DAVID KUMLER
University of Washington

Reanimating Lovecraft:

Racism and Ontological Terror in Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*

ABSTRACT

While H. P. Lovecraft is known for pioneering the genre of cosmic horror and for his philosophy of cosmic pessimism, he is also remembered by many for his virulent racism. Contemporary writers of Lovecraftian fiction have often attempted to deal with this mixed legacy by centring concerns about racism within their own work. It is common, however, for writers to treat racism as largely a matter of personal prejudice, which fails to account for the role of race in structuring reality itself and, as a result, misreads the role that racism plays in Lovecraft's work. This article takes up Victor LaValle's The Ballad of Black Tom, *a work of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction that stands apart in its account of race. By treating racism as not simply a matter of prejudice but, rather, as a persistent structure grounding western rationality, LaValle reveals race to be, itself, a matter of cosmic horror. LaValle's approach to contemporary Lovecraftian fiction both subverts and extends the project of cosmic horror while delivering a profound critique of both Lovecraft's racism and the problem of racism more generally.*

Keywords: H. P. Lovecraft, Victor LaValle, Race, Ontological Terror, Cosmic Horror

> If the thing did happen, then man must be prepared to accept notions of the cosmos, and of his own place in the seething vortex of time, whose merest mention is paralysing.
> H. P. Lovecraft

> Black emancipation is world destructive…. Because anti-blackness infuses itself into every fabric of social existence, it is impossible to emancipate blacks without literally destroying the world.
> Calvin Warren

Like the zombie of Haitian folklore, H. P. Lovecraft has been reanimated. While few of his contemporaries would have expected it, Lovecraft has become a ubiquitous presence in contemporary American culture. We can see the hand of Lovecraft at work in philosophical movements, popular television shows, videogames, novels, and art house cinema. This explosion of the Lovecraftian has led Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock to describe the present cultural moment as "The Age of Lovecraft" (Sederholm and Weinstock 2016, 3). Straying far beyond the pages of pulp magazines, Lovecraft's undead corpse now seems to lurk behind every corner of popular culture.

While on the one hand, Lovecraft is known for his philosophy of cosmic pessimism—the notion that, from the vantage of the cosmos, human life is both insignificant and meaningless—he is also remembered by many for his virulent racism. Central to Lovecraft's reanimation in our *present* moment has been a preoccupation with this racial hatred. While Lovecraft's racism has led to numerous debates about how (and if) the prejudices of an author can (or should) be treated separately from that author's work, my present interest is in the ways many contemporary writers of Lovecraftian fiction have chosen to centre concerns about racism within *their own* work. A fundamental question for these writers seems to be: How, if at all, ought one to carry forward a tradition fundamentally tainted (as many see it) by racism?

The answer to this question, however, hinges on both how we understand *racism* and how *Lovecraft's* racism fits within our larger understanding of race. Unfortunately, in my view, it is common for writers to treat racism as largely a matter of personal prejudice. This understanding of racism has resulted in, on the one hand, writers who, by adopting a humanist anti-racism, aim to correct Lovecraft's racism by teaching readers to see the humanity in his racialized/monsterized others and, on the other hand, writers who aim to show that a consistent philosophy of cosmic pessimism is incompatible with racism: that, in other words, Lovecraft's racial prejudices are simply inconsistent with his broader project. By treating racism as largely a matter of prejudice—which is to say, as

something an individual can simply *unlearn*—these approaches fail to account for the role of race in structuring reality itself and, in this failure, misread the role that racism plays in Lovecraft's work.

In this article, I take up Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*, a work of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction that stands apart in its account of race. By treating racism as not simply a matter of *prejudice* but, rather, as a persistent *structure* grounding western rationality, LaValle reveals race to be, itself, a matter of cosmic horror. If the project of cosmic horror is, as Eugene Thacker suggests, about confronting the limits of human rationality and, indeed, thought itself, then LaValle's work shows that race is precisely this type of limit: an unthinkable contradiction upon which the very notion of the human rests (Thacker 2011; 2015). To expose race for what it is—a perverse ontology that renders racialized others human-but-not—is to invoke a type of cosmic horror. By centring the question of race while rejecting assimilative humanism and liberal didacticism, I argue, LaValle's approach to contemporary Lovecraftian fiction both subverts and extends the project of cosmic horror while delivering a profound critique of both Lovecraft's racism and the problem of racism more generally.

