



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 4, Issue 1

Summer 2021

M. P. Shiel, the Decadent Vortex, and Racial Anxiety

Neil Hultgren

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 June 2021

Date of Publication: 21 June 2021

Citation: Neil Hultgren, 'M. P. Shiel, the Decadent Vortex, and Racial Anxiety', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 4.1 (2021), 25–46.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v4i1.1506.g1619

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

M. P. Shiel, the Decadent Vortex, and Racial Anxiety¹

Neil Hultgren

California State University, Long Beach

Decadent literature is unique in that it purports to confront the realities of nature as it was imagined in the late nineteenth century – nature that, like language, had proven itself deaf to human concerns and unwilling to uphold its end of the mimetic bargain that the Romantics had struck with it. If nature had shifted, over the course of the nineteenth century, from Wordsworth’s nurturing and unbetraying presence to Tennyson’s harpy, then decadent writing registered this shift and attempted to make sense of the new identity of nature and the hard truths that accompanied it. Recent criticism by scholars such as Dennis Denisoff and Benjamin Morgan has explored the relationship between decadent literature and nature through an ecocritical lens, whether in relation to paganism (Denisoff) or scalar understandings of the globe (Morgan).² Amidst this recent convergence of ecocriticism and decadence, whether via what Denisoff describes as ‘Pagan animism and ritual de-individuation’ or what Morgan explores as a ‘spatial scaling-up’ of literature in discussions of global climate change, human subjectivity has, somewhat inevitably, slid into the background.³ Ecocriticism, in its efforts to think through the effects of human agency on climate change and imagine a future for the earth that is not based on humanity, has by necessity turned towards unique ways that science fiction and fantasy writers explored extended and collective kinds of subjectivity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Ursula K. Heise predicts that ‘The larger-than-life hero or single protagonist may decrease in importance, since epic-style narratives over the last century have tended to shift the major narrative actants from individual human characters to collective and sometimes nonhuman actors’.⁴

Yet the turn away from the single protagonist’s subjectivity risks our overlooking and ignoring some of the most potent aspects of the literature of the late nineteenth century, and, alternatively, ignoring variants of current ecologically oriented fiction that, like Jeff VanderMeer’s

Southern Reach trilogy (2014) and his *Borne* novels and novellas, are striking to readers in part because of the unique contortions of consciousness that they perform as narrators and characters struggle to conceive of a dynamic and unsettled planet. It is for this reason that M. P. Shiel's (pen-name of Matthew Phipps Shiel, 1865-1947) apocalyptic 'last man' novel, *The Purple Cloud* (1901), alongside some of his other works of the late nineteenth century, is worthy of additional attention. While Shiel clearly draws on literary techniques such as the sublime, pathetic fallacy, and what would later be called cosmic horror to represent nature, his work is not reducible to any of these different techniques, and it frequently foils – whether deliberately or not – our attempts to disentangle human consciousness from the planet.⁵ Shiel's late-Victorian texts explore the ways in which the earth is frequently used as a marker to delimit human consciousness and, even more clearly, to mark the demise of subjectivity, the limit at which subjectivity becomes impossible.

Shiel, Poe, and the Whirlpool

The hydrological phenomenon of the whirlpool, while not representative of all complicated intersections of human subjectivity with the terrestrial in Shiel's oeuvre, serves as a fascinating example of the ways that Shiel's texts entangle conceptions of the human with the non-human world. Since at least Walter Pater's 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance* (1873), decadent writing has been fascinated by the notion of flux and change which has, in certain cases, been connected to one specific phenomenon of such flux, the whirlpool. Pater opens his conclusion by commenting that our 'physical life is a perpetual motion' of natural elements: 'the passage of the blood, the waste and repairing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tissues of the brain under every ray of light and sound'.⁶ When Pater turns to describing 'the inward world of thought and feeling', he comments that 'the whirlpool is still more rapid, the flame more eager and devouring'.⁷ Because the flux of blood and brain tissue emerges in Pater's prose prior to the whirlpool of thought and feeling, Pater implies that the experiences of consciousness align with material

corporeal processes, while the whirlpool reference suggests that the earth provides the metaphors that in part enable this alignment.

Shiel's background made him especially sensitive to such metaphors. As a writer born on the Caribbean island of Montserrat, home to the Soufrière Hills subduction volcano, Shiel grew up in an environment where devouring flames and unsettling earthquakes were as likely to be a part of lived experience as they were metaphors for physical, mental, and emotional processes. In one version of his autobiographical portrait, 'About Myself', Shiel described the 'passionate woes', 'despondent manias', and 'tantrums' of Montserrat's vulcanism, observing pithily, '[n]o one born in such a place can be quite sane'.⁸ Shiel's works do not simply remind readers that water and flame have physical existence outside of our minds; they suggest that water and flame can represent the collapse of human consciousness just as much as they can represent its vivid life. The *Oxford English Dictionary* sheds light on the figurative power of hydrology in depicting mental states during the nineteenth century, as it cites Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1836) as the first example in which *maelstrom* refers not to a literal whirlpool but to '[a]ny state of turbulence or confusion; a swirling mass of small objects'; Carlyle describes Teufelsdröckh's laugh as a 'billow in that vast world-Mahlstrom of Humour', a phrase that, given the history of the word *humour*, may or may not pertain to a discussion of something more abstract than liquid.⁹ As both the example from Pater and the *Oxford English Dictionary's* entry on the word *maelstrom* indicate, nineteenth-century British scholars were in part responsible for the expansion of the whirlpool and vortex beyond the hydrological phenomena into psychological metaphor.

The whirlpool is a unique hydrological phenomenon in part because, even in places where whirlpools are known to form, they are temporary. Brief in terms of human time, they are intermittent and transitory, appearing and disappearing in ways we can see. Observers of whirlpools may emphasize their predictable and periodic circular movement, yet witnesses also note the violence and disorientation they create in those who may be caught up in their motions. Within the late Victorian period, the whirlpool both hearkens back to the sublime stupefaction

provoked by cataracts and mountaintops in Romantic writing and anticipates the turn towards geometric abstraction in the work of the Vorticists.¹⁰ Whirlpools as vertical phenomena also serve as gateways not simply to death and destruction but to the depths of the sea and, in certain imaginative works, to the interior of the earth itself. Though nature writer Robert Macfarlane notes that Edgar Allan Poe's description of the whirlpool in 'A Descent into the Maelström' (1841) is 'nautically preposterous', he acknowledges that 'Poe's story partook of widespread nineteenth-century fascination with the idea of an actual global underland to which certain entrance points existed'.¹¹ In a way that unintentionally echoes Shiel's writing, Macfarlane also notes that the actual maelstrom near the Lofoten Islands does not resemble a funnel but that its 'rough circle' connects to 'lines of foam' similar to 'the arms of a spiral galaxy'.¹² As Shiel adopts the mythical funnel shape of the whirlpool from Poe, he anticipates Macfarlane in imagining correspondences among the revolutions of the whirlpool and other revolutions in nature. Shiel does not reference the structure of the galaxy, but he frequently implies ways in which the circular motion of a whirlpool might suggest planetary motions, most notably the earth's rotation. Whirlpools sit at the intersection of the terrestrial and the galactic, concrete and the abstract, imaginable and the unimaginable, interior and exterior, and mental and physical. Within decadent literature – a kind of writing dependent on analogies of the human mind, the literary work, language, and the so-called natural world – the whirlpool signals both the necessity and instability of such analogies, and at the same time reminds us of the sometimes logical and sometimes arbitrary switching points between different discourses related to decadence.

