up reality: it converts specific and individual beings into one vague, empty being. This "confers a kind of essential being on beings themselves," and "[i]nsofar as every particular being is brought to its concept, the concept of the ontic, everything which makes it a particular being, when confronted with the concept, disappears" (Adorno 2018, 228). "[T]he constant and repeated ontologization of the ontic moment" (83), in other words, comes quite close to the confusion between everyday moments of miscommunication and the inhumanity of language that Neil Hertz objects to in de Man.

Heidegger, Adorno writes, is beholden to "[t]he chemically pure concept of philosophy," to "an unruined essence" at the expense of "that which has only been made and posited by men" (2003, 80). What this ontologisation forgets, for Adorno, is that "[i]n the universally mediated world," which happens to be the world in which humans live, "everything experienced in primary terms is culturally preformed" (81). And while there are good reasons to want to break out of this cultural container—in order, for instance, to give nonhuman agents their due—such a journey, for better or worse, starts from *within* a cultural horizon: Adorno writes that:

[w]hoever wants the other has to start with the immanence of culture, in order to break out through it. But fundamental ontology gladly spares itself that, by pretending it has a starting point somewhere outside. In that way such ontology succumbs to cultural mediations all the more; they recur as social aspects of that ontology's own purity. (Adorno 2003, 81)

Failing to acknowledge the ineluctable social and cultural aspects of the encounter between the human and the nonhuman, Adorno warns, will lead to the mindless projection of one's all too human perspective on the

nonhuman world. Such a position that “embezzles its own cultural mediation” is not less inescapably human but is fatally less self-aware about its own limitations (80).

The exchange between Hertz and de Man and the ideas of Adorno hold a lesson for our current moment, when materialist and object-oriented returns to things proliferate. For all their differences, these theories have one thing right: they strive to overcome the constructionist fallacy that holds that, because all of the nonhuman world is now affected and *marked* by human actions, it is therefore also *constituted* by human action. As Andreas Malm has tirelessly argued, as humans we *encounter* nature, we do not *produce* it (2017, 42). Yet new materialisms and object-oriented ontologies alike tend to forget the *human half* of that encounter: the fact that, for better or worse, we humans can only ever encounter nonhuman entities from within a human horizon. As Adorno argues, that forgetting ends up reintroducing “cultural mediations” and “social aspects” in unexpected places.

The clearest index of this unconscious projection of social and cultural elements on the nonhuman world is that these theoretical developments tend to imagine the nonhuman world in weirdly human, even liberal, terms. In the *object-oriented ontology* of people like Graham Harman and Timothy Morton, for instance, objects have the (all too human) capacity to withdraw from their relations to other objects and to introvert themselves. Things never fully surrender themselves in their encounters with humans, nor in their encounters with one another: “the inner aspect of the object [...] is forever withdrawn from the sensuous domain” (Gratton 2014, 100). What is this if not the projection of a liberal vision of privacy, a belief that the core of our personal lives will be immune from interference? In Jane Bennett’s *vibrant materialism*, all agents, whether they are humans, electric transmitters, or, in one of her most famous examples, the fatty acid Omega-3, have the capacity to freely choose to engage—or not engage—with other things, as if they were happy liberals exercising their freedom of choice. As Thomas Lemke has noted, Bennett’s extension of the category of the actor to the nonhuman world “still buys into the liberal concept of agency that sees it as a property of individual entities, focusing on will, freedom and choice” (2018, 41). The *material ecocriticism* of Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann might offer the clearest instance where a desire to access the purity of the nonhuman world results in a blindness to the all too human characteristics that get smuggled into the nonhuman world, and ultimately ends up flattening and

homogenising the diversity of that world. For Iovino and Oppermann, matter has the power to tell stories: things are “undeniably expressive” and “have their own stories to tell” (Oppermann 2018, 9), and this turns the world into “a site of narrativity, a storied matter, a corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed” (Iovino 2012, 451). And when material interactions can be imagined as producing meaning, it is only a small step to imagine ecological interactions as cosmic conversations: Iovino and Oppermann write that “the world’s phenomena are segments of a conversation between human and manifold nonhuman beings” (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 4). The result is an image of the world as a polite cosmic dinner conversation. Such an image is conspicuously liberal, as it projects a fantasy of an infinitely patient dialogue between tolerant and generous conversation partners onto the nonhuman world.

