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Editorial

Articles

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EDITORIAL

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Reading Lovecraft Now

Over the last twenty years, it has become increasingly difficult to think about contemporary Gothic texts without finding at least some connection to H. P. Lovecraft. The experience of the author's protagonists regularly confirms humanity's ephemeral or negligible status, especially when contrasted with the vastness of time and space both on Earth and within the surrounding cosmos. This wider perspective increasingly appears to relate to the kinds of circumstances we have been facing over the last twenty years. In fact, most of the articles in this issue address what it means to read Lovecraft in a time that also evokes the kind of dread Lovecraft suggested was at the heart of the weird tale:

> The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of

> black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim (Lovecraft 1945, 16).

No matter how advanced our technology becomes, humanity cannot completely avoid being untouched by pandemics, natural disasters, or the problem of death; even contemporary medicine can only extend human life by a few years, an insignificant amount of time when understood through what geology and astronomy tell us about how time affects our planet and the universe.

Though we obviously are not hearing Lovecraft's "beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities," we nevertheless wrestle with immediate problems ranging from climate change to pandemics; cultural upheaval to armed conflict; politics to post-truth; racism to fake news; identity politics and conservative backlash. The instability caused by these disturbances makes us even question the limits of the reality that surrounds us. In a world where things might seem harder to understand, it makes sense to wonder if we are living in a kind of Lovecraftian scenario, one where our perspective seems on the brink of shifting to something much vaster and more incomprehensible. Through the suggestion of the existence of perspectives enunciated from outside humanity, Lovecraft anticipated this current scenario of uncertainty about the human condition: "In the yawning maw of the Cthulhean, all certainties and comforting correspondences become merely the blown dust of illusion. There is no redemption or salvation, and the Other that diminishes human-scale to nothing can never be contained or mastered." (Krzywinska 2009, 278). Addressing the oversized creatures found in Lovecraft's writing might even suggest a response to the problem of the Anthropocene, particularly since his stories frequently confirm that the footprint left by human activity on the planet becomes imperceptible when contrasted with the cosmic vastness of time and space.

One of the major assumptions behind the articles gathered here is that addressing Lovecraft right now requires wrestling with everything that his legacy—and his increasing popularity—entails. Whereas his influence was once limited to a relatively small number of readers and writers, it now finds a place within a host of much different materials, including video games, podcasts, role-playing games, internet memes, YouTube videos, dating simulators, graphic novels, plush toys, coloring books, plays, young adult novels, movies, television shows, and social media accounts, including mock presidential campaigns. But even though Lovecraft is harder to ignore than he once was, his increasing influence has made it impossible to look past his often pointed and disturbing positions on race, class, and gender. Consequently, his popularity in recent decades makes it necessary to explore new ways of reading his work and understanding how it connects with present concerns.

To some extent, this issue was originally planned as a thematic companion to our forthcoming co-edited volume, *Lovecraft in the Twenty-First Century*. In fact, we were initially drawn to the ways this collection and that collection overlapped with each other in so many unexpected and insightful ways. But as this issue came together, we began to see how each article challenged our own thoughts and plans

and therefore made this an independent collection filled with unique insights about how the conversation on Lovecraft's thought and its influence on literary texts, discussions of race and gender, and adaptations into other media can help us reflect on our present condition.

Catherine Pugh and Simon Maeder open this issue with an article titled: "'Life is a Hideous Thing': *Providence: The Shadow Over Lovecraft* and Staging the Unknown." They discuss the challenges of staging Lovecraft by centering their attention on the 2018 touring piece *Providence: The Shadow Over Lovecraft*, devised and staged by Simon Maeder in partnership with Dominic Allen. In *Providence*, two actors perform on an empty stage with minimal props and so they must rely on a creative use of skill and sound to reproduce the fear and disgust that comes across in several of Lovecraft's narratives. Pugh and Maeder focus on how the author's horrors, based on the use of language and excessive monsters, are adapted on stage under the restrictions of a small budget through the creative use of theatrical and cinematic practices intended to disrupt the relationship between performer and spectator. Their final goal is to study how this increases the tension felt in the audience as they encounter Lovecraft's sense of the unknown as a source of both imagination and horrors.

The next two articles focus on the growing field of adapting Lovecraftian horror into videogames. Contrary to the challenges presented by theatre, this media offers an immersive interaction that breaks limits of physical distance though the body extensions offered by the screen, speakers, and controllers; these components make the videogame experience an absorbing one that drags the player into the world and tension inside the game:

> The way that games actively resist the player, and the concomitant emotions that arise for the player when they are resisted by the game, has a sublime dimension, arising at times from aporia. The particular nature of resistance and the emotions it solicits is not possible in other media. (Krzywinska 2009, 286).

Brian Psiropoulos's "Blood and Insight: Monstrosity in *Bloodborne*" opens the section with an exploration of *Bloodborne* and its adaptation of Lovecraft's dualisms that separate the cosmic and monstrous from the earthly and human through the presence inside the game of schisms dividing what one is, and what the other is not. By focusing on the game's cosmic horrors, largely incomprehensible to mortals, the article directs its attention towards the way *Bloodborne*'s plot, characters, setting, and monsters reproduce several Lovecraftian scenarios, whose meanings are subverted in that the insistence on separateness reveals the existence of a monstrosity of human rather than alien origin.

Leo Chu completes the study of videogames with an analysis of a game that mediates Lovecraftian horror through subjective perception titled: "Horror, Intimacy, and Uncanny Biology: Representing the Lovecraftian Perception in *The Song of Saya*." Starting with a speculation on whether Pickman sees his models differently when contrasted with the narrator's own disgust and horror in

"Pickman's Model," Chu explores the way subjective perception influences the affects one feels in the encounter with cosmic beings by studying the game *The Song of Saya* (*Saya no Uta*). Chu considers the way the video game creates a character embodying a domestic intimacy that is juxtaposed with the cosmic indifference of Lovecraftian monsters and points out the need to creatively reread this domesticity to retrieve the radical alterity in Lovecraftian fiction.

After the discussion on videogames, the issue continues with an exploration of racism and gender in David Kumler's "Reanimating Lovecraft: Racism and Ontological Terror in Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*." Kumler claims that by treating racism as largely a matter of prejudice in Lovecraft, most contemporary Lovecraftian writers have failed to account for ways race structures aspects of reality itself, and so they misread the role that racism plays in Lovecraft's work. Kumler studies Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* as a work of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction that stands apart in its approach to race in that it subverts and extends the idea of cosmic horror while rendering a critique of Lovecraft's racism and the problem of racism in general. The next essay, Christopher Weimer's "Romancing Weird Fiction: Lovecraftian Reinscriptions in Jordan L. Hawk's *Whyborne and Griffin*," scrutinizes Jordan L. Hawk's series of eleven novels and some shorter texts of paranormal romance where the stories of a male couple, set in an ominously familiar 1890s New England, appropriate and reinscribe Lovecraft's work to create an intersection of cosmic horror and male/male romantic fiction.

If Lovecraft is helpful with unpacking aspects of our current cultural and political circumstances, he may also help us approach the overwhelming problem of the Anthropocene. George Mousinho discusses this problem in light of Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* and his lesser known, co-authored, story, "Till A' the Seas." Mousinho underscores Lovecraft's contemporary relevance when it comes to the imagined human exploration both in terms of uncovering hidden truths and of unleashing potentially apocalyptic forces.

The collection closes with Lucas Townsend's article "Reading Lovecraft in an Era of Post-Truth," which gets right to the problem of finding our way in the world by drawing on the ways Lovecraft can help us wrestle with the current "post-truth" era. False narratives, absent of verifiable points of reference, have a consequent impact on how we claim to make sense of the world. Townsend supports his analysis on the fact that Lovecraft's characters are generally forced between accepting or denying their observed evidence for the sake of their own psychological health, as well as the general sanity of the world at large.

With the texts presented in this issue, we look forward to inspiring other scholars to expand the current research on the permanence of Lovecraft and his influence on all manner of Gothic and Gothic-related texts of recent years. The current uncertainty and changes to all aspects of our lives brought on by COVID-19 also seem to confirm that humanity's uncertainty about our present and future will stay with us for decades to come. We anticipate that Lovecraft's fiction and its

influence on contemporary cultural products will remain a productive source from which we can read with the hope of making sense of our condition.