While much has been written about geographic and geologic phenomena in Shiel's writing,¹³ critics have had less to say about the recurrence of the whirlpool in Shiel's fiction. Yet not only was Shiel's work part of the understanding of the whirlpool I describe here, but it was also a way in which anxieties about race were interwoven with fears of mental disintegration and the dynamic nature of the earth. Though *The Purple Cloud* offers perhaps the most sophisticated sense of the whirlpool as a central structure for the contemplation of the intersection between the

natural world, human subjectivity, and racial difference, Shiel's fiction of the 1890s had relied on the whirlpool both as a plot device and as a vehicle for metaphysical speculation. His April 1895 story in the *Pall Mall Magazine*, 'Huguenin's Wife', one of the first that Harold Billings connects to Shiel's turn towards supernatural fiction,¹⁴ concludes with the revelation that the soul of the narrator's friend's wife has transmigrated into a murderous feathered cheetah. A storm and an undefined geological catastrophe accompany this revelation, such that the story's setting, the island of Delos, disconnects from the earth's crust and begins, allegedly, to float. The narrator observes the geologic events that bring this about: 'a multitude of deep, smooth, conical openings, edged with grey, glowing scoriae'; he notes that '[t]he deep, – without billow or foam or ripple – luminous far down with phosphorescences – rushed, like some lambent lamina yoked to the fiery steeds of Diomedes [...] towards the island.'¹⁵ Through description so ornate that it becomes vague, this passage depicts the collapse in the earth's crust followed by rushing water. In Shiel's 1896 Viking story for *Cassell's Family Magazine*, 'The Spectre-Ship', the whirlpool is described more clearly and more closely resembles that of Poe's 'A Descent into the Maelström'. Gurth Hermodsson, the nephew of the Viking Sigurd, plots to usurp the Viking's position in his absence and marry Sigurd's young ward. At the story's climax, after Gurth has murdered the unsuspecting Sigurd, and the Viking's burial ship has been set ablaze and launched, the ship mysteriously pursues Gurth, ignites Gurth's ship, and forces the panicked Gurth to steer his own craft into 'one of the huge whirlpools which swirl in frothy frenzy' off the coast of Norway.¹⁶ The whirlpool removes the villain from the story and from the known world, reestablishes the social order in which Sigurd's ward marries his son, and, by completing the pursuit of Gurth by the burial ship, fulfils a seer's prophecy that Gurth must 'beware of the dead'.¹⁷ The whirlpool is Shiel's tool for bringing his story to a close and providing its plot with a melodramatic conclusion.

Shiel's 'Vaila', part of the second short story collection he published in John Lane's Keynote series, *Shapes in the Fire* (1896), aligns the Norwegian setting of 'The Spectre-Ship' with the ornately incoherent geology of 'Huguenin's Wife'. Located on the island of Vaila off the

Norwegian coast, the ancestral home of the narrator's friend, Harfager, sits at a confluence of lakes adjacent to the sea, surrounded by plunging waterfalls. In the climax of the story, when Harfager's mother and aunt perish and Harfager himself descends into madness, a nearby tempest causes the chains that hold the palace to the island to snap and the entire mansion begins revolving. The narrator's reaction to the revolving Norwegian abode initially mimics Harfager's ecstasy at the fulfilment of an age-old prophecy that portends his family's destruction, but it quickly turns to horror as, in a moment reminiscent of Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), the narrator escapes just in time to witness the mansion's collapse.

The whirlpool also appears in two longer works penned by Shiel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *The Yellow Danger* (1898), Shiel's excessive take on the invasion novel genre, a Norwegian whirlpool again appears, this time to eliminate the antagonists of the story at its dénouement, though what was the fulfilment of a prophecy in 'The Spectre-Ship' becomes here a self-conscious act of genocide perpetrated by the British naval hero, John Hardy. Before Hardy infects with cholera 150 million Chinese warriors who have invaded continental Europe, he decides he must execute twenty million Chinese prisoners of war who have been captured on barges just prior to invading the British Isles. Hardy's fleet tows the twenty million warriors to Norway and consigns them to the maelstrom, where they are consumed and, from the perspective of the novel, disappear.¹⁸ Published three years later, *The Purple Cloud* avoids the direct representation of Norwegian whirlpools, though it frequently draws on the rotational frenzy displayed at the conclusion of 'Vaila' and reimagines the violent whirlpools of the earlier stories as an eerie 'circular clean-cut lake' of wheeling fluid that the protagonist, doctor, and eventual explorer, Adam Jeffson, finds at the North Pole.¹⁹

Shiel's whirlpools take on extra resonance in relation to his significant debt to Poe's fiction. Shiel first encountered Poe's works when he was seventeen, and, though he later downplayed their significance, they impacted nearly every aspect of his artistic output.²⁰ Three of Poe's works anticipate Shiel's representations of whirlpools. Poe's early story, 'MS Found in a Bottle' (1833),