Humanist Anti-Racism or Cosmicist Anti-Humanism

Lovecraft's dual legacy as both racist and cosmicist casts an uneasy shadow over contemporary cosmic horror writing, and one prominent response has been to draw on the Lovecraftian mythos to *humanize* those Lovecraft cast as less-than-human. Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country*, for instance, centres on the struggles of a Black family who—in stark contrast to the evil, racialized cultists of Lovecraft's oeuvre—must contend with *both* the horrors of antiblack racism and cosmic monstrosity. Similarly, Ruthanna Emrys's *Innsmouth Legacy* series aims to humanize the people of Innsmouth—human-monster hybrids that critics have often read as a thinly-veiled metaphor for racial miscegenation. Humanist responses such as these aim to correct the problem of racism by incorporating racialized others into the sphere of "full" humanity, revealing that the so-called monster is human and was human all along. While this didactic impulse to humanize is certainly well-meaning, imbedded in it are a number of difficulties. When value is only legible in human terms, anything that exceeds the normative sense of the human must either be assimilated (normalized and *made* human), rendered inhuman, or left to fluctuate in the murky space between—human in some moments and contexts, inhuman in others. This becomes a significant problem when we recognize that "human" is not a neutral category. The very notion of human *being* finds its origins in a colonizing project that defined the human in opposition to both the indigenous savage and the Black slave.

There exists a rich theoretical discourse on the conceptual history of the human and its fraught relationship to racialized bodies. It is not uncommon for contributions to this discourse to begin with Michel Foucault's claim, in *The Order of Things*, that "[a]s the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end" (Foucault 2002, 422). In *The Order of Things*, Foucault shows that concepts like "man" and "the human" do not name

metaphysical absolutes, but rather, concrete histories and relations of power. However, as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson demonstrates, this line of inquiry and critique precedes Foucault, finding earlier articulation in anti-colonial and Black radical thought. Jackson notes that writers ranging from Aimé Césaire to Frantz Fanon to Sylvia Wynter have long sought to question the presumed neutrality (and *natural*ity) of the human through close examinations of Western humanism's evolution within the "broader field of gendered, sexual, racial, and colonial relations" (Jackson 2013, 670). As a product of Western imperialism, *human* is not synonymous with *homo sapiens* but rather functions as "a technology of slavery and colonialism that imposes its authority over 'the universal' through a racialized deployment of force" (ibid, 670).

Uncritical attempts to humanize reinscribe this technology through what Sylvia Wynter describes as "overrepresentation:"

> The struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethno-class (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioural autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves. (Wynter 2003, 260).

Wynter's conceptual distinction between western bourgeois "Man" and the "human" species reminds us that any attempt to humanize is also an attempt to represent. Furthermore, Aria Dean notes that this "ethno-class conception of the human" is a product of racial capitalism and a necessary component of capitalist expropriation and primitive accumulation. As Dean argues, "While the American instantiation of racial capitalism has a particular intimacy with chattel slavery, the concepts this history has generated—like the concept of the human—posture as universal…. Under racial capitalism, from the Middle Passage onward, the was-African-made-black is a miraculous paradox, human-but-not. She is an object-subject" (Dean 2017). The "human," as a product of racial capitalism, becomes a means by which to objectify and accumulate "inhuman" bodies: those bodies deemed "human-but-not." Liberal humanism, in its commitment to the human, is unable to disarticulate itself from this colonizing politics of exclusion, accumulation, and assimilation.

Contra efforts to bring the dehumanized *up* to the level of the human, cosmicist writers like Thomas Ligotti reject the idea of human value altogether: Cosmic insignificance collapses the human, the less-than-human, and the nonhuman into indistinction. The question of race thus disappears, leaving us with, arguably, a deracinated Lovecraftianism. Ligotti has accordingly criticized Lovecraft's racism—not on moral or ethical grounds, per se, but on philosophical ones, contending that racism is inconsistent with cosmic pessimism. Ligotti notes that, while much of Lovecraft's writing reveals him to be "a perfectionist of cosmic disillusion," his racism reveals "another Lovecraft, one who revelled in protectionist illusions that could not be more alien to the propensities of his alter ego" (Ligotti 2010, 44). While

this reading elides some of the important relays between Lovecraft's cosmic pessimism and his racism, it offers a strong case for simply purging the Lovecraftian of its racialized imagery. For Ligotti, human tradition is antithetical to a truly cosmic imaginary and, accordingly, a cosmicist perspective requires one to reject the easy comforts of tradition—both racializing *and* humanizing traditions. Purging the Lovecraftian of its explicitly racial elements, however, cannot adequately respond to the racism that grounds Lovecraft's work (and, for that matter, western thought more generally), largely because it treats racism as little more than a "protectionist illusion" or a personal flaw.