These paradigms officially claim to move *beyond* the humanist belief in human singularity, yet they often turn out to be “ultra-humanisms” (Colebrook 2014, 162) in that they metaphorically extend human attributes to nonhuman entities. The problem with this anthropomorphic operation is not the anthropomorphism as such: anthropomorphism is arguably unavoidable when we try to imagine nonhuman worlds, and it might even be strategically useful, as Jane Bennett notes when she writes that “[w]e need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism [...] to [...] uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances” (2010, xvi, 99). The problem with such projections of liberal fantasies of privacy, of freedom of choice, and of polite conversation is the same as with all liberal fantasies: they remain blind to material constraints, to power differences between people, to the possibility of abuse, and therefore to the true complexity of the human-nonhuman interactions that make up our world—a complexity not exhausted by “resonances and resemblances,” but also involving dissonances and differences. The Hertz-de Man dialogue and Adorno suggest that a more multidimensional and dynamic analysis of the interactions between humans and nonhumans could begin by resisting the inflated category of the nonhuman, and instead bringing an awareness of cultural and social mediation to more patient descriptions of the human-nonhuman interactions that make up the world. In the next section, I exemplify such an approach through a comparative reading of three literary texts that are obsessed with the tense encounters between the human and the nonhuman worlds. Through these readings, literature emerges as a place where more complex and multidirectional accounts of the entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies are recorded. The nonhuman,

far from emerging as a robust reality, becomes visible as an unstable moment in process of de-, re-, and inhumanisation.

LITERATURE AT THE LIMITS OF THE HUMAN: THE AFTERLIVES OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM¹

When we consider the literary history of nonhuman agency, the Antarctic takes a special place. Antarctica has always been a challenge to literature's customary work of humanisation: not only does it lack an Indigenous population (and thus an Indigenous literature), but the relentless blankness of the landscape's ice and snow is dispiriting at best. Antarctica's featureless wasteland has, in the words of one critic, inspired "a history of negative discovery, a hermeneutics of despair" (Wilson 2004, 37). One imaginative strategy for coping with such despondency has been the projection of lurid images onto Antarctica's blank screen: the literature of Antarctica is marked by a proliferation of vortices and giant lodestars, of polar holes leading to an interior earth, sometimes all the way to the North Pole, and of "Lost race" fantasies (Leane 2016, 34, 46). Such sensational figures convert the Antarctic into an affective space, a space that conveys the darker aspects of the traditional sublime—obscurity, vastness, isolation—without quite allowing the human mind to recover from the traumatic impact of the encounter with the continent's nonhuman surfaces. To the extent that Antarctica is a place that has consistently rebuffed attempts at colonisation and integration in a globalised world (Siskind 2005), the literature of Antarctica is a privileged place to explore the *limit* of the human's world-making capacities. The three texts I consider here try out different genres to capture the nonhuman reality of the Antarctic, yet they all end up *failing to find* either *a sustainable relation between the human and the nonhuman* or *a generic template that is particularly conducive to welcoming the nonhuman*. My final point will be that this failure preserves the nonhuman world as something strange—not as some putative stable, charismatic ontological substance but as something fatally entangled with processes of de-, re-, and inhumanisation.

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket, Edgar Allan Poe's only novel from 1838, is a novel of the early Anthropocene: its eponymous narrator sets out on a maritime adventure as a stowaway on a

¹The material in this section is adapted from Pieter Vermeulen. *Literature and the Anthropocene*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020, 66–72.

whaling ship, but after a mutiny and a shipwreck, he enthusiastically joins the *Jane Guy*, the ship that rescues him, on an obsessive mission to map and cultivate the land and subdue the native population of Tsalal, an Antarctic isle. Unsurprisingly, the combination of scientific interest and colonial ambition, of exploration and exploitation, is reflected in the novel's obsession with race, and its almost hysterical insistence on clear contrasts between white and black. The Indigenous population's complexion is "jet black"; they are clothed "in skins of an unknown black animal" (Poe 1999, 163–164); in a startling detail, even their teeth turn out to be black (216). In one of the novel's many bewildering inconsistencies, the narrator's companion, Dirk Peters, is initially described as a monstrous creature "with an indentation on the crown (like that on the head of most negroes)" (49), before Poe decides to forget this portrayal and reinvent Peters as a white character. The novel ends with the narrator fleeing the insurgent natives—whose shrieks of "*Tekeli-li!*" fill the sky—on the "wide and desolate Antarctic Ocean" (211) and being miraculously saved by "a shrouded human figure" whose skin colour, we read in the novel's very last words (before a long endnote that adds further confusion), "was of the perfect whiteness of the snow" (217).