culminates with its unnamed narrator, a passenger on the ancient ghost ship, *Discovery*, ‘plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool’ in a storm at the South Pole.²¹ Poe’s only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), ends with an event that echoes the fate of the *Discovery*, though it is less precise in its rendering of actual hydrological phenomena: after a lengthy and increasingly bizarre journey, Pym reaches the South Pole and, before sighting an ambiguous white figure, encounters a ‘chasm’ and a ‘cataract’.²² The conclusion of *Arthur Gordon Pym* unites representations of race and hydrological phenomena. Poe’s most detailed rendering of a whirlpool, however, locates the phenomenon not at the South Pole but nearer to the North, as a fisherman tells the narrator about his near demise in a whirlpool that periodically forms off the Norwegian coast in ‘A Descent into the Maelström’. Poe’s exactitude in locating the story – the fisherman is noted for his ‘particularizing manner’ – places it at 68 degrees latitude near the Lofoten islands, a detail that Shiel would later make more particular when noting in *The Yellow Danger* that the British leave the barges of Chinese prisoners in the whirlpool miles north of 67 degrees and 48 minutes latitude.²³ Unlike the narrator of ‘MS Found in a Bottle’, Poe’s fisherman survives to detail the nuances of his psychological experience: his awe about the vortex as ‘a manifestation of God’s power’, ‘amusement in speculating upon the relative velocities’ of objects floating in the whirlpool, and elements of horror, though the horror is largely experienced by his brother, also a fisherman, who dies partly because the experience makes him ‘a raving maniac through sheer fright.’²⁴ ‘A Descent into the Maelström’ is Poe’s most cerebral examination of strange hydrological phenomena, but it is also, of the three works described here, the most vivid example of what Matthew A. Taylor calls the ‘posthuman ecology’ of Poe’s writing, or its ‘radical, often fearful decomposing of normative conceptions of discrete humanity and bounded individual identity’.²⁵

Bestial Subjects in a Vortical Universe

The posthuman ecology that Taylor describes, with its ‘fearful decomposing’, might be understood as gaining traction and prominence in the late nineteenth century, long after Poe’s death, because

of Darwin's discoveries and the 'basic scientific reality' that Allen MacDuffie, in his discussion of Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), sees as accompanying such reality: 'the dwarfing vistas of Deep Time, the corporeality of human consciousness, the inevitable extinction of the species, life, the planet itself'.²⁶ In *The Purple Cloud*, however, Shiel's storytelling locates posthuman horror not in the vast swathes of temporality that become observable due to time travel but in one of the novel's more mystical moments as Adam Jeffson finally reaches the North Pole as part of a worldwide competition for a cash prize. Having murdered some crewmates and abandoned others, Jeffson reaches the Pole to find a circular lake that frightens him because it is sexualized and apparently in pain:

The lake, I fancy, must be a mile across, and in its middle is a pillar of ice, very low and broad; and I had the clear impression, or dream, or notion, that there was a name, or word, graven all round in the ice of the pillar in characters which I could never read; and under the name a long date; and the fluid of the lake seemed to me to be wheeling with a shivering ecstasy, splashing and fluttering, round the pillar, always from west to east, in the direction of the spinning of the earth; and it was borne in upon me – I can't at all say how – that this fluid was the substance of a living creature; and I had the distinct fancy, as my senses failed, that it was a creature with many dull and anguished eyes, and that, as it wheeled for ever round in fluttering lust, it kept its eyes always turned upon the name and the date graven in the pillar. But this must be my madness... (p. 41).

What Jeffson sees is as jarring as his narration is unreliable. Though this is one of the book's most distinctive examples of the supernatural, which could potentially mitigate or ignore MacDuffie's 'basic scientific reality', its only consolations come from a suggestion that some entity capable of written language – whether a divinity or a person from a previous civilization – has left its inscription on the pillar or constructed a lake that is 'clear-cut', details that could allude, according to John Sutherland, to Theosophist Helena Blavatsky's occult imaginings of the Pole (pp. xxiv-xxv, 274). Yet the fluid that surrounds the pillar is the more frightening and disturbing part of the description because it is the first in a series of episodes in *The Purple Cloud* in which the protagonist and the planet appear caught in a mimetic relationship.

The fluid, or at the least animate characteristics Jeffson discovers in the fluid – its ecstasy, the sense that it has 'dull and anguished eyes', and the notion that it 'wheel[s] in 'fluttering lust' –

suggest a surge of pained and sexualized energies almost akin to the Freudian libido and its reliance on dynamic drives and vectors of desire. The fluid seems to have fallen prey to overwhelming emotion, and the narrative record's signals of its own potential unreliability compound the cathetic instability of the fluid. Narrative turmoil accompanies the fluid, which is not explicitly described as water. Monique Morgan has, in her discussion of the genre of *The Purple Cloud*, determined that Jeffson exhibits traits of an unreliable narrator; she highlights how he suffers from delusions and she observes that his narrative includes significant gaps in time between what he experiences and the narrative recording and accounting of such experiences.²⁷ In terms of the unfolding of Jeffson's narrative and the features of his unreliability, his experience at the Pole is a moment of fracture. Before his experience at the Pole, Jeffson is unreliable because, to use the terminology provided by narratologist James Phelan, he 'underregard[s]' his own knowledge and desires related to the murderous actions that he takes or condones as he competes to become the first person to arrive at the North Pole.²⁸ In his descriptions of phenomena at the Pole, he moves into the realm of what Phelan calls 'misreporting' when readers begin to suspect that polar visions are inaccurate.²⁹ Such suspicions are not merely driven by the oddity of, for instance, fluid 'wheeling with a shivering ecstasy', but by the fact that the form of the text is marked by frequent qualifying interjections. A perception opens itself to doubt when the person experiencing it describes it as 'a distinct fancy' that occurred 'as my senses failed'. Similarly, Jeffson observes the name or word on the pillar at the centre of the lake as part of what he describes as 'the clear impression, or dream, or notion', phrasing that suggests significant slippage from distinct perception to oneiric fantasy. The paragraph form also breaks with the convention set by Shiel's novel. While *The Purple Cloud* is an amorphous literary work, notable for having no chapter breaks beyond 'Forward' and 'The Purple Cloud', the description of Jeffson's arrival at the Pole is especially fragmentary, as paragraph breaks are joined by more frequent section breaks and specially asterisked section breaks, such as one that comes after Jeffson 'dropped down flat in

swoon' (p. 40). Jeffson's initiation into the occult knowledge of the earth is accompanied by an accelerated collapse of his narrative authority and reliability.

John Sutherland's edition of *The Purple Cloud* connects this moment to the cryptic conclusion of Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* in a way that is persuasive (p. 274), but the moment is also entirely unique given that Shiel does not end his narrative here. Instead, Jeffson's mental unrest and unreliability proliferate until he begins his work on his palace many pages later. The image of the fluid in the circular lake persists in the narrator's mind as he begins his journey southward: 'What I had seen, or dreamed, at the Pole followed and followed me' while 'in my spinning dark dreams spun that eternal ecstasy of the lake' (pp. 44, 45). Jeffson later notes, when he comes upon his ship, the *Boreal*, which he believes will allow him first contact with humans since his discovery, '[f]rom the day when I stood at the Pole, and saw there the dizzy thing that made me swoon, there had come into my way not one sign or trace that other beings like myself were alive on the earth with me' (p. 62). Jeffson's speculations about his Polar confusion continue even later into the novel, when he questions the structure of the earth more broadly and wonders, 'that thing that wheeled at the Pole, wheels it still yonder, yonder, in its dark ecstasy?' (p. 156).