Describing the project of cosmic horror, Ligotti writes, "[A] familiar storyline is that of a character who encounters a paradox *in the flesh*, so to speak, and must face down or collapse in horror before this ontological perversion—something which should not be, and yet is. Most fabled as specimens of a living paradox are the 'undead'" (ibid, xx). This "ontological perversion" can be understood in two ways: on the one hand, as that which is *ontologically perverse*—that which, in other words, cannot be situated within the accepted categories of being—and, on the other hand, that which *perverts ontology*—which is to say, something in the presence of which the accepted categories of being are disrupted. Cosmic horror takes form in the interplay between these two senses of ontological perversion: In the encounter with the ontologically perverse object, ontology itself is perverted. Mark Fisher describes this encounter as an intrusion into our reality by "that *which does not belong*" (Fisher 2016, 13). It is not merely that we have been intruded upon by something we *fear*, but rather that this intrusion undermines our understanding of *reality*: It is an intrusion by that which, insofar as we've understood reality, *cannot be*, and, if we are to accept the existence of this weird object, then our sense of reality must be revised. As Fisher writes, "The weird here is a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete" (ibid, 13). The cosmically horrific thing does not merely threaten our lives and bodies; rather, it subverts our notions of who and what we are and what it means to exist in the universe.

It is notable that Ligotti invokes the undead as a prime example of ontological perversion: both dead and alive, neither alive nor dead, the zombie perverts our notion of a "living being." The zombie, however, finds its origins in Haitian slave folklore. Unlike the zombie of contagion narratives, the Haitian zombie is understood to be reanimated and controlled by someone else: by the master. On plantations, zombification was sometimes used as threat by masters to discourage suicide among slaves. Should slaves seek to escape their enslavement by killing themselves, the master could re-animate their corpses and bring them back as zombies—eternal slaves without even the possibility of death as release.[1] That Ligotti should mention the undead as a quintessential example of supernatural

---

[1] We might note here that the figure of the racialized undead appears quite literally in Lovecraft's "Herbert West—Reanimator," which features the revivification of a recently deceased black man who is described in particularly offensive and derogatory language.

horror's "ontological perversion" is crucial to the discussion at hand. After all, the zombie and the slave represent the same perverse ontology: the human-but-not. As Calvin Warren writes, nothing more clearly perverts ontology than slavery, the conversion of *being* into an object:

> Personality became property, as Hortense Spillers would describe it, and with this transubstantiation, Being was objectified, infused with exchange value, and rendered malleable within a sociopolitical order. In short, Being lost its integrity with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade; at that moment in history, it finally became possible for an aggressive metaphysics to exercise an obscene power—the ability to turn a "human" into a "thing." (Warren 2015, 237)

The slave is the literal embodiment of "ontological perversion," the truest example of a "paradox *in the flesh*." This legacy reverberates to this day through the racialized body.

If we think racialization in terms of ontological perversion, then Lovecraft's racism takes on a new significance. This racism might be read not merely as hatred of what is *different*—a "protectionist illusion," as Ligotti puts it—but as revilement in the face of what is *ontologically perverse*, that which *should not be, and yet is*, that which—both human and not—undermines the integrity of *human being*. This racism is thus neither auxiliary to Lovecraft's work nor merely symbolic, but quite literally a matter of *cosmic horror*. Ligotti writes that "the most outstanding instance of [ontological perversion] is a puppet that breaks free of its strings and becomes *self-mobilized*" (Ligotti 2010, xx). Given the historical thingification of the slave, is it too much to presume that, for Lovecraft, a similarly perverse ontology is invoked by the idea of a slave breaking free of its chains and becoming self-mobilized? It is notable that, in Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, the shoggoths only become *truly* terrifying entities when the protagonist learns that these former slaves had revolted against their masters. It is also notable that this discovery prompts the narrator quite suddenly (and unexpectedly) to *humanize* the Old Ones, against whom these shoggoths had revolted:

> After all, they [the Old ones] were not evil things of their kind. They were men of another age and another order of being…. [W]hat had they done that we would not have done in their place?... Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star-spawn—whatever they had been, they were men! (Lovecraft 2001, 330)

In the context of this slave revolt, it is the slaves who are deemed monstrous and the masters who are suddenly seen as human.