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"Life is a Hideous Thing:"

Providence: The Shadow Over Lovecraft and Staging the Unknown

ABSTRACT

Through close analysis of the 2018 show Providence: The Shadow Over Lovecraft, *this work applies dramaturgy, theatre theory and history alongside horror and cinematic techniques to Lovecraft's stories, examining the way that fear—and the unknown—can be performed. Devised and staged by Simon Maeder and Dominic Allen, this one-act horror-comedy utilises numerous theatrical and cinematic techniques to perform scenes from Lovecraft's life, as well as several of his stories, including* "The Statement of Randolph Carter" *(1920),* "Herbert West—Reanimator" *(1922),* The Shadow Over Innsmouth *(1936) and* "The Call of Cthulhu" *(1928). Destabilising the relationship between performer and spectator, Providence evokes Lovecraft's disturbing and disruptive ambiance through various theatrical techniques, such as Théâtre du Grand Guignol. Primarily focusing on the difficulty of translating Lovecraft's notoriously invisible or indescribable monsters to the stage, the show's devising process suggests that acknowledging the practical limitations of theatre ultimately frees the performer, allowing for theatrical creativity and stagecraft to be exploited to powerful effect. Critical analysis concerning theatrical adaptations of Lovecraft's work is underdeveloped, therefore this article hopes to invite further consideration of this topic.*

Keywords: Theatre, Adaptation, Performance, Stagecraft, Suspense

For many of H.P. Lovecraft's creations, terror lies in the intangible and indescribable, bringing further uncertainty and destabilisation to already volatile Gothic themes of isolation, corrupt power, strange places and transgressive creatures. While Gothic monsters such as vampires, werewolves and zombies follow a generally consistent set of rules, Lovecraftian entities are born from the Weird, infused with the "dread of outer, unknown forces [. . .] a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space"(Lovecraft 1945, 16).[1] Part of the horror of Weird and Cosmic creatures is that they cannot be faced or fought in the same way as other horror monsters. Protagonists can barely fathom the existence of these creatures, much less know how to defeat them. Confronting these representatives of the unknown almost inevitably leads to death, mutation, or madness.

However, in order to reimagine Lovecraft's work in commercial form, the arcane must somehow be made comprehensible. The vast and dangerous unknown must somehow be constrained into a palatable format that can be understood and enjoyed without losing its disturbing impact.[2] Critics such as Julian Petley have spoken of the difficulties in translating Lovecraft's "crushingly pessimistic wider worldview"(Joshi 1996, 488) into a cinematic product both generally and for specific texts, citing a lack of characters and action as well as dense descriptive passages derived from a complicated and bleak mythos (Petley 2007, 43). These same issues arise when adapting Lovecraft—or Lovecraftian-inspired narratives—for the stage, with much of the peril unseen or indescribable, exacerbated by Lovecraft's simultaneous evocation of fascination and human insignificance that S. T. Joshi terms "cosmicism" (ibid, 47).

Despite this creative conundrum, numerous theatre companies have attempted to stage adaptations of Lovecraft's work, including the 2018 touring piece *Providence: The Shadow Over Lovecraft*. Devised and staged by Simon Maeder and Dominic Allen, this one-act horror-comedy was performed at the VAULT Festival (London), the Edinburgh Fringe and the London Horror Festival. Using an intriguing blend of physical theatre, comedy and a chilling score by Wilfred Petherbridge, the play explores Lovecraft's (subsequently called Howard for the purpose of this work to differentiate between the character on stage and his real-life counterpart) controversial life through the development of several of his stories. A key part of the show involves staging sections of these narratives, including "The Statement of Randolph Carter" (1920), "Herbert West—Reanimator" (1922), "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (1936) and "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928). *Providence* not only navigates the difficulties of presenting these stories to a theatrical audience, but also integrating them within the main narrative. Utilizing a frame narrative

[1] For a more comprehensive discussion of the Weird versus the Gothic, see Woofter 2019.
[2]An approach equally taken in the series of audio plays created by Dark Adventure Radio Theatre (DART) and NYC Radiotheatre. However, not only does this have a larger cast, but the radio format benefits Lovecraft's ineffable worlds. H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society, https://www.hplhs.org/; NYC Radiotheatre, https://www.radiotheatrenyc.com/.

establishes the "strangeness" of the storytelling before Lovecraft's texts are actually staged, blending them into an overarching narrative that effectively weaves between several different simultaneous realities (the stage environment; Lovecraft's life and afterlife; the stories). The company (re)crafted these stories with only two actors, a virtually blank stage, and minimal props, relying solely on the actors' skills, an effective sound palette and the horror of the stories themselves to create fear, unease and disgust.

Much like the plethora of films adapted from or inspired by Lovecraft's work, the stage has adopted his themes and narratives,[3] despite the challenge of making these formidable but unknown horrors real for a theatrical audience. *Providence* utilizes both theatrical and cinematic practices to entertain and terrify, combining the immediacy and tangible thrill of the theatre with the technology and tension of the screen. Working within the restrictions of a small-budget theatrical performance, Maeder and Allen nevertheless create compelling moments of horror, conjuring Lovecraft's immense and unspeakable creatures from suggestion, movement and reaction. Their work on *Providence* suggests that acknowledging the practical limitations of theatre in fact frees the performer, allowing for theatrical creativity and stagecraft to be exploited to powerful effect.

The theatrical and cinematic techniques used by *Providence* to adapt Lovecraft's narratives for the stage, as well as their historic influences, edifies the destabilizing relationship between performer and spectator. Various techniques designed to evoke suspense are employed, such as breaking the fourth wall and the sign-posting of the horrors to come utilized in both Grand Guignol and the cinema of attractions. Furthermore, manipulation of space and sound is used to disturb the audience, creating a claustrophobic, invasive and unstable atmosphere; spatial and aural disruptions also allow for Lovecraft's complex worlds and expansive monsters to be imagined on stage.

Loving Your Limits: Claustrophobia, Sign-Posting and Performing Monsters

The unrestrained and transgressive aspects of horror and science fiction means they are the perfect genres to explore the limits of what can be achieved on stage, particularly Lovecraft's awe-inspiring and sublime cosmic horror. However, the theatrical devising process requires an understanding of the limitations that will hinder more elaborate and extravagant ideas. Alongside excitement and enthusiasm for ambitious projects, rehearsals soon reveal which ideas will prove impossible on a practical level due to space, budget, cast and so on. Despite this, establishing and understanding limitations can become a freeing experience instead of an enslaving restriction.

[3] Including the annual theatrical London Lovecraft Festival, where *Providence* was also performed. http://londonlovecraft.com/.

When and how to reveal the threat and/or monster is a recurring issue throughout the horror genre. While uncanny, sensory stimulation (such as glimpses in the shadows, muffled sounds and disembodied screams) assist in creating an atmosphere of dread and fear, revealing the monster too much or too early can irreparably weaken its impact, derailing the entire text. There is a danger that, once seen, the monster just does not inspire much fear, or even provokes laughter. Lovecraft frequently employed the threat of the unseen or indescribable to torment both characters and audience. Not only did Lovecraft often make his monsters invisible to the naked eye such as the creature in "The Dunwich Horror" (1929), but he made actually *seeing* the creature a crucial part of the horror itself, as with the infamous "Innsmouth look" or the first physical emergence of Cthulhu:

> Poor Johansen's handwriting almost gave out when he wrote of this. Of the six men who never reached the ship, he thinks two perished of pure fright in that accursed instant. The Thing cannot be described—there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order. A mountain walked or stumbled. God! (Lovecraft 2014a, 216).

By not describing the creature, Lovecraft refuses to break the suspense of the scene—no relief is offered, increasing both terror and tension. The reader can see the extreme, indescribable effect of merely witnessing the creature, with the peppering of expletives ("God!") reinforcing the narrator's own fears. Lovecraftian entities defy description and language, with Zadok's ability to talk rapidly disintegrating ("The Shadow Over Innsmouth"), the unpronounceable Cthulhu and R'lyeh being the closest recognisable sound to the "gibberish" (ibid, 197) that is actually heard, and the protagonist of "The Statement of Randolph Carter" being told by his ill-fated companion that the unseen threat is "too utterly beyond thought [. . .] no man could know it and live!" (Lovecraft 2014b, 86).

How, then, can something unseen, unknowable and irrepressible be staged, particularly by a cast of two? On a practical level it cannot be done, and in horror terms it *should not* be done. Terror belongs in the shadows, no matter the medium. Writing on cinematic adaptations of Lovecraft's works, Petley suggests that "the most effective visualisations are generally the briefest," with "tantalising glimpses," "sudden eruptions" and point-of-view shots expressing the power of the Lovecraftian monster (Petley 2007, 46). Theatre-makers employ the same technique, using a lack of realism to their advantage by giving the audience just enough sensory information to create an image.