The Pole's inland lake and its supernatural features are both drawn from Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1888),³⁰ but Shiel also connects them to debates within physics during the second half of the Victorian period. Most suggestive in Jeffson's description is the word *fluid*, which he employs for the weirdly animate rotating liquid. The references to fluid point to Victorian theories of the structure of the universe premised on ether and atoms, as well as the debt of these theories to hydrodynamics. William Thomson (later Lord Kelvin) adapted Hermann von Helmholtz's idea of 'an absolutely unalterable quality in the motion of any portion of a perfect liquid' in his 1867 paper, 'On Vortex Atoms'.³¹ Thomson hypothesized that the entire universe was comprised of a mechanical, frictionless ether in which atoms were sites of vortex motion. He opened his paper with the use of the German word, derived from Helmholtz, 'wirbel-bewegung', which can be loosely translated to mean whirl-movement.³² Thomson's theory of vortex atoms was, for the

initial two decades following the publication of his paper, a Victorian ‘theory of everything’.³³ Though Shiel does not directly refer to Thomson in *The Purple Cloud*, the whirling fluid that Jeffson encounters at the Pole suggests at least partial awareness of Thomson’s paper and its reference to Helmholtz’s ‘wirbel-bewegung’. Thomson’s vortex atoms had interested intellectuals and imaginative writers who wanted to question increasingly materialist conceptions of the universe. Theories of vortex atoms proved attractive to religious scientists like Balfour Stewart and Peter Guthrie Tait, whose book *The Unseen Universe* was published in 1875, and to Madame Blavatsky, who quoted *The Unseen Universe* in *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and cited Thomson’s article in *The Secret Doctrine*.³⁴ Yet if the permanent fluid motions involved in the vortex theory of atoms allowed one to speculate that some sort of divine cause was once responsible for setting them in motion and prompted *Popular Science Monthly* to assert of the theory, ‘when its adaptability to occult as well as to plainer properties of matter are considered, we need not wonder that it has been thought so beautiful that “it deserves to be true”’,³⁵ Shiel’s take on vortex motion as the secret of the earth replaces belief with confusion. A sense of beauty falls prey to Jeffson’s ‘horrid thrill’ (p. 41). Jeffson’s response to the unsettling site of the vortex at the North Pole is to imitate its motion, motion that he notes corresponds to that of the planet: ‘my whole being reeled and toppled drunken, like a spinning-top in desperate death-struggle at the moment when it flags, and wobbles dissolutely to fall’ (p. 41).

Shiel’s text aligns the movement of the planet, the movement of Jeffson, and, implicitly the vortex motion structuring the universe not with enchantment, but with degeneration. As the team of explorers on the *Boreal* nears the Pole, Jeffson observes that the area above the 89th parallel ‘is a cursed region – beyond doubt cursed – not meant to be penetrated by man: and rapid and awful was the degeneration of our souls’ (p. 37). He notes the ‘selfish brutishness’ of himself and the crew (p. 37). The sense of degeneration at the Pole is echoed in Jeffson’s subsequent desire to spin as he ‘wobbles dissolutely’ when he rotates his body before the clear-cut lake. The alignment of Jeffson’s revolving condition at the Pole with degeneration and dissolution reproduces a pattern

from his earlier tale, 'Vaila'. There Shiel associates hereditary decline with circular motion. When Harfager, the last of a cursed family line, begins to imitate his own revolving house, the narrator describes Harfager's animality and degeneracy: Harfager

sprang; stretched horizontal arms; and began to spin – dizzily! – in the same direction as the mansion! – nor less sleep-embathed! – with floating hair, and quivering cheeks, and the starting eye-balls of horror, and tongue that lolled like a panting wolf's from his bawling degenerate mouth.³⁶

The narrator's sense of his friend's revolutions leads him to turn away 'with the retching of loathing' and depart the palace.³⁷

Both the passage from 'Vaila' and the description of Jeffson's perceptions of the Pole in *The Purple Cloud* relate spinning and the mimicry of the earth's revolutions with conceptions of brutish personal and species decline. Given the reactions of the narrator of 'Vaila' and of Jeffson, the vortical motion of the universe is not only a source of theistic consolation as many contemporary reactions to the theory of vortex atoms would suggest, but also a concept that entailed the reduction of elements of human consciousness to repetition, trance, and unreliability. The revelation that Shiel associates with revolution is not one of transcendence, but one that suggests kinship with animals and inanimate matter. Shiel's rendering of the whirlpool also differs in its aesthetic response to Pater's 'Conclusion'. Unlike Pater, Shiel refuses to highlight the aesthetic opportunities of the vortex, but sees the whirlpool as violating the physical and psychic boundaries of the human.

Visions of Racial Transformation

Shiel's exploration of the decadent whirlpool in both *The Purple Cloud* and 'Vaila' also connects degeneration with race. Since the 1960s, readers of Shiel have acknowledged and debated the rhetoric of white supremacy that informs his texts.³⁸ The privileging of whiteness in his writing is the most striking in *The Yellow Danger* and less directly in *The Purple Cloud*. In these texts, the combination of disorientation and degeneration that Shiel associates with the whirlpool emerges

when Shiel represents individuals from outside Europe or, more narrowly, Western Europe. While the juxtaposition of a hydrological feature, the whirlpool, and a system of classifying human difference, race, seems on the surface to entail little logical connection, Shiel's background brings them together, as does recent ecocriticism informed by postcolonial and decolonial theory.

Shiel seems to have been aware of the distinctiveness of his own origins as a descendant of formerly enslaved African people and Irish immigrants on the British colony of Montserrat.³⁹ The ways in which he at times acknowledged and at others suppressed this history merits further investigation, but three significant patterns are worth noting here. First, Shiel justified his writing and his conduct in terms of the cultural and geographic uniqueness of his upbringing. When Shiel 'was convicted in 1914 of indecently assaulting and carnally knowing Dorothy Sircar', the twelve-year-old daughter of his then unmarried partner, Elizabeth Sircar, he tried to justify his innocence to publisher Grant Richards by noting that he was 'wildly non-English' and that he had been sexually active at the age of two or three.⁴⁰ In a different register, as I have mentioned above, he also associated the landscape of Montserrat with madness, creating a parallel between geological and mental tumult.