All of this raises a fundamental question: If cosmic horror is about an encounter with ontological perversion, *whose* encounter are we talking about? *Whose* concepts and frameworks are rendered obsolete? Imbedded in the project of cosmic horror is the assumption of a homogenous, human "we"—but what happens to that project when the human is revealed to be an overrepresentation and a fiction?

Ontological Terror

Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* is a re-telling of Lovecraft's infamously racist 1925 short story, "The Horror at Red Hook." In Lovecraft's story, Thomas Malone, a police detective working in immigration enforcement, discovers a devil-worshipping cult in the Brooklyn immigrant neighborhood of Red Hook and, while leading a raid on the cult, encounters something cosmically horrific. Having glimpsed "cosmic sin" via a classically Lovecraftian tangle of the demonic and otherworldly, Malone is paralyzed by a sense of terror and insignificance (Lovecraft 2004, 132). In both structure and content, the narrative is quintessentially Lovecraftian. However, "The Horror at Red Hook" is also often regarded as the quintessential example of Lovecraft's racial prejudices as expressed in his fiction, largely because its inspiration and premise are expressly and openly xenophobic. As Lovecraft put it in a letter to Clark Ashton Smith, the story is largely inspired by the unsettling presence of "gangs of young loafers & herds of evil-looking foreigners that one sees everywhere in New York" (Lovecraft and Smith 2017, 83). This attitude manifests in depictions of immigrants as "swarthy, evil-looking strangers" and the largely immigrant neighbourhood of Red Hook as "a maze of hybrid squalor" (Lovecraft 2004a, 199, 122).

LaValle's novel retells Lovecraft's story in two parts. The first part follows a young Black man named Tommy Tester who, through an encounter with Robert Suydam—the cult leader in Lovecraft's story—ends up joining what, in LaValle's re-imagining, is Suydam's plot to awaken Cthulhu. The second part follows Detective Malone as he investigates the conspiracy at Red Hook. While largely consistent with Lovecraft's narrative, LaValle's version provides readers with a rather different glimpse of the *horror* Malone encounters at Red Hook, ultimately suggesting that Lovecraft's telling of the story is a redacted and altered account, a strange but ultimately "much more palatable" version of the *true* events LaValle narrates (LaValle 2016, 140).

In many ways, LaValle's critique of Lovecraft pivots on his depiction of Tommy's world as structured by what Cedric Robinson calls "racial capitalism." As Robinson uses the term, racial capitalism signifies the fact that capitalism has, from its earliest development, been permeated by structures of racialization. Robinson demonstrates that racialism—defined as "the legitimation and corroboration of social organization as natural by reference to the 'racial' components of its elements"—is essential to the development (and continuation) of capitalism (Robinson 2000, 2). To understand capitalism, then, one must understand its deeply racial character.

The world of Tommy Tester is, like our own, fundamentally structured by racial capitalism. As we learn early on, Tommy makes his living through a number of peculiar hustles. While nominally a musician, Tommy is not particularly talented and cannot compete with the numerous more talented musicians in Harlem. Tommy realizes, however, that if he leaves Harlem, competition becomes sparse. Because he is Black and dresses the part of the "dazzling, down-and-out musician," people in

other neighbourhoods—specifically, non-Black immigrant neighbourhoods—believe that he's an authentic jazzman (LaValle 2016, 11). It is clear that Tommy's hustle—and the market itself—is structured by race, and in a number of ways. Tommy's hustle hinges on the recognition that, as a Black man, he can deploy his race in such a way as to appear "authentic." He also recognizes that, while not everyone will buy into appearances alone, the Eastern European and Irish immigrants in Queens and rural Brooklyn might. Thus on both the level of the product (perceived jazz musicianship) and the level of the customer ("outer-borough bohunks and Paddys"), race has a market value, of which Tommy is keenly aware (ibid, 18). Indeed, the value of Tommy's "service" is largely dependent on both his own race and that of his "customers." This is true not only of Tommy's jazzman routine, but also of his other hustles. This becomes apparent, for instance, when Tommy plays up an image of Black criminality that he might be taken seriously by a woman who has hired him to deliver a mysterious occult tome to her. As Tommy tells her, "There's a place in Harlem…. It's called the Victoria Society. Even the hardest gangsters in Harlem are afraid to go there. It's where people like me trade in books like yours. And worse" (ibid, 15). Tommy, however, has never actually been to the Victoria Society—a place he later learns is little more than a Caribbean social club. Tommy is as much a gangster as he is a musician, but by performing his race in particular ways he is able to sell the perception that he is, indeed, both of these things.