Poe's baffling story activates several generic frames, none of them traditionally realist ones. The book announces itself as a sensational adventure story (the title page presents a breathless summary of the plot, culminating in "incredible adventures and discoveries STILL FARTHER SOUTH" [title page]); in the narrator's time as a stowaway hiding below deck, it exploits the claustrophobia of gothic fiction; after the shipwreck, it becomes a shipwreck narrative, including the horrors of cannibalism; setting sail farther south, it morphs into a diary-like combination of a scientific report (which Poe cobbled together from existing stories) and travelogue. In the end, none of these frames quite fit or last, and it is the mismatch between the different frames, together with the maddeningly unequal pacing of the narrative and the factual inaccuracies, that best conveys the sense of disorientation that disturbs the novel's world-building. Neither the familiar emotive scenarios of trauma nor the sublime quite come off: the perfectly white *deus ex machine* is surely sublime, but it is also quite ludicrous. Arthur Pym, for his part, is a remarkably untraumatised character (Wilson 2004, 40): he mentions his cannibalism matter-of-factly ("Let it suffice to say that ... we devoured the rest of the body piecemeal" [Poe 1999, 117]) and insists that the horrors of shipwreck have not left him emotionally scarred: "[t]he incidents are remembered,

but not the feelings which the incidents elicited at the time of their occurrence" (136).

The different generic frames the novel tries on fail to programme particular emotive scenarios, but this does not mean that the sensation of the mismatch between these templates conveys a robust sense of the geological realities of Antarctica. Indeed, the novel spectacularly misses the signs of geological agency it nevertheless intimates. Confronted with the irregular cavities and protuberances of a chasm on the Antarctic island, Arthur Pym makes a number of drawings of their structure (reproduced in the book) that resemble alphabetical characters, bringing the novel to speculate that "the hieroglyphical appearance was really the work of art" (220) and to assign authorship to an ethnic group combining knowledge of Ethiopian, Egyptian, and Arabian characters (220). Far from a confrontation with nonhuman agency, then, this points to a failure to even imagine geological action.

This is even more apparent when geological events are captured in overtly racist terms. When the protagonist escapes from the isle in the midst of a volcanic eruption, the novel describes this geological phenomenon as a racial battle between black and white: the water is "of a milky consistency and hue" as "[t]he white ashy material fell now continually around [them], and in vast quantities" (215–216), until the mysterious white figure liberates them from "[a] sullen darkness" overtaking "the milky depths of the ocean" (217). Earlier on, the novel presents what may very well be a geological event as an unexpected attack by the natives. It notes that "the channel or bed of [the] gorge was entirely filled up with the chaotic ruins of more than a million tons of earth and stone," but rather than seeing this as the outcome of a geological process, the novel aggressively overlays this interpretation with its racist imaginary as it concludes that the earth and stones "had been artificially tumbled within it" (187). "[A] partial rupture of the soil," the novel concludes, must be the work of the savages using cords to acquire "a vast leverage" (188). The certainty of black mendacity, for Poe, obscures the insight into geological agency, as such an insight would threaten the colonial posture of mastery Arthur Pym has come to adopt and for which the novel never quite finds the right genre. Rather than offering an encounter with the nonhuman, then, Poe's novel ends offering insight in the intimate relationship between the allure of the nonhuman and the reality of racist dehumanisation. It suggests that the desire for a reality—like Antarctica, like geological processes—unmediated by human action is implicated with the drive to

establish hierarchies of life in which some forms of life are privileged and promoted while others are denigrated and dehumanised. Poe's novel, that is, reveals the deep connection between what Kathryn Yusoff has called "the geophysics of being" and "colonial violence" (2018, 11).