Theatre lies in a liminal space between the phantasmic word and the illustrative cinema; while it cannot compete with the budget and realism of film, it can turn the purely imaginative worlds of literature into something tangible. For the creators of *Providence*, theatre works around life; re-imagining the recognizable into the wondrous. In this way, theatre packages and sells people's experiences back to them, much like a child can use a cardboard box to be a car one moment, and a house the next. The reason this arguably works so well in the horror genre is that not

only presenting an actual monster would be impossible,[4] any attempt would in fact be pointless. Michel Houellebecq explains that Lovecraft's heavy descriptions impede adaptation in visual form as "Images graze the consciousness but none appear sufficiently sublime, sufficiently fantastic; none come close to the pinnacle of dreams" (Houellebecq 2005, 63-64). Therefore, as with cinema, revealing the monster selectively is effective because imagination can come up with far more potent threats than reality. Theatre is the bridge between text and film where the audience can still use their imaginations, therefore it stands to reason to *imply* the horror rather than to show it.

The creators of *Providence* implemented Sanford Meisner's philosophy that all "acting is reacting".[5] Advocating that, "acting is behaving truthfully under imaginary circumstances," the Meisner Technique encourages instinctual spontaneous responses through both improvisation and repetition, believing that actors give more authentic performances when responding directly to their environment (Silverberg 1994, 9). During a climactic moment in "The Call of Cthulhu," when the characters encounter the monster, the actors' eyes widen at the unseen horror in the distance, while a simple choregraphed slow gaze upward gives the audience a sense of scale. This, coupled with Petherbridge's terrifying, echoing sound design gives the audience all they need to *see* Cthulhu. Much like Lovecraft's original story, it is the witness's reaction that validates the horror, not the monster itself. The terror of Cthulhu is substantiated by Allen's character reflexively and wordlessly shooting himself in the head; the hopelessness and enormity of the situation calling for immediate and terminal action with no resistance or exclamation.

Reliance on reaction rather than description allows Maeder and Allen to use dialogue sparingly, using silence or a breaking down of words to exploit the tension between the disturbing and the comprehensible. Words are adapted into action, and *Providence* does not shy away from removing words entirely to produce emotive imagery. Maeder's training at the Jacques Lecoq School of Movement and Theatre in Paris leads him to approach the devising process from a physical perspective first, only using words when they are absolutely necessary.

Maeder employed Lecoq techniques when developing Howard's character, believing that getting his physicality right was essential. As there is no footage of Lovecraft, Maeder had to work off descriptions, including one account that described him walking like a bird. Subsequently, he decided to base Howard's physicality on a crane: head forward and bobbing as he walked, feet coming up a little too high as he stepped.

Allen's portrayal of Poe, however, was based on the physicality of Groucho Marx. The actors wanted Poe to be the complete opposite of what people might

[4]In current fringe theatre, at least.
[5]This is more of an adage than an explicit quote, mostly associated with the Meisner Technique.

expect; after death, Poe is finally happy, able to bounce around and make jokes. This dissonance manifests in Poe's movements, which were inspired by Marx's "splitting" of his body; legs and feet moving smoothly while his top half could jerk about to create a strange yet charming disconnect (a technique employed in reverse by Charlie Chaplin, who would open his feet out and "shut" his upper body).

Lecoq emphasized precision, as well as "qualité de mouvement" (quality of movement); every physical thing an actor does on stage must be easily understood by someone far away. *Providence*'s movement sequences, characterizations, mannerisms, mimes, and reactions directed at the audience, were all based on teachings from Lecoq. This is most notable when Maeder and Allen break down Lovecraft's stories into short vignettes without losing story elements or atmosphere, such as Herbert West's (Maeder) murder spree. The stage becomes bathed in a red backlight, meaning that only the performer's shadowy outlines can be seen. The actors perform a choreographed sequence, where motions of stabbing, strangling and shooting become heightened to a ridiculous frenzy. The jerky, erratic movements do not produce laughter from the audience however, rather they essentialize the atmosphere of the story in a gruesome montage of death.

Condensing complex and extensive narrative events, such as West's murders, into a slick, evocative sequence is particularly useful when creating drama for a small theatre space. Although they may initially appear limiting, these performance spaces can be turned into an asset when devising horror texts. Most touring shows like *Providence* have to be adapted to the space available, often fringe theatres or festival venues. The original show was staged at the VAULT Festival in a black box theatre; a small, bare space intended to be quickly modified for a variety of intimate performances. The production lacks the grander experience of bigger-budget shows, but benefits greatly from the versatility and stark atmosphere of black box theatre. This direct, dark, and simple staging offers an incredibly close environment, with actors able to interact easily with the audience. This kind of theatre demands a different stagecraft skillset, as although there is little-to-no emphasis on set design, lighting and so on, the onus of creation rests almost entirely on the performers' ability.

At first, the cramped stage presented a challenge to Maeder and Allen, but it was turned it into an opportunity. The actors not only utilize the tight space, but work to exacerbate its close atmosphere to induce oppression and claustrophobia when needed. Maeder and Allen purposefully brought the audience closer to the raised stage to create a more intimate (or claustrophobic) feel, with the added bonus of upping tension during horror sequences due to the actor's proximity. This intentional unease was heavily inspired by Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" (Artaud 1958). Artaud's work aimed to induce an altered state in the spectator, closing the gap between reality and fantasy. He wanted to confront the audience through image and gesture, as well as technical tools such as sound and lighting, removing the spectator from the position of calm observer. The "cruelty" lay less in "horror" and more in a brutal resolve to break the safety of being in an audience, shocking the senses and emotions through sensory disruption rather than words.

Maeder and Allen's choice to bring the audience closer was so successful that the decision to limit the space on stage and bring any seating forward was carried over to other venues on tour.

Providence also borrows techniques from the French theatrical horror tradition Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, particularly in its use of entrapping the audience through intimacy, collusion and signaling. Hand and Wilson note that, "Dramatic irony and the use of clearly recognizable narrative structures are the key weapons in the writer's armory, allowing the audience to come gradually to a realization of what is about to happen" (Hand and Wilson 2002, 49). The Grand-Guignol's reliance on signposting is used effectively in *Providence*, with Howard's (often verbatim) narration and the audience's knowledge of both the stories themselves and horror conventions in general to provide foreboding or comic relief (with the aid of sound effects, a brief lighting change and some puppetry, a "seafood platter" becomes a squishy tentacled monstrosity crawling towards Howard's face). During "Reanimator," one character insists that he saw the first supposedly unsuccessful test subject walking about, shortly before a loud knocking on the door. Hand and Wilson write:

> In Grand-Guignol horror the issue is not *what* will happen, or even *who* it will happen to, but rather *when* and *how* it will happen. This allows for a gradual increase in tension, which is only released when it finally *does* happen [...] In this sense it is not the aim of the Grand-Guignol performer to make the audience jump out of their skins, but to ratchet up the tension by playing with the audience's sense of anticipation, to the point that the climactic moment of the piece provides an almost welcome release (ibid, 50).

In the case of "Reanimator," the knowledge of what is trying to get inside, backed by unsettling sounds and the spectator's genre expectations (knowing the body on the slab will inevitably reanimate), causes more tension and drama than the shock of the eventual scare.

The tension developed by the claustrophobic setting and clear signalling fosters an atmosphere of apprehension and dread. The theatre audience is required to put their body at risk, more so than cinema. Horror in particular attempts to elicit a visceral reaction from its audience, whether this is fear, disgust or laughter. Speaking on horror cinema, Jonathan Lake Crane writes that, "the audience "must also cooperate by laying their bodies on the line. Laughter and fright both require gut reactions [...] The audience must willingly allow the film to put blood pressure up a notch *and* tickle macabre funny bones. Films will not work if we refuse to involve the body in the spectacle; however, when we give ourselves over to the film, we put our own flesh at risk" (Crane 1994, 37). Similarly, James Twitchell dissects the meaning of "horror," noting that it stems from the Latin word *horrēre* ("to bristle") and the shivering feeling it causes the feeling of creeping flesh ("the creeps") (Twitchell 1985, 10). "Horror" as a physical state became synonymous with the moment of transition, of being on a threshold: "We stand still and shudder, suddenly paralyzed" (ibid, 11). But in a theatre or cinema space, the audience not

only willingly seek this sensation, etiquette (and the fact the show cannot be "turned off") makes it difficult to leave until the horror is over.

Additionally, in theatre there is a risk that the action will spill into the audience, breaking any semblance of the spectator being protected by the boundary of the stage. In both cinema and theatre, the spectator knows that although they can be jump-scared, they cannot be touched or hurt. However, the risk remains that something unexpected will creep out of the dark and grab them.[6] In this sense, theatre becomes more akin to experiences where consumers pay to go through fright experiences such as haunted houses, terrorized by actors as well as environment. The introduction of potentially interactive live bodies into any performance creates disorder; the spectator is put under threat.