However, the effects of racial capitalism extend beyond Tommy's deployment of racial value to generate income. When Tommy initially contrives his jazzman scheme, he tells his father, Otis, of his plans. Otis offers (not for the first time) to get Tommy a job as a bricklayer—an honest job working construction like his old man. However, Tommy sees little value in such work: His father had always been paid less than his white counterparts and, as a Black man barred from union membership, Otis had frequently been a victim of wage theft. Tommy recognizes that these oppressions are no fluke or flaw in the system but that, for Otis, as a Black man, "Less money and erratic pay *were* the job" (ibid, 18). While Tommy's hustle may not have been a particularly stable profession, neither was his father's more respectable job. Tommy has learned that "you better have a way to make your own money because this world wasn't trying to make a Negro rich" (ibid, 19). Rather than have his labour exploited (or simply stolen) through a commitment to respectability, Tommy draws on other forms of value to make a living.

We might read Tommy's position, then, as one where he is excluded (only partially by choice) from the market as a labourer to be *exploited* yet included as a commodity to be *purchased* and/or *exchanged*. Despite the abolition of slavery—which nominally ends the commodification and sale of Black bodies—this commodity status clings to Tommy through his race. As Christina Sharpe puts it, "The means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain" (Sharpe 2016, 12). To be racialized as Tommy is, in other words, is to be interpellated as a particular type of commodified subject. As Aria Dean writes:

> [B]lack people may not literally be bought and sold, but the logic of racial capitalism persists through embedded white supremacist ideologies. […] Perhaps not always immediately available as raw, manual labour, black people and blackness continue to embody a speculative and semiotic value thirsted after by a white marketplace (Dean 2017).

In an interview with NPR's Sam Briger, LaValle speaks of the fraught position that he, as a Black writer, shares with his protagonist, pointing out that the Tommy Tester of 1920s Harlem, living the afterlife of 1860s slavery, is in fact modelled on 2010s Victor LaValle:

> [W]hat I was sort of thinking about was the hustle of writing as a whole, right, and specifically the hustle of being a black writer…. [T]here's all these hustles that exist that if you play into them, there are already readers, there are already accolades, there are already avenues that have been set up to essentially decide that you are good at that because you essentially just look like someone who should be good at that. Right, it's the idea that if you look the part, we'll overlook your mediocrity…. And I was terrified at the idea of turning into someone like that. (LaValle 2016)

As a Black writer, LaValle understands in a very immediate way the "speculative and semiotic value" of Blackness, a value that hinges largely on the white reader's desire to glimpse the "authentic" Black experience—an "authenticity" which, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and others have noted, is structured more by white expectations than by Black experiences (Adichie 2009). In essence, what LaValle—and Tommy—must contend with is a market that interpellates racialized subjects in order to sell them: in other words, a market that *produces* racial categories and identities in order then to *capitalize* on them. Far from flattening social relations in an unraced sphere of exchange, the market is a key engine of racialization and not merely at its moment of inception. Rather, racialization functions as an ongoing project of primitive accumulation—as Iyko Day puts it, "a persistent structure"— continually producing racialized bodies that can be commodified and converted to capital (qtd. in Dean 2017).

This has important implications not only for how we understand Tommy's subjectivity within a racial capitalist regime, but also for how we might imagine, to use Frank Wilderson's words, an "antagonistic identity formation" capable of confronting racial capitalism (Wilderson 2003, 225). As Wilderson argues, a classically understood proletariat, structured fundamentally by exploitation, cannot account for the positionality of Black subjects whose primary structuring relation to capital is not simply *wage* slavery but the afterlife of *chattel* slavery. In Wilderson's view, a revolutionary project centred on the worker's claim against the legitimacy of the relations of production does nothing to address the afterlife of slavery.

This tension between a worker-centred revolutionary struggle and Black positionality is played out allegorically in *The Ballad of Black Tom*, specifically in the tension between Tommy Tester and Robert Suydam. Tommy first encounters Suydam while performing in Flatbush. Suydam approaches, compliments Tommy's

"git-fiddle," and without hesitation offers Tommy $500 — more than half of Otis's yearly salary — to play at a party he's hosting (LaValle 2016, 17). Tommy is incredulous but accepts $100 as a retainer. When Suydam leaves, Tommy is accosted by two police officers — Malone and his partner Mr. Howard (whose name is certainly no coincidence). The police fleece Tommy of the $100 and question him about Suydam. The old man, it turns out, is part of an ongoing investigation — one that Lovecraft's readers will be familiar with. Tommy plays dumb and the officers ultimately let him go.