Yann Martel's 2001 success novel *Life of Pi* remixes many of the elements of Poe's novel, even if it abandons that novel's fascination with the South Pole. *Arthur Gordon Pym* prefigures the Anthropocene imagination by projecting an oblique and deeply colonial terraforming fantasy onto the natives; *Life of Pi* explores the possibilities and liabilities of a lifeboat scenario. The novel tells the story of Pi, an Indian boy who loses his parents in a shipwreck that leaves him stranded on a raft with the few remaining animals from his parents' zoo. After the death of a hyena, a zebra, and an orangutan, most of the novel is devoted to the multispecies cohabitation of Pi and the tiger Richard Parker. "Richard Parker" is the name of the cannibalism victim in Poe's novel (as well as of two [!] real-life cannibalism victims that postdate Poe's novel), while "Tiger" is the name of the dog accompanying Arthur Pym when hiding as a stowaway. Nor do the echoes of Poe's novel end there: apart from the two novels' elaborate metatextual frames, there is, for instance, the paradisiacal island on which Pi arrives and that turns out to be a massive carnivorous organism—"a free-floating organism, a ball of algae of leviathan proportions" (Martel 2001, 271–272)—which borrows the horror and treacherousness of Poe's Tsalal.

Life of Pi makes it very clear that the cohabitation of tiger and human being is not a starry-eyed return to nature but a matter of careful life management. Indeed, Pi's painstaking chronicling of his interactions with the tiger recalls the novel's earlier celebration of the zoo as an institution that *liberates* animals from a life of "compulsion and necessity within an unforgiving social hierarchy" in the wild (16). Such careful management, the novel notes, is necessary to "*Keep Him [the tiger] Alive*" (166) and to keep the multispecies lifeboat—including microbes, bacteria, and "a multitude of sea life" (197)—afloat. As Eva Horn has shown, lifeboat imaginaries induce a situation of scarcity in which decisions about life and death assert themselves with tragic force (2013, 1000–1001). *Life of Pi* invites such considerations of life and death, but its magic realist mode allows it to entertain the possibility that a radical decision can be indefinitely postponed. Genre here functions as a strategy for enchantment, not as a conduit for sensation (as it does in Poe); but as in Poe, it serves to *evade* rather than confront nonhuman agency.

The last part of the novel brutally undoes that evasion as it admits the inevitability of violence and death, only to end up performing another gesture of avoidance. This last part presents an interview between two insurance officials, working for the Japanese Maritime Department, and the older Pi. These officials refuse to believe Pi's fantastic story, and Pi responds by replacing it with a horrific account without animal actors, in which a shipwrecked Pi witnesses acts of cannibalism and the beheading of his mother, after which he himself kills the French cook who murdered his mother. The implication is clear: the story that has entertained us for almost 400 pages is a displaced version of a deeply traumatic experience, a coping strategy through which Pi survives traumatic loss. What seemed like a fabulous encounter with the nonhuman world is part of a psychologically realist scenario of coping with human violence—with, we could say, the *inhuman* rather than the *nonhuman* dimension of life. The end of the novel, in other words, reinstates the generic conventions of realism, most notably psychological and traumatic realism, to make sense of the strangeness of the preceding novel. This strangeness, featuring weirdly subdued tigers and meat-eating islands, is ultimately thoroughly rehumanised. As in *Arthur Gordon Pym*, the novel ultimately fails to fit the nonhuman world into a generic pattern; instead, it tells a thoroughly human story of the inhuman violence lurking in all of us.

Mat Johnson's 2011 comic novel *Pym* spins another affective and tonal variation on Poe's novel. Mainly a satire of contemporary identity politics, *Pym*'s unashamed ludicrousness qualifies it as what Mark McGurl has called a work of "posthuman comedy" (2012): a farcical engagement with human life's diminishing stature in the order of things. Chris Haynes, an unsuccessful black professor of American literature, discovers that Dirk Peters, Arthur Pym's monstrous (and magically whitened) companion in Poe's novel, actually existed. He organises an expedition to recover the all-black island of Tsalal, which, in the context of contemporary identity politics, is no longer a site of dread (as it was for Poe) but a "great undiscovered African Diasporan homeland, uncorrupted by Whiteness" (Johnson 2012, 39). Except it isn't: Poe's sublime figure of whiteness has spawned a population of white monsters who enslave Haynes's all-black crew to do mining work underneath the permafrost of Antarctica, until Haynes manages to escape to the "Dome of Light," a biodome designed by Thomas Karvel (a transparent satire of American kitsch painter Thomas Kinkade, the self-declared "Painter of Light™") and inhabited by humans rather than white monsters. The novel's irreverent tone, even when

dealing with such issues as genocide and extreme violence, underlines its ambition to avoid the clichés of Antarctic literature and debunk the heroism of “yet another polar epic of man succumbing to nature” (94). Neither sublime nor traumatic, *Pym* is appropriately preposterous.