Second, Shiel identified himself with the white landowners of Montserrat from a young age, such that Harold Billings describes how he made 'a sharp distinction between his lighter family and the generally black mass of those in the West Indies removed just a few years from slavery'.⁴¹ This sense of distinctiveness from the less white inhabitants of Montserrat partly informs, for Billings, the 'development, expression, and occasionally attempted suppression of a vast megalomania' on Shiel's part.⁴² While I am unable to go so far as to make this diagnosis, Shiel did deny that he had 'Negro' blood and admitted that he was 'mixed' in the 1930s, in a way that may attempt to hide his hereditary connection to his paternal grandmother, who may have been an enslaved person.⁴³

Third and finally, Shiel wrote works in the 1890s and early 1900s that engaged with Darwinism, eugenics, and the construction of racial categories, often in relation to decadence.

William Svitavsky notes that Shiel's decadent fiction and his invasion thriller *The Yellow Danger* both engage with narratives of race, but he suggests that the conception of race in *The Yellow Danger* indicates a shift in thinking from his decadent writing: 'Where Shiel previously might have expressed a Decadent resignation at the decline of his race, he now [in *The Yellow Danger*] affirms a conviction of predestined racial greatness that is far more disturbing.'⁴⁴ It is not, however, entirely clear that Shiel's views changed with his turn to invasion fiction; it is also possible that he saw racist jingoism as a necessary component for invasion fiction or, alternatively, that the genre required him to represent more cultures outside of Europe; and his views of these cultures became more explicit.⁴⁵ Shiel's work displays a penchant for constructing racial allegories that attempt to resolve social and cultural conflicts. Less extreme than *The Yellow Danger*, Shiel's 1899 novel, *Contraband of War: A Tale of the Hispano-American Struggle*, centres on a distinction made by the Spanish sailor, aristocrat, and polymath, Immanuel Appadacca, that the world is 'at present in the hands of two chief races – the Latin and the Teutonic'; the book concludes with a seemingly predetermined 'victory for the Saxon' (here aligned with the Teutonic) and a harmonious coexistence between Appadacca and his counterpart from the United States, Dick P. Hocking.⁴⁶ The book refers to this coexistence as a '[m]arriage [...] between the Saxon and the Latin'.⁴⁷ As a figure whose naval prowess is complemented by his love of art and beauty, Appadacca at one point plays a 'dark-hued violin' and arranges and examines his collection of gemstones during a naval battle.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, Hocking is 'working vulgarly', a contrast that the novel resolves by infusing a 'Saxon' work ethic with some of the charms of the weaker decadent artistry of the 'Latin'.⁴⁹

A similar union emerges at the end of *The Purple Cloud*, when Jeffson is married to Leda, the Sultana's daughter he discovers while burning Constantinople in his post-apocalyptic rage. The discovery of Leda prompts Jeffson to shift both his efforts and his narrative from burning cities and constructing a palace towards romance and cultural exchange with Leda. When paired with Leda, Jeffson ceases wearing the Turkish garb he borrowed from the embassy in London, 'for gone now apparently are those turbulent hours when, stalking like a peacock, I flaunted my

monarchy in the face of the Eternal Powers' (p. 211). He also notes 'a certain *Western-ness*' in Leda that he suspects he has brought about (p. 213; italics Shiel's). While Leda is clearly a force that moderates Jeffson's decadent behaviour and provokes him to suspend his parodic Turkish performance, a modified version of Englishness results from their coupling. Some cultural variation is permitted as long as Anglo-Saxon culture is at least the narrow winner in such racial and cultural competition.⁵⁰

Beyond these overtures to so-called 'Latin' and 'Eastern' cultures, greater challenges to whiteness from beyond Europe and the Middle East in *The Purple Cloud* and *The Yellow Danger* are coupled with a sense of cataclysm, and this cataclysm sometimes becomes instrumentalized in Shiel's writing, such that *The Yellow Danger* uses the whirlpool as a weapon to preserve Englishness and whiteness. Here Shiel's debt to Poe is particularly relevant in determining Shiel's attitude towards people from beyond Europe. In her discussion of the 'Africanist presence' as it is registered in Poe's writing, Toni Morrison looks at the conclusion of Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* and contends that 'the concept of the American self was [...] bound to Africanism, and was [...] covert about its dependency'.⁵¹ In her reading of *Arthur Gordon Pym*, Morrison connects the 'white curtain' of the cataract that Pym and his companions encounter at the South Pole with the 'shrouded human figure' whose skin 'was of the perfect whiteness of the snow' from the last two sentences of the novel.⁵² Poe's work is unique because it partially reveals the otherwise 'covert' 'dependency' of the American self upon black Americans; after the black character Nu-Nu dies, the cataract and the shrouded white figure 'are figurations of impenetrable whiteness that surface in American literature whenever an Africanist presence is engaged'.⁵³

Perhaps due to the question of his own whiteness, Shiel registers an awareness of the ways that Poe connects hydrological features at the South Pole with race and what Morrison calls 'impenetrable whiteness'.⁵⁴ The main character of *The Yellow Danger*, naval hero John Hardy, weaponizes the whirlpool to execute the Chinese warriors who have attempted to invade Britain, turning the degenerative and disorienting powers of the vortex into a device for preserving British

sovereignty. Here Shiel draws on Poe for inspiration and reimagines the whirlpool as a place of mass extermination. Hardy's fleet tows the barges northward from the North Foreland of England and across the North Sea at the direction of 'a man named Henrick Björnson, a Norwegian sea-captain'.⁵⁵ The barges stop off the coast of Norway. Described as a 'grave-side',⁵⁶ the whirlpool devours Britain's adversaries:

And all at once the whole is over: and every wave, and eddy, and barge, and flake of froth slips into the sweep of one mighty, bawling, racing whirlpool.

Within the writhing uppermost ridge of this vast circumference, invisible under a fierce white wrath of shrieking spray, fly with a thousand wings the barges of the yellow men, fly on even keel, fly uplifted, spurned from the polished ebony of the dizzy basin of water. And as they fly, the storm smothers their gasping breaths, and lifts their hair. And as their speed intensifies to the droning sleep of the spinning-top, their queues stiffen and rise horizontal like darting serpents, and twenty million straight and fluttering pigtailed, keeping ever their distances, race in narrowing whorls towards a bottomless, staggering well, a steep epileptic abyss, that yawns, six furlongs broad, within the central space.⁵⁷

Shiel's prose here subsumes the Chinese warriors within the category of inanimate objects through metonymy (the barges) and synecdoche (the pigtailed) such that the human energy lost by those drowning is rerouted to the whirlpool, which is transfigured by animate rage so that it is 'bawling', 'writhing', and 'epileptic'. Shiel also depicts the whirlpool as enabling a racial transformation. The reference to 'the barges of the yellow men' hearkens back to the novel's title and its racist imagery, but the description also deploys a black and white binary. The upper part of the whirlpool first hides the barges under its 'white wrath', but as the whirlpool's motions continue, the barges are 'spurned from the polished ebony of the dizzy basin of water' before, notably, they race towards its bottom.⁵⁸ The hydrological event resonates as a racial one, as white wrath drives the Chinese invaders down the racial hierarchy, such that they move through the ebony basin, after being spurned by it at first, into the abyss. The whirlpool confirms the otherness of the Chinese antagonists; its structure enables their transition to greater racial difference through the machinations of white, English defenders.