Three days later, Tommy goes to Suydam's mansion but learns that the party is not until the next night. Suydam, rather, wishes to hear Tommy play before the main event. Taking Tommy to his library, however, Suydam admits that he can see through Tommy's jazzman charade: "Do you know why I hired you?... I saw that you understood illusion. And you, in your way, were casting a powerful spell. I admired it" (ibid, 46). Suydam goes on to tell Tommy about his study of esoteric, occult knowledges and of "a King who sleeps at the bottom of the ocean" (ibid, 50). Suydam gestures to the window and Tommy can see, in the depths of what is undoubtedly an ocean, a massive shape stirring. Deeply unsettled, Tommy attempts to flee, but Suydam stops him, explaining that they cannot open the doors until morning due to the horrors they might encounter on the other side. This library, Suydam explains, "travels beyond human perceptions, human limitations of space, and even time…. Tonight we've travelled quite far…. We went to the shadow-haunted *Outside*" (ibid, 56).

Suydam explains to Tommy that he plans to awaken the Sleeping King, who will wipe away "all the petty human evils, such as the ones visited upon your people" and establish a new order (ibid, 57). Suydam believes that, for his service, he will be rewarded with power and prestige and suggests that Tommy is also "a man who believes in such things" — a presumptive claim given Tommy's earlier acknowledgement that, if you were Black, "[l]ess money and erratic pay *were* the job" and that "this world wasn't trying to make a Negro rich" (ibid, 57, 18, 19). Tommy knows that, as much as he might deserve to be fairly compensated for his work, the world does not function that way — not for him. His father's white, unionized co-workers might have bargained for better wages and job protections, but such a bargain was never any benefit to Otis. Why would Suydam's revolution be any different?

LaValle's version of Suydam, however, offers us something that Lovecraft's does not. For Lovecraft, Suydam represents something purely evil. Not only does he dabble in the demonic and the occult in his quest for power, but he does so in collaboration with immigrants and minorities. LaValle's version of the story, while narratively consistent with Lovecraft's, offers a different perspective. While Suydam is presented as a sketchy figure — luring Tommy to his home under false pretenses and dabbling in dark magic — he is not cast as evil in quite the same way, and certainly not by association with immigrants. In fact, we might read Suydam as something of a vanguard revolutionary figure, a Lovecraftian Lenin to lead the cosmic revolution. He wants to obliterate human evils and to save Tommy and

others from the "mazes of hybrid squalor"[2] in which they are forced to live (LaValle 2016, 47). Suydam offers a type of political hope that, taken at face value, at times feels just and even somewhat egalitarian, if ultimately marred by Suydam's own white-saviorism egotism. Like many a political leader, Suydam advocates for a potentially worthy cause—and perhaps he even believes in it—however, this cause will always remain secondary to his own quest for power, and this much is clear to Tommy. While Suydam speaks of great rewards and revolution, Tommy cannot but view such expectations as foolish.

Returning home the next morning, Tommy is stopped by the police officers who had accosted him earlier. They tell him rather blandly that his father is dead. Having received a report that Tommy had been less than honest regarding a delivery, the police had come to his home to investigate. As Mr. Howard explains, "I entered the apartment, clearing each room in order, until I reached the back bedroom. In that room a male Negro was discovered displaying a rifle. In fear for my life I used my revolver…. After defending myself, it was discovered that the assailant had not been brandishing a rifle" (ibid, 63). Otis, rather, had been holding a guitar. Tommy is distraught but remains outwardly calm, knowing fully the brutal consequences any display of emotion might bring about. To make matters worse, Howard interprets Tommy's lack of visible response as an indication of his sub-humanness: "Tell me my father's dead and I'm going to take a swing at you…. But these people really don't have the same connections to each other as we do. That's been scientifically proven. They're like ants or bees" (ibid, 62). Howard's refusal to see Tommy as human reflects the type of ontological perversion Ligotti associates with cosmic horror: the human-but-not.