While "reminding viewers that they are watching a film is an unproductive thing for a Hollywood director to do in most contexts" (Spadoni 2007, 112), acknowledging the fact that there is an audience can be a productive tool in theatre, particularly in horror or comedy (which often go hand in hand). Breaking the fourth wall invites a relationship of play and collusion, similar to the vaudeville tradition or early film's "cinema of attraction" as discussed by Tom Gunning.[7] *Providence* begins with Howard (Maeder) announcing that "Life is a hideous thing" shortly before his attempt to commit suicide is interrupted by the ghost of Edgar Allan Poe (Allen), who helps guide Lovecraft through an exploration of his childhood, writings, marriage and death. Both actors play an assortment of minor roles, but while Howard narrates his life, Poe is acutely aware that they are on stage, talking aside to the audience, assuring Howard that anything not making sense is because they are in a play, while occasionally slipping up by mentioning Lovecraft's "short, short life." Even so, Howard appears to have some awareness of the strangeness of the environment. For example, after Howard is teased by a mocking child (Allen), he asks the audience, "Did you see that little girl?" adding conspiratorially, "With the moustache?" Howard and Poe's asides to the audience work in the same way as an actor's look to camera in the cinema of attractions, a "cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator" (Gunning 2006, 382). Therefore, a different kind of relationship is constructed with the spectator. Poe's references to the events on stage being part of a play, the actors breaking the fourth wall and even coming out into the audience, all assist in breaking these boundaries.

Howard and Poe initially present the events on stage as an exhibition rather than theatrical entertainment, using the comedic and the macabre to draw in their

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[6]*The Woman in Black*, for example, features the spectral Woman entering the stage from the back of the auditorium, walking directly through the audience. During one scene, fog spills out into the audience, obscuring their view while the actor runs through the auditorium shouting in terror. Other productions dissolve the boundary altogether, placing the audience directly into the action.
[7]Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty also aimed to interrupt the relationship between audience and performer, disturbing the spectator.

audience. The first event the spectator is invited to is Howard's attempted suicide, backed by a vaudevillian style song and dance. Poe in particular is a powerful showman. His expressive pantomiming, continual attempts to interrupt with his own life story, manipulation of the stage ("I know a lot about depression" he says as a red spotlight and sounds of a raven play over a discordant musical note)[8] and quick-witted, comedic responses when bantering with Howard introduce him as a performer, even a barker. The sequence is also an early indicator to Poe's trickster nature; his ability to quickly switch between characters, knowledge of both the afterlife and the fact that he and Howard are in a play, as well as macabre comedy quickly establishes an unstable and unpredictable milieu that is later manipulated into horror.

Gunning argues that the cinema of attractions "directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle—a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself" (Gunning 2006, 384). The attraction can also be used as a technical showcase, demonstrating the power of cinematic (or in this case theatrical) techniques. The "story" sections of *Providence* increasingly turn horror into spectacle as the play continues (such as the aforementioned sequence in "Reanimator"). However, this is done without the blood and gore usually associated with visual horror; relying on reactions and the unseen turns the limits of the stage into an advantage by relying on the power of imagination. Remarkable spectacle is nevertheless created through body language, darkness, sound and simple technical changes. "Innsmouth," for example, takes place almost in complete darkness, lit primarily through torches held by the actors. As the protagonist (Allen) asks "where am I?" the lights fade out and a guttural voice pitted with clicks slowly replies from the darkness: "Innsmouth." Later, as the protagonist sleeps, a strange-looking hand lit by torchlight unsuccessfully tries the door. Gradually, the creature (Maeder) is revealed in sections as it chases the protagonist through the town, its distorted body language and unnerving voice making it appear deformed, damp and eerily uncanny. The stripped-down aesthetic of *Providence* is not only a space for horror, it allows space for play and imagination, working within the limitations of the stage to create the "radically transformative space" of theatre (Rabey 2018, 23).

Weird Theatre: Spatial Disruptions

From the beginning of *Providence*, spatial and temporal rules are corrupted, pushing the play towards the boundary-defying Weird. The set design of the play allows for continual spatial interrupts to take place. The bare set uses very few props, relying

[8]This "wink" to the audience is also used in order to acknowledge Lovecraft's racist and xenophobic views. During the Howard and Poe sections, whenever Howard makes an inappropriate comment, a sinister musical sting plays while both he and Poe look away or out to the audience ("Did we just get some foreshadowing?" Poe shudders). This simple but effective technique instantly condemns these views of Lovecraft without preaching or discussion, allowing the play to continue without shying away from the problematic subject matter.

primarily on a chair and two sheets to conjure almost every scene, both natural and supernatural. Virtually everything else is created through physical theatre, mime, sound, and puppetry. When characters from Howard's life appear, they are signalled by slight alterations in costume: a sheet quickly wrapped around a waist and a change in body language and intonation quickly transforms Poe into Howard's mother. Others are shown via puppetry, imbuing a sense of play and imagination into childhood memories, for example, a metal moka pot is turned upside-down to stand in for Howard as a child, while a piece of lace becomes his two silent aunts.

Through an examination of Howard Barker's work, James Reynold's develops *chthonic theatre*: a "literal and metaphorical 'going underground'" that rejects order, enlightenment and clarification (Reynolds 2015, 149). In both presentation and narrative, chthonic theatre advocates a physical and emotional climate of darkness, claustrophobia and the subterranean. Reynolds proposes *chthonic space* as an unrelenting descent underground to death, madness or an untethered, eternal existence, which may nevertheless lead to physical or spiritual regeneration. This imagining of the chthonic space particularly resonates with the VAULT production of *Providence*. The festival venue entrance is found under a bridge, leading off to an underground space, sectioned and transformed into several small black-box theatre spaces. The feel of the auditorium, therefore, is distinctly subterranean; exposed brick and concrete walls, a close atmosphere, musky scent, and the rumbling of London noises above and around establish an uncannily claustrophobic environment before any action actually takes place. Hand and Wilson discuss the importance of converted space in Grand-Guignol, arguing that these spaces disrupt the audience's sense of security: "Layers of complexity are always added to any performance when it is lured away from purpose-built theatres. Such theatrical experiences play around the boundary between 'this is not *a* theatre' and 'this is not *theatre*'" (Hand and Wilson 2002, 30-31). This underlines the Weird experience of the play—the smells, sounds of underground space and even the vibrations through the floor and chairs from the bass of the sound effects push the body into a more extreme state than a conventional theatre space.

As the play continues, stories such as "Reanimator" and "Innsmouth" become intertwined with incidents from Howard's own life. As West and his assistant lean over their first test subject waiting to see if he will awaken, the tension is interrupted by a telephone ringing. Howard answers (his voice changing dramatically as he stutters "Herbert We—Howard Lovecraft"), he is told that his mother has been admitted to an asylum before returning to "Reanimator." After the story has concluded, Howard is again seen on the phone, being informed of his mother's death, juxtaposing images of madness, bodies, and shrouds.

The combination of chthonic descent and spatial instability gives the impression, not of a linear biopic narrative, but a downward journey as aspects of Lovecraft's life are reluctantly excavated and presented to the audience. Echoes of Howard's life increasingly begin to appear in the "stories," such as young Howard's aunts telling him "Family will always bring you home. To Providence" which

reappears later during "Shadow" as "Family will always bring you home. To Innsmouth." The further down the narrative goes, the more the environment becomes unstable and strange, until it begins to fracture during the staging of the final story "The Call of Cthulhu," where it is not made entirely clear whether the protagonist is a character in a story or Howard himself. Space collapses in on itself as Howard's reality becomes indistinguishable from his fictional worlds.[9]

Sound

Sound is a vital component in creating effective theatrical horror, used not only to build tension but also to create meaning and even narrative. As Hand discusses in more detail, the spectator's emotional response to auditory stimuli can even be recorded on a physiological level (Hand 2018, 125-126), further dissolving the boundaries between stage and spectator.[10]

Petherbridge's sound design for *Providence* is used as a backdrop that adds extra clarity and atmosphere due to a purposeful lack of set and props. Diegetic sound is used to craft scenes such as cafes, riverbanks, parties, and buses with no set or props, while heartbeats, screams, and a repeated motif of a formidable rhythmic booming intensify moments of horror. Sound effects range from brief, surprising sounds used for comedic effect (such as the screech of an unfortunate cat when Howard throws a heavy book offstage), to a massive rolling tumult of organ chords mixed with hideous wet, squashing sounds that create the vision of an ancient Eldritch God of the deep in the spectator's mind.