Shiel's reference to the bottom of *The Yellow Danger's* whirlpool as a 'bottomless, staggering well' resonates with Macfarlane's discussion of 'A Descent into the Maelström'. Macfarlane

examines the overlap between recent activism against oil extraction in the Lofoten islands of Norway and Poe's story, which he calls 'a premonitory oil-dream' in which 'the Maelstrom operates both as a kind of boring drill and a means of seeing the seabed where it lies bared at the base of the vortex'.⁵⁹ The whirlpool of *The Yellow Danger* is a frightening reversal of what Macfarlane discusses. Hardy and his fleet aren't attempting to obtain or explore resources in their visit to the Norwegian whirlpool, but to dispose of bodies that have become stripped of their personhood. Extraction of resources becomes the disposal of individuals that Hardy considers as waste. The chapter in which the mass death of the Chinese prisoners is discussed opens with Hardy's internal question about the invaders on barges, 'What was he to do with them?'.⁶⁰ The occupants of the barges are compared to a 'locust host' and, though Hardy dislikes the cruelty of starving these men, his decisions are equally shaped by questions about time and logistics – it would take too long to shoot them.⁶¹ The racial conversion of the Chinese invaders at the whirlpool is premised on a conversion of human persons to corpses in need of disposal.

This double conversion anticipates recent discussions of the racial politics of the Anthropocene, most notably Kathryn Yusoff's contention that certain narratives of human-based climate change must be discarded in order to account for practices such as chattel slavery, settler colonialism, genocide, fossil fuel extraction, and nuclear testing that have not been adequately examined by the fields of geography and geology. The constitution of geology as a field that, until very recently, ignored human influence on the physical environment has in part facilitated practices such as slavery: 'It is not that geology is productive of race per se but that empirical processes mesh across geological propositions and propositions of racial identity to produce an equation of inhuman property as racially coded'.⁶² While Shiel's representation of death via whirlpool can be discussed as racist and jingoist frenzy or as an overblown parody of the already extreme invasion genre, Hardy's sense that he must, on a material level, eliminate Chinese bodies that are in the wrong geographic location, signals Shiel's possible awareness of the conflation of 'inhuman property' and black bodies that Yusoff describes.⁶³

This slippage between the human body and inanimate object is again manifest in *The Purple Cloud*, where the invasion of *The Yellow Danger* has transformed into something akin to migration. Benjamin Morgan has argued persuasively that *The Purple Cloud* shows the ‘mutually unsettling’ relationships between different conceptions of the planet, including ‘the planet as an occult being that takes on human-like capacities of meaning-making and intentionality; the planet as a geophysical system where volcanic eruptions and atmospheric climatic events interact in unpredictable ways; and the planet as a geopolitical space of mass migration and expressions of sovereignty’.⁶⁴ A global volcanic event, accompanied by a poison gas, eliminates everyone on earth except for Leda and Jeffson. The cloud’s arrival is not instantaneous, however: as it moves across the earth from east to west at a speed of 100 to 105 miles per day, it sends crowds fleeing Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe to Scandinavia and England, such that Jeffson is surprised by the great variation of humanity that greets him first in Norway and then in England. *The Purple Cloud’s* representation of this migration is distinctive and intertwined with its decadence.

When Jeffson arrives at a Norwegian town near Aardheim, the first city he visits on his return polar journey, Jeffson notes ‘something un-northern, southern, and Oriental’ about the dead there (p. 67). He perceives two Norwegian peasants and then ‘an old Jew of the Polish Pale, in gaberdine and skull-cap’ (p. 67), followed by

two dark-skinned women in costly dress, either Spanish or Italian, and the yellower mortality of a Mongolian, probably a Magyar, and a big negro in zouave dress, and some twenty-five obvious French, and two Morocco fezes, and the green turban of a shereef, and the white of an Ulema’ (p. 67).

The description of the crowd echoes the racial references to the Chinese warriors drowning in the whirlpool, but also includes references to dress as well as nationality, such that Shiel’s catalogue suggests diversity amidst a group of what Jeffson calls ‘foreign stragglers’ (p. 67). The corpses that Jeffson encounters in Norway are the first of a series that he describes repeatedly, mingling references to nationality, costume, and skin colour throughout the middle of *The Purple Cloud*. The descriptions of corpses are part of what John Sutherland calls the text’s ‘verbal décor’; *The Purple*

Cloud is ‘full of ornate catalogues in which terms, unfamiliar to the general reader, tumble over each other in rich profusion’ (p. 263). Though *The Purple Cloud* contains many decadent catalogues of items that hearken back to the extravagant and often morbid lists of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À Rebours* (1884) and the eleventh chapter of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), lists that in some cases do include human remains, Shiel’s catalogues of corpses augment the decadence of these previous works as the objects on display are themselves dead bodies. Jeffson invites his reader to take aesthetic pleasure in and consume the victims of a global cataclysm in an aesthetic manoeuvre simultaneously revolting and eerily suggestive of the ways in which people of colour are frequently consumed by what Yusoff calls ‘Western geologic modes of extraction and White Imperialism’.⁶⁵ This connection between extraction and the decadent catalogue is consolidated when Jeffson later begins looking for living humans who may have sealed themselves in the mines of England for survival. He describes how he found ‘everywhere, in English duckies and guggs, Pomeranian women in gaudy stiff cloaks, the Walachian, the Mameluk, the Khirgiz, the Bonze, the Imaum, and almost every type of man’, a group of people he encounters when searching for ‘the treasure of a life’ (p. 107). In the search for the ‘treasure’ of a living human being, foreign corpses replace the coal that the mines were designed to extract.