For both Tommy and LaValle's readers, this devastating yet all-too-familiar scene quickly undermines whatever cosmic horror Tommy encountered in Suydam's library. As unsettling as the "Outside" might be, the "Inside," so to speak, is where the true horror resides. Nor is this horror merely that of physical violence. The horror at *LaValle's* Red Hook is more akin to what Calvin Warren calls "ontological terror"—a horror deeply imbedded in metaphysics itself. It is not simply that Tommy's father has been killed and thus deprived of life, but that both Tommy and his father have been deprived of their humanity; or, rather, that the category of *humanity*—along with any moral obligation *to* humanity—never fully included them in the first place. As Warren writes, "[P]ressing the ontological question presents *terror*—the terror that ontological security is gone, the terror that ethical claims no longer have an anchor, and the terror of inhabiting existence outside the precincts of humanity and its humanism" (Warren 2018, 4). Nor is this metaphysical violence simply a matter of Howard's dehumanizing *opinion* of Tommy and his father, comparing them to ants or bees. Far beyond simply *offending,*

---

[2] Lovecraft uses this phrase to describe the Red Hook district—highlighting its racial hybridity, its poverty, and its dinginess. LaValle lifts the phrase from Lovecraft's text and places it in the mouth of Suydam. In this transposition, the phrase shifts from an expression of disgust to one of pity.

Howard's statement invokes and expresses an ontological hierarchy that fundamentally structures Black life: It expresses that, much like the "lives" of ants or bees, Black lives not only do not *matter*, but are hardly even "lives." It is this terrifying notion that Warren calls "ontological terror."

The very human horror Tommy encounters through the murder of his father is, in a remarkable sense, not unlike the cosmic horror Lovecraft evokes in his weird tales: In both cases, the horrific encounter unsettles the very ground of *being*. However, there is a key difference between Lovecraft's *cosmic* dread and LaValle's *ontological* terror. While cosmic dread involves the fear of *becoming* decentred, being *made* insignificant, and having one's privileged metaphysical status *revoked*, ontological terror is rooted in the fact that one has never been centred or privileged in the first place and that this ontological hierarchy is imbedded in western metaphysics itself. As Christina Sharpe writes, "The ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extra-legal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary; it is the ground we walk on" (Sharpe 2016, 7). The fact that, in 2020, it is somehow necessary to declare—and even argue—that *Black lives matter* is a dark reflection of the very real persistence of this ontological terror. While manifestations of ontological terror proliferate to a staggering degree—the extrajudicial murders of George Floyd and Sandra Bland being only the most *visible* examples in recent memory—the fact that, in 2019, a white man in South Carolina was sentenced to 10 years in prison for *enslaving* and abusing a Black man for 23 years, and the next day a Black man in the same city was sentenced 12 years for *possession* of drugs and a firearm, reveals in an almost measurable sense the ontological hierarchy at play (Harriot 2019). While there are more than enough physical terrors embedded in these scenes, the *ontological* terror here is that Black lives are simply disposable: hardly "lives" at all.

Tommy's thoughts soon return to Suydam and the Sleeping King. In the face of this absolute dehumanization, Tommy realizes that cosmic indifference could only be a relief: "A fear of cosmic indifference suddenly seemed comical, or downright naïve…. What was indifference compared to malice?" (LaValle 2016, 66). Tommy's world, structured by racial capitalism and anti-Blackness, *requires* his less-than-humanness. Even compared to poor whites, who might at least earn a wage, Tommy—on account of his race—has no such privileges. He could work, but with no assurance he would get paid. He could hustle a few dollars, but with no assurance that he would be allowed to keep it. He could stay home and play guitar, but with no promise he would not be shot to death in his bedroom. He could stand and be silent, but with no promise that this would not be read as an indication of his inhumanity. As these realizations come crashing down, Tommy recognizes that, compared to the *ontological terror* of anti-Blackness, the *cosmic horror* of indifference is a welcome improvement. With this recognition, Tommy returns to Suydam's mansion for the party, but as Suydam delivers his revolutionary exhortations, Tommy smashes his guitar and—amid screams for him to stop—walks through the library doors towards whatever awaits on the other side.

Embracing Cosmic Monstrosity

It seems no accident that, in the work of Lovecraft, those who prefigure the arrival of cosmic monstrosity are often racialized because, after all, the dehumanizing function of racialization constructs racialized others as ontological impossibilities—human-but-not. *The Ballad of Black Tom* is largely structured on this recognition: Tommy Tester, made a monster by a violent metaphysics, embraces this monstrosity, travels to the Outside, and returns as something cosmically horrific: as Black Tom. In taking on the identity of Black Tom, Tommy becomes, like Lovecraft's monsters, an image of cosmic alterity—that which confounds the categories through which we parse (and produce) our all-too-human reality. LaValle's novel suggests that there *is* something cosmically horrific—something "weird"—in the racialized other: that, in fact, the racialized other's very *being* constitutes a fundamental challenge to the categories and frameworks that structure reality. In this reading, ironically enough, Lovecraft may have perceived something very true about race: Namely, that its production conceals a contradiction. Reality itself is structured upon this contradiction—a contradiction that, in LaValle's version of cosmic horror, is made flesh in the Black body.