Pym not only remixes the elements of Poe’s novel (even Pym is still alive after 200 years!), including its colour-coding; it also uses its satirical edge to target another Anthropocene fantasy: that of the self-contained and self-sustaining biodome. Biodomes are closed ecological systems that are supposedly independent from the outside world, even though the most famous of such experiments, that involving the so-called Biosphere 2 in the 1990s, was notoriously unsuccessful. And so it is in Johnson’s novel: life in the biodome is accompanied by the continuous drone of the fossil fuel-driven engines keeping the dome warm and liveable. The novel shows the idea of a “good” and clean Anthropocene at a remove from racialised slavery to be an illusion; it also shows that literature and art, in the guise of Karvel’s design of the dome (for which he even painted the sky), might be complicit in rendering uncomfortable realities invisible and keeping the world comfortably human-centred. The novel remarks that Karvel’s world “seemed a place where black people couldn’t even exist, so thorough was its European romanticization” (184). Indeed, the novel’s flippant recycling of familiar tropes of Antarctic literature (lost tribes, underground civilisations, purported utopias) demonstrates that Antarctica is less a nonhuman outside to culture than a thoroughly mediated imaginative site. The novel suggests that the notion of Antarctica as a blank surface outside of culture, as a place untainted by human destruction, is congruous with the obsession with white purity that is on display in Karvel’s painting and in Poe’s novel. As the novel notes, white people preserve their imagined whiteness by “refusing to accept blemish or history. Whiteness isn’t about being something, it is about being no thing, nothing, an erasure” (225). The allure of the nonhuman world, the novel suggests, is akin to a suspect desire for historical impunity and innocence.

CONCLUSION: LITERATURE AND THE DYNAMICS OF DE-/ RE-/IN-/NON-/ ...-HUMANISATION

The novels by Poe, Mantel, and Johnson all mobilise formal and thematic devices to capture the nonhuman world—whether that world is instantiated by the Antarctic, by geological processes, by monsters, or by animals.

All three end up situating the nonhuman world, and the desire for such a world, in morally and politically charged processes of de-, re-, and inhumanisation that highlight the human capacity for violence. Cumulatively, they make clear that the fundamental entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies does not detract from the exceptional responsibility of human constituencies in addressing the environmental crisis; the fate of the nonhuman world and peak humanity need to be thought together. Through their emphasis on diversity and specificity, they underline the need not only to pluralise the nonhuman world and to deontologise the nonhuman, but also to explode the falsely unifying “Anthropos” of the Anthropocene: all three novels show how some privileged constituencies bear a disproportional responsibility for environmental violence, while other disadvantaged groups often suffer its consequences most intensely. Rather than reified categories of “the human” and “the nonhuman,” grappling with the complexity of the Anthropocene requires situating these categories in multidirectional processes in which people and realities are rendered human, inhuman, nonhuman, more-than-human, and so on.

Pym’s climax emblematises literature’s capacity to stage such complex processes, as it presents the uneasy overlap between questions of race and climate change. The exhaust of the biodome’s engines threatens the life-world of the white monsters (a fear they refer to as “the Melt” [196]), and the novel’s protagonist provokes an attack by the monsters (slave holders as well as climate change victims!) on the dome to be able to escape. Escape, that is, depends on an act of genocide. The novel showcases literature’s capacity to bring together cultural, biological, geological, and ontological agencies and explore the overlaps and frictions between them. What the novels I have discussed cannot do is hypostatise, glamorise, and ontologise the nonhuman. Perhaps the nonhuman is simply not a category that applies to any stable reality. If Poe’s novel ends on a vision of splendid whiteness, *Pym* ends (equally abruptly) when the protagonist discerns what the last sentence refers to as “a collection of brown people, and this, of course, is a planet on which such are a majority” (Johnson 2012, 322). Brown evades the strict division between white and black, and it points beyond the destructive fantasy of a self-contained, monoracial community (Davis 2017, 42). This refusal of the “chemically pure” concept (to quote Adorno’s critique of Heidegger), of the “mysterious” (to quote Hertz’s critique of de Man), and of “the perfect whiteness of the snow” (to quote Poe’s racial fantasy) might be appropriate for the leaky ecologies in which human and nonhuman agents are entangled in the climate changed present.

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