On a practical level, sound can also be utilized for censorship, or to allow complex scenes to be staged with less difficulty.[11] *Providence* exploits the dissonance of what disturbing acts can and cannot be seen throughout, but particularly during the "Reanimator" section. After Herbert decides that he needs fresh bodies, the stage is plunged into red light as a montage plays out of Herbert killing his victims in silhouette. Over the top of this is not only a huge cacophony of sound, but the monotonous voice-over of Herbert recording every failed result until the scene reaches its climax with Howard desperately screaming at the body in frustration before an eerie and heart-racing silence. Sound here allows what may have been a limitation to be reformatted as a disturbing, gruesome sequence.

There is, therefore, a distinct power in the strategic power or both volume and silence, particularly in a stage environment where sound is palpable and

[9]This technique also allows the company to address Lovecraft's racist and xenophobic attitudes. As Howard's narrative begins to break down, space simultaneously begins to fracture, allowing for unwelcome appearances by a Ku Klux Klan member and a Salem witch-hunter.
[10]For example, *The Woman in Black* (1987) uses a sophisticated soundscape against a virtually barren set to create uncanny, often terrifying moments, while the audience of *Ghost Stories* (2010) enter the auditorium to an eerie ambience featuring drips, rumbles and whines.
[11]Such as *The Woman in Black*'s fatal pony and trap accident on the moors, or the vampire Eli's attack on the bullies at a swimming pool during the climax of *Let the Right One In* (2013).

inescapable. Stephen Mallatratt explains in his "Adaptor's Note" for *The Woman in Black* "raising the volume of a sound cue to an unexpected level, the audience can be shocked to screaming pitch" (Mallatratt, 1998). Maeder equally asserts the power of volume during "Reanimator," where the incredibly loud cue of the reanimating corpse caused people to jump out of their seats. West's (Maeder) repeated unsuccessful attempts at reanimation take place amidst a cacophonous soundscape but after the final failure the players and audience are plunged into a pregnant silence. Maeder and Allen experimented during rehearsals for the most effective moment to reanimate the corpse. After a physical release of tension in the characters and audience, the corpse jumps to life with sounds of screeching and screaming. The scream itself is mixed with the sound of a train braking recorded up close and in high quality, blowing two speakers in one Edinburgh venue.

The sound design was intended to be a constant threat that could appear out of nowhere at any moment, further setting the audience on edge. Furthermore, while the unknown is terrifying partly because of its unlimited and therefore incomprehensible nature, sound offers the spectator information about the threat. Paradoxically, however, instead of that information offering enlightenment, it can instead increase the uncanniness of the threat; in the same way that glimpses of the monster makes it more terrifying, auditory clues confirm threats of danger without the comfort of clarity; the terror of something heard but not seen is that it can still be anything or anywhere—but it is definitely *there*.

At one key point in the staging of "Randolph Carter," sound takes over from performer as the Carter's (Maeder) companion, Warren (Allen) "disappears" into a grave.[12] Warren's voice is played over a radio while Carter continues to react to it in real time; the disembodying of voice from performer creating a further layer of uncanniness. The voice over the radio describes terrible visions and urges Carter to "run and don't look back!" before the rope travels unnaturally fast, suggesting something dragging Warren away. Although Carter is able to stop the rope, the buzzing static from the radio becomes fortified by both high-pitched notes and a deep booming noise. When Allen fails to answer Carter's pleas, the sound of the voice shifts into a monstrous, demonic tone that delivers the fateful final line from the story: "YOU FOOL, WARREN IS DEAD!"

Sound in *Providence* is also an important tool in signposting the horror about to happen. Recontextualizing seemingly innocuous sounds suddenly makes them ominous. Whenever a re-enactment of a short story is about to take place, the sound of a typewriter can be heard. The *Providence* audience quickly understands what this cue means, prompting apprehension and heightened vigilance.[13] Furthermore, the sounds themselves are designed to create tension—the staccato clacks of the

[12]Achieved by Allen miming repelling into an upturned armchair.
[13]Jerrold Levinson discusses the effect of the "shark" musical theme in *Jaws* (1975), suggesting that in the film, visual cues, such as point of view shots from the waterline, do not necessarily mean that that shark is present, yet the sound instantly tells the audience that shark is there.

typewriter are sudden, sharp and intrusive. Like a well-timed ringing phone or knock at the door, the noise alters the atmosphere, suggesting some unseen person or entity has interrupted the narrative. The unnaturally loud volume turns what would usually be a background noise into something unpleasant, and imbues the sound with meaning; it is not only Howard creating a new horror, the actors are as well.

Conclusion

Compared to the vastness and special effects of cinema, or the non-visual scope of radio, theatre can feel restricted, incapable of summoning the monumental and sublime monstrosities of Lovecraft. However, once these limitations are embraced, the oppressive paranoia of Lovecraft can become ideal for an intimate stage, with its tactile environment and palpable atmosphere. Horror has a long tradition on stage, and as such is able to adapt to the challenges of conjuring both physical monsters and the terrors of the unseen and unknowable without necessarily having to corporeally present them to an audience. In many ways *Providence* is as much an homage to the horror genre as it is to Lovecraft's work. Many tropes that pepper the horror film industry have long fallen into realm of cliché yet, in theatre, they can find new life. Twitchell suggests that "Effective make-believe horror occurs when we can no longer trust our own senses to register reality, when we can no longer protect our own pressure points" (Twitchell 1985, 27). Although Twitchell primarily relates this to the illusion of cinema, theatre is an equally potent entity. It relies on practical trickery and the willingness of the audience, not only to be complicit in the reality of the stage, but also to risk the potential physicality of horror by putting their bodies on the line. Throughout *Providence*, the deep, bass notes of the soundscape can have a physical effect on the spectator, such as feeling the vibrations through the floor, or the strange sensation of being pushed by the sound. The show disturbs the audience by playing with their concept of security—bodies are physically manipulated through sound, claustrophobic settings and fourth wall breaks interrupt the anomality of the dark auditorium, while the stage (and actors) may become anything at any time. This unstable atmosphere invites the dread of Lovecraft's unknown monsters, priming the audience to witness the unseeable.

Rabey suggests that Gothic theatre occurs in liminal and/or chthonic space, thereby propelling a "proposition outwards (and perhaps upwards) to its extreme pinnacle, as there is 'nowhere else logically to go', when exposing conventional limitations as constraints which do not *necessarily* apply" (Rabey 2018, 24). As *Providence* proves, the "conventional limitations" of theatre are ripe for play and creative transgressions. The stage may be bound by practical constraints, but these limitations are there to be played with an overcome—particularly when paired with the interminable and transgressive space of horror.

Although the play ostensibly follows Lovecraft's life, it is structured to suggest a journey downwards towards the unknown. As the narrative continues, spatial and temporal boundaries become interrupted. Reality—both for Lovecraft and the spectator—is increasingly distorted. Faced with his inevitable death,

Howard declares, "I don't want to fear the unknown anymore. I want to know it." Attempting to approach the unknown brings with it fear and horror, but there is also pleasure in imagining this uncanny existence; a borderless world offers no safety, but also eternal exploration. As one character explains in one of the final scenes of *Providence*: "Lovecraft's story was a Lovecraft story." In staging this story, then, the unknown is not only a powerful driving force, but the key to exploring imagination, horror, life, and the monsters that live beyond them.

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Blood and Insight:

Monstrosity in *Bloodborne*

ABSTRACT

In no other medium is H. P. Lovecraft's continued relevance more evident than in the videogame. The form's unique features, including the role of random chance in determining outcomes, the possible death(s) of the protagonist, and the possibility of multiple endings, are well-suited to Lovecraft's cruel, oft incomprehensible creatures and cosmology. This paper analyzes From Software's 2015 game Bloodborne *as both heir to and revisionist critique of Lovecraft's work and worldview. Through its alien creatures and human organizations, Bloodborne recognizes monstrosity not as the defining characteristic of an external entity or force, but rather as the human process of identification and alien-ation of difference. I begin by illustrating how the monsters of cosmic horror are themselves a reinvention of earlier materials: Gothic writers like Machen and Le Fanu took monsters out of the woods and made them unwelcome visitors from far realms and dimensions. Lovecraft derided the anthropocentricism of his predecessors, and made his invaders impersonal, unconcerned with human fate. This distance required and reinforced a series of binaries separating (hu)man and monster, body and mind, and heaven (or hell) and Earth. I argue that* Bloodborne*'s monsters serve to undermine these distinctions, either through embodying a collapse of difference itself, or by metaphorizing the process of monstrosity, as defined above. Finally, the game's third ending,* "Childhood's Beginning," *seems to promise new, if somewhat ambiguous, possibilities.*

Keywords: Lovecraft, Monstrosity, Videogames, Dualism, *Bloodborne*

Before From Software released *Bloodborne* for PlayStation 4 in March 2015, fans of the developer's previous titles thought they knew what to expect. As with *Demon's Souls* or *Dark Souls, Bloodborne* would cast players as weary slayers of monsters in a decaying fantasy world. *Bloodborne*'s evocative first trailer, "The Hunt Begins," encouraged this perspective. It depicts a long-coated killer with an enormous sawblade, cutting down furious beast men in a stylized seventeenth-century central European setting. So it was something of a surprise when the released game's second half, and indeed its entire plot, revolves not around a familiar 'beast scourge' but rather the events that set it in motion—humankind's attempt to make contact with, and to claim the powers of, strange cosmic beings called The Great Ones; beings clearly inspired by the Great Old Ones of Howard Phillips Lovecraft's stories and mythos. As *Bloodborne* progresses, it moves from one subgenre of horror based upon creatures of European folklore (werewolves, witches, vampiric 'vilebloods') to another, more recent one, based upon Lovecraftian monstrosities (alien larvae, scholars transformed into viscous slug people or many-eyed insects, and brain-sucking fiends whose tentacles leech the player's avatar of wisdom and life). That the game's story was actually a Mythos-inspired one was deliberately held back as something of a secret, unveiled to players only after they reached the game's second half.