While *The Purple Cloud* invites readers to experience a decadent combination of pleasure and horror in its lists – a combination made even more fraught for early twenty-first century readers by the racism of these lists – Jeffson’s reaction to the deceased global masses is telling. When he journeys beyond Norway to Dover, Jeffson finds ‘a mixture of races, black, brunette, brown, yellow, white, in all the shades [...] and, over-looking them all, one English boy with a clean Eton collar sitting on a bicycle’, but he notes that death ‘had overtaken them all’ (p. 75). This experience, which first suggests the boy’s superiority, via the boy’s ‘over-looking’, and then his equality, via ‘overtaken’, results in a significant crisis for the narrator:

I did not know whither, nor why, I went, nor had I the least idea whether all this was visually seen by me in the world which I had known, or in some other, or was all phantasy of my disembodied spirit – for I had the thought that I, too, might be dead since old ages,

and my spirit wandering now through the universe of space, in which there is neither north nor south, nor up nor down, nor measure nor relation, nor aught whatever, save an uneasy consciousness of a dream about bottomlessness. (p. 75)

Jeffson's cosmic detachment in this section – the sense that he is a 'disembodied spirit [...] wandering now through the universe of space' – suggests an overlap between Jeffson's disorienting experience of the non-white migrants in Europe and the experiences of the maelstrom, vortex, or whirlpool that this article has explored, yet the response to the mixing of bodies explored in this passage emphasizes a disorientation from disembodiment rather than the bestial embodiment experienced at the North Pole. Later, while exploring post-cataclysm England, Jeffson 'commune[s]' with himself during a storm,

I, poor man, lost in this conflux of infinitudes and vortex of the world, what can become of me, my God? For dark, ah dark, is the waste void into which from solid ground I am now plunged a million fathoms deep (p. 90).

Once again, Shiel deploys an hydrological metaphor to emphasize confusion about race, subjectivity, and geography, such that Shiel's decadent writing destabilizes the very categories of mind, nature, and place upon which decadence relies. Shiel's vortical meditations fascinate due to their unique expression and perplexing convolutions of time and space, yet their imbrication with conceptions of race and decline suggests that the late-Victorian notions of the decadent and the cosmic are bound up with racial narratives requiring our attention.

¹ I am grateful to the Harry Ransom Center at University of Texas at Austin for a one-month fellowship in the humanities that, supported by the C. P. Snow Memorial Fund, enabled this research. I am also indebted to earlier research on Shiel by Ailise Bulfin, Benjamin Morgan, Ross Forman, and Brian Stableford as well as to audience members who asked questions in response to an earlier version of this essay presented at the 2015 University of London conference, 'Aestheticism and Decadence in the Age of Modernism: 1895-1945'.

² See Dennis Denisoff, 'The Dissipating Nature of Decadent Paganism from Pater to Yeats', *Modernism/Modernity*, 15.3 (2008), 431-46, and Benjamin Morgan, 'Fin du Globe: On Decadent Planets', *Victorian Studies*, 58.4 (2016), 609-35.

³ Denisoff, 'Decadent Paganism', p. 444; Morgan, 'Fin du Globe', p. 611.

⁴ Ursula K. Heise, 'Science Fiction and the Time Scales of the Anthropocene', *ELH*, 86 (2019), 275-304 (p. 301).

⁵ Previous ecocritical readings of *The Purple Cloud* include Morgan's 'Fin du Globe' and Ailise Bulfin, 'The Natural Catastrophe in Late Victorian Popular Fiction: "How Will the World End?"', *Critical Survey*, 27.2 (2015), 81-101.

⁶ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), p. 150.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁸ Quoted in Ailise Bulfin, “‘The End of Time’: M. P. Shiel and the ‘Apocalyptic Imaginary’”, in *Victorian Time: Technologies, Standardizations, Catastrophes*, ed. by Trish Ferguson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 153-77 (p. 163).

⁹ ‘Maelstrom, n.’, in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <www.oed.com/view/Entry/112107> [accessed 10 December 2020].

¹⁰ For connections between Vorticism and conceptions of the vortex, see Miranda B. Hickman, *The Geometry of Modernism: The Vorticist Idiom in Lewis, Pound, H. D., and Yeats* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), pp. 20-23.

¹¹ Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), pp. 307, 308.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 307.

¹³ See Bulfin, ‘Natural Catastrophe’, p. 91; Morgan, ‘*Fin du Globe*’, pp. 612, 623-24; Bulfin, ‘End of Time’, pp. 159-67; and Monique R. Morgan, ‘The Eruption of Krakatoa (also known as Krakatau) in 1883’, *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. by Dino Franco Felluga (January 2013), <https://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=monique-morgan-the-eruption-of-krakatoa-also-known-as-krakatau-in-1883> [accessed 12 June 2021].

¹⁴ Harold Billings, *M. P. Shiel: A Biography of His Early Years* (Austin: Roger Beacham, 2005), p. 155.

¹⁵ M. P. Shiel, ‘Huguenin’s Wife’, *Pall Mall Magazine* (April 1895), pp. 568-76 (p. 576). This description aligns with the ‘chemical theory of volcanoes’ that Jefferson discusses in puzzling over the shape of the continents in *The Purple Cloud* (M. P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud*, ed. by John Sutherland (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), p. 156).

¹⁶ M. P. Shiel, ‘The Spectre-Ship’, *Cassell’s Family Magazine* (September 1896), pp. 755-64 (p. 764).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 756.

¹⁸ Though previous critics have discussed Hardy’s use of biological warfare, they have had less to say about Hardy’s bizarre choice for executing the occupants of the barges. For the biological warfare, see William L. Svitavsky, ‘From Decadence to Racial Antagonism: M. P. Shiel at the Turn of the Century’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 31.1 (2004), 1-24 (p. 13); Ross G. Forman, *China and The Victorian Imagination: Empires Entwined* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 149; and Morgan, ‘*Fin du Globe*’, p. 624. Brian Stableford mentions Hardy’s use of the maelstrom in his plot summary (Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romance in Britain 1890-1950* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), p. 76).

¹⁹ Shiel, *Purple Cloud*, pp. 40, 41. Further references to the novel are given after quotations in the text.

²⁰ Billings, *Biography*, p. 77. Shiel’s *Prince Zaleski* (1895) is the most explicit example of his debt to Poe, as detective Zaleski is modelled on Poe’s Dupin. See, for example, Brian Stableford, ‘The Decadent Detective: *Prince Zaleski*’, in *Jaunting on the Scoriac Tempests and Other Essays on Fantastic Literature* (Cabin John, MD: Borgo Press, 2009), pp. 22-31 (pp. 23-24). Less discussed has been Shiel’s adaptation of Poe’s hot air balloon story, ‘The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall’ (1835), as a tale of an eight-year-old who inadvertently travels from England to Nice, ‘The Awful Voyage of Ralphie Hamilton’ (1898), in *The Boys’ Friend*.

²¹ Edgar Allan Poe, ‘MS Found in a Bottle’, in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket and Related Tales*, ed. by J. Gerald Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008), pp. 179-89 (p. 189).

²² Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym and Related Tales*, ed. by Kennedy, pp. 1-178 (p. 175). John Sutherland mentions how both *Arthur Gordon Pym* and *The Purple Cloud* include references to warm-weather bodies of water at the Poles (Shiel, *Purple Cloud*, p. 274).

²³ Edgar Allan Poe, ‘A Descent into the Maelström’, in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym and Related Tales*, ed. by Kennedy, pp. 223-39 (p. 224); M. P. Shiel, *The Yellow Danger*, 2nd edn (London: Grant Richards, 1898), p. 335.

²⁴ Poe, ‘Descent’, pp. 234, 237, emphasis Poe’s, and 235.

²⁵ Matthew A. Taylor, ‘The Nature of Fear: Edgar Allan Poe and Posthuman Ecology’, *American Literature*, 84.2 (2012), 353-79 (p. 369).

²⁶ Allen MacDuffie, ‘Charles Darwin and the Victorian Pre-History of Climate Denial’, *Victorian Studies*, 60.4 (2018), 543-64 (p. 558).

²⁷ Monique R. Morgan, ‘Madness, Unreliable Narration, and Genre in *The Purple Cloud*’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 36.2 (2009), 266-83 (pp. 271, 276).

²⁸ James Phelan, *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³⁰ While outlining Shiel’s representations of the Pole in relation to Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*, Sutherland also relates how Blavatsky understood the Pole as the sacred origin of humanity’s ancestors (p. xxiv). Yet, as Joscelyn Godwin notes in his study of mystical theories of the Pole, humanity’s ancestors who resided at the Pole were, by Blavatsky’s description, colourless, ‘colossal’, and ‘had ethereal, not physical bodies, and could not be injured or destroyed by death’ (Quoted in Joscelyn Godwin, *Arktos: The Polar Myth in Science, Symbolism and Nazi Survival* (Kempton, Illinois: Adventures Unlimited Press, 1996), p. 19).

³¹ William Thomson, ‘On Vortex Atoms’, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, 6.73 (1867), 94-105 (p. 94).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Helge Kragh, *Higher Speculations: Grand Theories and Failed Revolutions in Physics and Cosmology*, illustrated edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 35.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

- ³⁵ Kragh, *Higher Speculations*, p. 45; Daniel W. Hering, 'Modern Views and Problems of Physics', *Popular Science Monthly*, 45.33 (August 1894), 511-21 (p. 515). A portion of Hering's article containing the quoted passage appeared in the *Leicester Daily Post* on 22 September 1894.
- ³⁶ M. P. Shiel, 'Vaila', in *Shapes in the Fire: Being a Mid-Winter-Night's Entertainment in Two Parts and an Interlude* (London: John Lane, 1896), pp. 67-122 (p. 120).
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Sam Moskowitz, in reviewing Shiel's literary output, refers to him as 'an anti-Semite, anti-Christ, anti-Negro, anti-Oriental, an ardent believer in Aryan superiority and a war lover' (Sam Moskowitz, 'Shiel and Heard', *Science Fantasy*, 17.50 (1961), 95-112 (p. 108).
- ³⁹ Billings, *Biography*, pp. 12-13, 40-41.
- ⁴⁰ Kirsten MacLeod, 'M. P. Shiel and the Love of Pubescent Girls: The Other "Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name"', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 51.4 (2008), 355-80 (p. 355, quoted on p. 358).
- ⁴¹ Billings, *Biography*, p. 41.
- ⁴² Ibid., p. 43.
- ⁴³ Ibid., pp. 41-42.
- ⁴⁴ Svitavsky, 'From Decadence to Racial Antagonism', p. 13.
- ⁴⁵ Given the extremity of many of Shiel's plots and characters, it is often difficult to determine the extent to which his stories are parodic. Stableford warns readers against 'taking the ideas in *The Yellow Danger* too seriously' and acknowledges that Shiel 'loved to strike a pose at once casual and provocative' (Stableford, *Scientific Romance*, p. 76).
- ⁴⁶ M. P. Shiel, *Contraband of War: A Tale of the Hispano-American Struggle* (Ridgewood, NJ: Gregg Press, 1968), pp. 85, 256.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 256.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 240-41.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 241.
- ⁵⁰ Maria Cristina Fumagalli reads Jefferson's union with Leda in tandem with a critique of 'North Atlantic modernity' and suggests that the novel encourages readers to imagine alternate, less Anglocentric modernities (Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *Caribbean Perspectives on Modernity: Returning Medusa's Gaze* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), pp. 48, 52).
- ⁵¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 33, 57-58.
- ⁵² Poe, *Arthur Gordon Pym*, pp. 174, 175.
- ⁵³ Morrison, *Playing*, pp. 32-33.
- ⁵⁴ Shiel's rendering of the whirlpool as a site of imposed whiteness is based on an interpretation of Poe's work that resonates with Morrison's interpretation of *Arthur Gordon Pym*. This rendering, however, is different to other readings of Poe. Robert S. Levine has argued that *Arthur Gordon Pym* demonstrates that Poe 'engages' the topics of slavery and race 'head on' rather than being, in Morrison's terms, 'haunted' by them (Robert S. Levine, *Race, Transnationalism, and Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 21). Alternatively, Terence Whalen claims that the racist 'haunting portrait of blackness' in *Arthur Gordon Pym* was Poe's 'means of appealing to multiple segments of the white literary audience' (Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 145). Thanks to my colleague Rene Treviño for directing me to these readings of the conclusion of *Arthur Gordon Pym*.
- ⁵⁵ Shiel, *Yellow Danger*, p. 335.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 337-38.
- ⁵⁸ The word *ebony* may be borrowed from 'A Descent into the Maelström'. The fisherman describes the maelstrom as a 'funnel [...] whose perfectly smooth sides might have been mistaken for ebony' (Poe, 'Descent', p. 235).
- ⁵⁹ Macfarlane, *Underland*, pp. 309, 309-10.
- ⁶⁰ Shiel, *Yellow Danger*, p. 333.
- ⁶¹ Ibid. Forman notes the zoomorphism used in Shiel's descriptions of the Chinese warriors: they are depicted as 'animals that move in groups, without individual agency' (Forman, *China and the Victorian Imagination*, p. 139).
- ⁶² Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 73.
- ⁶³ This interpretation is in line with Forman's comment that invasion novels like *The Yellow Danger* 'emplot unprecedented, rapid population shifts that are distinctly modern' (Forman, *China and the Victorian Imagination*, p. 140). Forman also contends that given the plot of the novel, Hardy is punished for the genocide he perpetrates (p. 149).
- ⁶⁴ Morgan, 'Fin du Globe', p. 627.
- ⁶⁵ Yusoff, *Billion Black Anthropocenes*, p. 58.