While Lovecraft's protagonists, when confronted by cosmic horrors, are desperate for the comfort and safety of their "placid island[s] of ignorance," LaValle reminds us that such islands are only placid for those privileged enough to be considered fully human (Lovecraft 1999a, 139). When detached from a human-centered perspective, however, the cosmically "horrific" becomes no longer primarily a terror but, rather, a potential source of *liberation*. LaValle's novel suggests that we might *embrace* the cosmically horrific—which is to say, in a sense, the *unhuman*—even amid the dangers it presents, because the "reality" it disrupts is already violent, hostile, and dehumanizing. For this reason, LaValle's brand of cosmic horror is, in the truest sense, a *reanimation* of Lovecraft: a necromancy that not only causes the dead to walk but also, like the zombie of Haitian lore, to bend to the will of the necromancer. Lovecraft has been reanimated, but his corpse now speaks what Lovecraft, in life, could not.

References

Adichi, Chimimanda Ngozi. 2009. "The Danger of a Single Story." *YouTube*, uploaded by Ted.com, 7 October 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg.

Dean, Aria. 2017. "Notes on Blacceleration." *e-flux journal*, no. 87. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/87/169402/notes-on-blacceleration/.

Emrys, Ruthanna. 2014. "The Litany of Earth." *Tor.com*. Last modified May 14, 2014. https://www.tor.com/2014/05/14/the-litany-of-earth-ruthanna-emrys/.

--------. 2017. *Winter Tide*. New York: Tor Books.

Fisher, Mark. 2016. *The Weird and the Eerie*. London: Repeater Books.

Foucault, Michel. 2002. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Routledge.

Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. 2013. "Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism." *Feminist Studies* 39, 669-685.

LaValle, Victor. 2016a. *The Ballad of Black Tom*. New York: Tor Books.

--------. 2016b. "'The Ballad of Black Tom' Offers a Tribute to and Critique of Lovecraft." Interviewed by Sam Briger. *Fresh Air*, NPR, February 29, 2016. Transcript. https://www.npr.org/2016/02/29/468558238/the-ballad-of-black-tom-offers-a-tribute-and-critique-of-lovecraft.

Ligotti, Thomas. 2010. *The Conspiracy against the Human Race*. New York: Penguin Books.

Lovecraft, Howard Phillips. 1999a. "The Call of Cthulhu." In *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, edited by S.T. Joshi, 139-169. New York: Penguin Books.

--------. 1999b. "The Shadow over Innsmouth." In *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, edited by S.T. Joshi, 268-335. New York: Penguin Books.

--------. 2001. *At the Mountains of Madness. The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories*, edited by S.T. Joshi, 246-340. New York: Penguin Books.

--------. 2004a. "The Horror at Red Hook." In *The Dreams in the Witch House and Other Weird Stories*, edited by S.T. Joshi, 116-137. New York: Penguin Books.

--------. 2004b. "The Shadow out of Time." In *The Dreams in the Witch House and Other Weird Stories*, edited by S.T. Joshi, 335-395. New York: Penguin Books.

Lovecraft, Howard Phillips and Clark Ashton Smith. 2017. *Dawnward Spire, Lonely Hill: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith*, edited by David E. Shultz and S. T. Joshi. New York: Hippocampus Press.

Ruff, Matt. 2016. *Lovecraft Country*. New York: HarperCollins.

Sederholm, Carl H. and Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew. 2016. "Introduction: Lovecraft Rising." In *The Age of Lovecraft*, edited by Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 1-42. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Thacker, Eugene. 2001. *In the Dust of this Planet.* Washington: Zero Books.

--------. 2015. *Tentacles Longer Than Night*. Washington: Zero Books.

Warren, Calvin L. 2015. "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, 215-248.

--------. 2018. *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Wilderson, Frank, III. 2003. "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" *Social Identities* 9, 225-240.

Wynter, Sylvia. 2003. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, 257-337.

Contributor Details

David Kumler teaches American literature and cultural studies at the University of Washington. He holds degrees in religious studies, creative writing, and literature. Broadly speaking, his research focuses on horror, the occult, popular dissent, and racial capitalism. Kumler's current project examines the intersections between the horror genre and Evangelical Christianity amid the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and 1990s and the rise of the religious right.

Email: kumler@uw.edu