Bloodborne's progression of enemies from the more recognizable to the least comprehensible mirrors the modern development of the horror genre itself: beginning with the more easily metaphorizable monsters of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Gothic novels, it proceeds to twentieth century Lovecraftian monstrosities that marry gross materiality (tentacles, slimes, non-symmetrical morphologies) with an almost aggressive meaninglessness. There is, however, within Lovecraft's work a decipherable thematic, recognizable through a series of deeply ingrained dualisms—separating the cosmic from the earthly, the mind from the body, and the ostensibly evolved from the determinedly degenerate. These are most evident in Lovecraft's establishment of *monstrosity* as that which is the opposite of and always endangering the human. *Bloodborne*'s subgeneric schism is the first of many moves the game enacts in its critique of Lovecraft's conception of monstrosity. On one hand, the game takes Lovecraft at his word—that we are always on the lookout for the alien, and that difference is the onus of all fear. Lovecraft's famous opening to *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, in which he proclaims that "[t]he oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (1973, 12) is a theme very much in evidence within *Bloodborne*. It is a game about ancient cosmic terrors, largely incomprehensible to mortals. There are some crucial, instructive distinctions, however. In *Bloodborne,* markers of difference are always developed, iterated upon, and ultimately undermined. Human hunters, for instance, increasingly resemble the very beasts they hunt. Differences in emphasis and epistemology between rival scholars produce results (or failures) that are only dark mirrors of each other. What *Bloodborne* acknowledges in its updating of Lovecraft is that cosmic horror is the product of two assumptions. The first, identified plainly by Lovecraft in *Supernatural Horror* and within his fiction generally, is that great inscrutable horrors originate *outside*—of our solar system or species or race or powers of perception—and these horrors are always ready to

invade, to penetrate whichever boundary we care most to erect. The second, mostly unspoken, assumption is that differences—typically taking the form of rigid, exclusive binaries (human/monster, body/mind, earth/space)—must first be investigated, classified, and labelled as such. Mindful of both assumptions, *Bloodborne*'s plot, characters, setting, and yes, its monsters allow the game to reproduce a number of Lovecraftian scenarios, while also subverting their usual meanings. In *Bloodborne,* the insistence on separateness, and the fascination with only the discrete parts (of the human, of the body, of the cosmos) is revealed to be a deeply human monstrosity.

Gaming Lovecraft

While works influenced by Lovecraft exist in all media from prose to film to popular music, the video game has become especially prominent over the last two decades. There are many reasons for this. Certainly, the niche, nerdy fandom that grew up on Lovecraft's work makes up a disproportionately significant portion of the artists and programmers that create video games. It helps that cost-averse development houses and publishers can use open-source Mythos stories and monsters without paying expensive licensing fees. And while video game development is expensive, the lower cost of making believably strange Lovecraftian horrors in games relative to filmed entertainments will probably ensure that the former provide more plentiful visual representations of Lovecraftian monsters and settings for the foreseeable future.

The explosion in Lovecraftian titles has been increasingly acknowledged among makers and critics. Alexander Chatziioannou declared 2019 "The Year of Cosmic Horror Video Games," lamenting:

> [t]he influence of H.P. Lovecraft, and the numerous writers inspired by his work, persists, nowhere more so than in video games—to the extent that one could engage solely with titles that traffic in overt references to their works, and still amass an impossible-to-exhaust backlog in the process.]…]multiple opinion pieces have been written calling for developer restraint in regards to pumping out games in the genre of what's generally referred to as "cosmic horror"—not due to concerns about Lovecraft's racism, but to stem oversaturation in the market. (Chatziioannou 2019).

While these adaptations are common, most are not entirely successful. The video essay *An in-depth Look at Lovecraftian Video Games* argues that most games inspired by Lovecraft's work do not effectively communicate his themes and ambiance. One of the reasons for this is that games typically rely on some form of *action* as their core mechanic (firing a gun, swinging a torch or a sword). Lovecraft's own works are light on action, largely because it would be futile: many of his monsters, especially the Great Old Ones, are effectively indestructible. This creates a problem for the game's creators: either make a game where not much happens and players have little to do, or—even worse!—make a game where they destroy Lovecraftian horrors left and right, taking all of the horrible majesty out of them (NeverKnowsBest). After all, one can kill Great Old Ones only so many times before the moniker becomes laughably ill-descriptive. Another problem that has plagued adaptations of

Lovecraft in film and games has been an over-emphasis on "tentacles and other superficial elements" (Weinstock 2016) without a clear understanding of Lovecraft's ideological and thematic concerns.

Bloodborne is one of a small number of games that avoids these pitfalls, and this is largely due to the clever way it treats its source material. *Bloodborne* is not a direct adaptation of any of Lovecraft's specific works: director Hidetaka Miyazaki's Great Ones are clear echoes of H. P. Lovecraft's Great Old Ones, but there is no Cthulhu or Azathoth here, and in fact none of the writer's colourful names or exact creatures or settings appear in the game. Rather, it offers up enough similarities so that players of the game eventually recognize that it exists in a Mythos-like universe, but not so many that it becomes subservient to its inspiration. This reinvention is not a pale imitation of Lovecraft, nor is it quite a translation or an adaptation; but it does open up crucial avenues for success as a Lovecraftian text. The first, a solution to Chatziioannou's problem of market saturation-bred boredom, is the game's *defamiliarization* of Lovecraftian creatures: the game's monsters are strange and icky enough to be grotesque and menacing, but not familiar enough to exist in Hello Kitty variants or rest comfortably on the player's desk as a cute plushy toy, as Great Cthulhu himself often does. Indeed, the very popularity Lovecraft's creations have achieved in mass culture gives their literal appearance in any new piece of media more for the pleasure of intertextual frisson than an opportunity to create genuine terror. "Recognition and remembrance," as adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon writes, "are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation" (4). *Bloodborne* works because it surprises its players in its second half with the *unexpected* recognition of a Lovecraftian universe. This is at first obscured within a more Gothic opening section, but, once evident, since the game actually contains none of Lovecraft's readily identifiable creatures and settings, shock reigns as the dominant response, and over-familiarity never diminishes the game's fearfulness.

Secondly, *Bloodborne* uses one of its medium's defining properties in service to its engagement with Lovecraftian material: indeterminacy of outcome. As Hutcheon points out, unlike a novelization of a film, a game's multiple outcomes (including the death of the protagonist at practically any point within the narrative) enhances the "intensity or tension" (50) which sells the newness and originality of the adaptation, allowing for its own cosmic horror to feel dangerous again. Miyazaki's work revels in the excitement of action games, with a core mechanic built around slashing, bludgeoning, and shooting nameless monstrosities; but the moment-to-moment gameplay of *Bloodborne* is so notoriously difficult, terrified players never cease to respect the Great Ones they encounter. As Seth Killian writes, "[t]he result is a feeling of constant fear of painful, expensive death […] a small mammal fear that prompts you towards flight as often as fight… (68). Rather than rush in headlong, as a player would in many action games, they must instead manoeuvre their hunter

through the game's world slowly and deliberately, knowing that death lies around every corner.[1]

Monstrous Developments

The trope most clearly identified with Lovecraft is the invasion of an alien entity upon our reality and consciousness. This was an evolution upon work done by his predecessors. Gothic writers including Sheridan Le Fanu and Arthur Machen (both referenced in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*) had created stories of malicious alien invaders that possess and destroy the unlucky few who, through accident or scientific breakthrough, become cognizant of them. Lovecraft's innovation was to make these aliens impersonal. This departure is evident in stories like "From Beyond"—a probable inspiration for *Bloodborne*—in which a scientist named Crawford Tillinghast builds a machine that will allow humans to experience what they otherwise cannot. He explains the thrust of his research to the story's narrator:

> What do we know… of the world and the universe about us? Our means of receiving impressions are absurdly few, and our notions of surrounding objects infinitely narrow. We see things only as we are constructed to see them, and can gain no idea of their absolute nature. With five feeble senses we pretend to comprehend the boundlessly complex cosmos, yet other beings with a wider, stronger, or different range of senses might not only see very differently the things we see, but might see and study whole worlds of matter, energy, and life which lie close at hand yet can never be detected with the senses we have. I have always believed that such strange, inaccessible worlds exist at our very elbows, *and now I believe I have found a way to break down the barriers.* (Lovecraft 2020, 212, emphasis in original)

As in Le Fanu and Machen, Lovecraft suggests there are other worlds beyond our ken, and accessing them through stimulation of human biology is possible: Tillinghast's machine "will generate waves acting on unrecognized sense-organs that exist in us as atrophied or rudimentary vestiges" (212). Once this is done, the recognition of creatures from other realms allows those creatures to notice the humans who have become aware of them, and to destroy them. The primary difference between, say, Machen's and Le Fanu's creatures and Tillinghast's "great inky, jellyish monstrosities" (213-14) is instructive, however. Earlier invaders can be understood as the dark reflection of the men they haunt (as in Le Fanu) or the lascivious underside of humanity itself (as in Machen). Man and monster both orbit the other like inseparable particles. In Lovecraft, something altogether different happens. We abandon the personal demon for the completely alien, cosmic threat. Tillinghast's jellyfish creatures are innumerable, and similar to each other, but are in no way similar to or bound up with the humans that they swim invisibly amongst. Humans may come to see these monstrosities, but never see themselves *in* them.

[1] The first time I played the game, my hunter died 563 separate times before she finally defeated the last boss monster.

Tillinghast has "seen beyond the bounds of infinity and drawn down daemons from the stars" (214), and this moment and its meanings are likewise echoed in *Bloodborne,* which revises both Lovecraft and his predecessors. After the player's character slays Rom, the Vacuous Spider, the moon descends—'drawn down', as it were, and several features of the game's world change. The most startling shift is the sudden appearance of dozens of lesser Amagdalae, giant insectoid Great Ones, hanging from the buildings of the game's city of Yarnham. Like Lovecraft's jellyfish, these entities were always present but were simply imperceptible until the moon drops and they are made visible.[2] While Le Fanu's and Machen's invaders and Lovecraft's jellyfish all require their victims to notice them in order to act (those who do not are safe) *Bloodborne*'s Amygdalae have always been active upon humankind, looming over and occasionally grasping at people with invisible claws. Their dramatic late game manifestation mostly serves to establish their effect upon human affairs, and to underline the game's conception of monstrosity. The significance of the Amygdalae, and the difference between *Bloodborne*'s hidden monsters and those of its predecessors, is suggested by the creatures' collective name. The *amygdala* is part of the limbic system of the brain, a primordial structure that translates sense experiences into appropriate emotional responses. Specifically, it is responsible for producing anxiety, aggression, sadness, and fear: all appropriate reactions to the sudden appearance of, for instance, massive alien beings. The amygdala is itself a dual organ, containing two nuclei held and separated by the brain's mammillary bodies.[3] In naming the game's most common Great One after a doubled embodiment of fear itself, the Amygdalae become ideal figures for the game's establishment of monstrosity not as something that exists outside of the human, but rather a manifestation of a two-part process—the recognition of difference, *and* the fear and disgust that this recognition unconsciously engenders within the human mind itself. The Amygdalae function as both symbol and instigator of this process, an occurrence made possible because, as Stephen Asma writes in "Monsters on the Brain," "art is a secret language that speaks directly to the limbic system… bypassing discursive (syllogistic) rationality." It can, therefore, "[trigger] the emotions directly" rather than "represent them to us" (955). The recognition of difference and the vehemence of reaction to it both happen unconsciously, but the effects are deeply felt. The implication is significant: fear and hatred of the unknown are not the necessary consequences of the encounter with difference, or even related to any intrinsic quality the other possesses, but rather the unconscious, emotional response to an unrecognized external stimulus. While this fear can be easily stoked and weaponized, as in Lovecraft's writing, *Bloodborne* deploys it to demonstrate the narrow deficiency of the cosmic horror worldview.

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[2] This change happens earlier if the player's character obtains 40 *insight*, an in-game currency and measure of how aware of the cosmic they have become.

[3] And each of these nuclei is in a sense a funhouse mirror of its other half: stimulation of the right amygdala always produces these emotions; stimulation of the left either produces the same emotions—or else something like their opposite: a pleasant sense of contentment. Here perhaps is both the angst of dying to one of *Bloodborne's* most frightening creatures, and the *fiero* experienced by players who finally defeat it.

Difference exists. There *are* others, but *Bloodborne* suggests that the fear they ostensibly provoke, and certainly our reactions to them, originate within the human.

Beginnings, Beasts, and Blood

Bloodborne is set in Yharnam, a fantastical central-European-like city, built upon the ruins of ancient Pthumerian labyrinths, where the blood of the departed Great Ones was discovered a century or so earlier. The player takes control of a new arrival in Yharnam, who after receiving a blood transfusion, awakes within a dream world containing a mysterious workshop. Gehrman, an old warrior, and his living Doll tell the player's character that they are now a *hunter*, who must return to Yharnam, slay its monsters, and unravel the mysteries of the plague that has ravaged the city. In some respects, the hunter resembles the heroic archivist and researcher protagonists of many Lovecraft stories. The position of *Bloodborne*'s protagonist is, however, more ambiguous. The player guides their hunter through a city that has fallen to a plague. Most of its citizenry has been transformed into hideous beasts, some resembling werewolves, others more simian in stature and gait. The few remaining untransformed humans have shut themselves inside their houses, and refuse to let the player's hunter in, fearing contagion.[4] Some blame the hunters collectively for the plague, others blame the player's character specifically, since the new hunter is a foreigner (and is derided as an "outsider" or "offcomer"). Meanwhile, the beasts themselves stalk the streets wielding torches and pitchforks, just as they did when they were men and women hunting the very beasts that they have lately become. They see all outsiders *as* monsters, and so attack the player's character on sight. Some can still speak, and when the hunter dispatches them, their death cries sound pitifully human. It is ultimately unclear whether these beasts see themselves as humans under attack by an overzealous hunter, or whether they recognize that they have indeed transformed, and so attack the hunter in a form of pre-emptive self-defence. The difference between the hunter and the hunted, between beast and man is in fact very thin: the player soon discovers that the contaminating agent that has transformed the populace into beasts—the Healing Church's blood ministration—is the same wondrous elixir keeping the player's character alive. The transfusion in the game's opening cinematic, in which the protagonist was saved from death, was just the beginning, perhaps, of another transformative process, spurred by the hunter's self-injection of Yharnam's special blood over and over again to restore their health in and between battles. As Madelon Hoedt writes, "every Yharnamite… is the destiny of the player character writ large, a testament to what becomes of users of blood" (2019, 172). While there are similarities between Lovecraft's researchers and *Bloodborne*'s hunters, there is this crucial difference of distance. In Lovecraft, the scholar identifies and studies the monstrous other, and, if he can, drives it out.

[4] As James Perkins Mastromarino notes, the game is "a dark reflection of life in 2020. The real populace on Earth and in the fictional populace in Yharnam bide their time indoors, nerves fraying under the strain. Public health preparations in both worlds seem woefully inadequate. Churches in both worlds that once offered succor can instead spread disease."

Bloodborne, inspired by Lovecraft, raises the same dialectic, but then subverts it. All hunters, injectors of blood, are slowly transforming into the very beasts they slay.[5]

Legend, Lore

Bloodborne's collapse of the duality of human and beast, hunter and hunted, is one of a series of moves that the game enacts, in which this tendency in Lovecraft's work towards dualism is replicated, expounded upon, and then unwound in such a way as to expose the inherent instability of its influence's binaries and biases. The history of Yharnam is itself emblematic of these divergences and oppositions, as evidenced by its two most important organizations, Byrgenwerth college and the Healing Church. Byrgenwerth was a place of esoteric learning where the Pthumerian labyrinths underneath Yharnam were studied. At some point, an incredible discovery was made: the existence of the Great Ones, enormously powerful beings from the cosmos, with names like Formless Oedon, the Dream Presence, and Kos. The Great Ones seem to have departed, but some of their blood was left behind, and this blood was found to possess miraculous healing properties. Later, Master Willem, provost of Byrgenwerth, is confronted by Laurence, one of his students. Laurence rejects Willem's admonishment to "fear the old blood," and instead wants to use it. He takes the knowledge of blood ministration, a Promethean power borrowed from the Great Ones, and founds the Healing Church. This schism would determine everything that happens afterwards.

Before investigating its origins and meanings, however, it is important to investigate what both Willem's Byrgenwerth scholars and Laurence's Healing Church have in common. Both perceive the Great Ones not as a source of danger, but rather as the means of increasing their knowledge and power. Both retrieved materials from the Pthumerian tombs and strove to use what they found to benefit themselves and humankind. As if to cement this similarity of purpose, a note in a church lecture hall reads, "Master Willem was right. Evolution without courage will be the ruin of our race." Ultimately, both believed in radical human evolution achieved through the knowledge of and contact with the Great Ones. Their schism was the result of an epistemological difference concerning how this knowledge and power would be achieved. For Willem and Byrgenwerth, it was through the mind and the senses, which they considered the joint pathways to transcendence. By looking upwards, opening their eyes and minds to the Great Ones' wisdom, humanity would grow. For Laurence and the Healing Church, knowledge was transmitted through religious communion, a gift from the Great Ones, preserved in their blood. The infusion of the Great Ones' blood into their lesser forms would

[5] Some Lovecraft stories, including "The Dunwich Horror" and "The Shadow over Innsmouth," include creatures with both human and monstrous lineages, which would seem to suggest some slippage between these concepts. Actually, however, the moral of these tales is that the degenerate was always destined to become their true self, i.e., something distinctly nonhuman. The result, effectively, is a 'one-drop rule' for aliens.

allow humans to claim their power for our own. Both visions, focused as they were on dividing the human in half, failed.

Master Willem sought to expand human vision to achieve superhuman understanding. He argued that "[o]ur eyes are yet to open" upon it. Consequently, the college building itself is packed with objects and symbols evincing sight: there is an observatory floor complete with a telescope, sample jars everywhere filled with eyeballs, and Willem himself—still alive, a century or more after the schism—is depicted with numerous antenna-like eyestalks growing out of his neck. Willem is ancient and no longer speaks, but the cluttered work that surrounds him is emblematic of a worldview that sees the human body itself as alien, monstrous, as a place of false knowledge and even disgust. His own body is obscured by heavy robes. Long sleeves hide his hands. He wears an eye mask and large hat, so that only his mouth, chin, and antennae-sprouted neck are visible.

This sprouting of sensory organs is an ever-present motif for Willem and the college. The in-game description of the Great One's Wisdom item partially reads "[a]t Byrgenwerth Master Willem had an epiphany: 'We are thinking on the basest of planes. What we need, are more eyes.'" The icon for this item depicts an open-topped skull, with wisps of smoke or perhaps energy erupting outwards. It is an abstracted rather than mimetic representation, but the wisps are shaped like wormy tendrils, as if to suggest their host's mind contained some comprehension of a be-tentacled Great One, or was perhaps reaching upwards towards that comprehension. Rather than originating in the "'base'" materiality of the body, wisdom for Willem is received through the senses as they attune themselves to the stars. This is further indicated by the description of the Rune Workshop Tool, which reads in part, "Runesmith Caryll, student of Byrgenwerth, transcribed the inhuman utterings of the Great Ones into what are now called Caryll Runes. The hunter who retrieves this workshop tool can etch Caryll Runes into the mind to attain their wondrous strength." This technology embodies the methodological thrust of Byrgenwerth scholarship. Caryll used one of the human senses—*listening* to the Great Ones' "inhuman utterings"—and then discovered how to translate that sense impression into another: *seeing* the visual iconography of rune script. With runes, the scholar could "etch the Caryll Runes into the mind," imprinting the visual image onto the nexus of the senses and the seat of comprehension. If the player has their hunter murder old Willem, he drops the Eye rune, whose description reads in part, "[d]isillusioned by the limits of human intellect, Master Willem looked to beings from higher planes for guidance, and sought to line his brain with eyes in order to elevate his thoughts." But the process he hoped would evolve consciousness seems to have been a failure. His denigration of the body in favour of the senses proved at best a mixed success: all of his self-grown eye stalks are, after all, on the *out*side.

While Byrgenwerth's methods sought to increase human awareness without the use of blood, this too was ultimately catastrophic, as enemies encountered outside the college—former students and professors—violently attest to. Unlike the Gothic, fanged beasts of Yharnam, the creatures here are vaguely insectoid in appearance. The most common, called the Garden of Eyes, has skeletal wing

structures protruding from its back, and features a swollen head covered with dozens of large white eyes. Vacuous Rom, the boss monster of this area, is a school-bus sized grub with a conical face, also littered with numerous asymmetrically placed eyes. Hybridized, with insectoid features prevalent over mammalian ones, both Rom and The Garden of Eyes are far more Lovecraftian in the specifics of their presentation compared to the folkloric and Gothic creatures encountered previously. The resemblance between their new forms and the humans they once were is also less-pronounced: these creatures do not speak (the Garden produces a piercing shriek reminiscent of a whistle or alarm tone) nor do they use weapons or other tools. In abandoning the "'base'" physiological path towards human evolution, Willem and his followers avoided sinking to the animality of the blood-drunk beasts, becoming instead something more distinctly alien. However, it is difficult to argue that this is an improvement. All those extra eyes do not seem to have granted them additional understanding. Willem's approach, centred on the senses and the intellect, simply built a different breed of monster.

Laurence's offshoot, the Healing Church, used blood ministration to gather large numbers of worshippers and therefore immense religious and civic power; it also eventually caused the plague of beasts. The more blood someone injected, the greater the resultant beast, which is why so many of the early church leaders—Vicar Amelia, Ludwig, and Laurence himself—appear in the game as nigh-unkillable boss monsters.[6] The Church moved in the opposite direction of Willem, privileging the "lower" knowledge of bodies and blood over the "elevated" faculties of the mind and the senses. Interestingly, however, sometime after the church formed, its upper ranks broke into two disparate, oppositional factions of their own—the Choir and the Scholars of Mensis. This redivision was along the same epistemological lines as the original schism, but dramatically intensified those divisions.

The Choir experimented on the blood and bodies of church parishioners. In *The Old Hunters* expansion, players discover misshapen people with enormous, spongey heads; their great mass belying the fact that their intellect and even basic survivability has shrivelled. Those still able to speak call out for the hunter to help them replenish the precious brain fluids that their wasted organs no longer produce, or for the hunter to just kill them to end their torment. But the Choir's greatest accomplishment was the discovery and capture of an enormous, abandoned Great One called Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos, found in the old Pthumerian labyrinths. Some have argued that she is the source of the church's miraculous, cursed blood, drawn upon after the reservoirs in the old labyrinth dried up (Redgrave 2015, 28). If so, this ancient being is useful not because of her knowledge or insight, but only as the celestial cow that produces its magical milk. The Choir, one half of a schism born from an earlier schism, carried their mania for the

[6] The Sword Hunter Badge item description reads in part, "Ludwig was the first of many Healing Church hunters to come, many of whom were clerics. As it was, clerics transformed into the most hideous beasts."

knowledge of the blood and the body to previously unknown degrees, often at the expense of the minds of their followers.

Their rivals, the Scholars of Mensis, returned to elements of the teachings of Willem of Byrgenwerth. Turning their intellect and senses up towards the spiritual realms, they summoned the ghost of Mergo, a dead infant Great One. This was accomplished through a ritual requiring the involuntary sacrifice of hundreds or perhaps thousands of kidnapped townsfolk. Mergo's umbilical cord, dropped after the hunter kills its protector, reads in part, "[t]his Cord granted Mensis audience with Mergo, but resulted in the stillbirth of their brains." The use of *stillbirth* to describe the annihilated minds of the scholars that achieved contact with Mergo places them into a sympathetic if ironic relationship to him. Mergo's embodied form died in childbirth, but his spirit—all that the scholars care about—was resurrected within an insubstantial realm called the Nightmare of Mensis. Paradoxically, the Scholars achieved this first step on their path to extend and improve human life only by killing countless people. The Scholars of Mensis were too careless with bodies, both their own (their signature armor, the antenna-like Mensis Cage, covers only the head), and those of their sacrifices, whose bodies are strewn about the walls and streets of Yahar'gul, The Unseen Village. The Scholars were careless with blood, wantonly spilling it rather than injecting or worshipping it. They successfully created an elevated plane of existence where their disembodied minds could wander and their senses could swim, but only one, their leader Micolash, was able to travel there. The creation of that nightmare blasted their half-forgotten bodies, so their "stillborn" minds, only half-delivered unto the dream, perished also.

Endings

After the player's character kills Mergo's Wet Nurse, the infant Great One dies for a second time. The hunter returns to the workshop, and *Bloodborne* ends in one of three ways. In the "Yharnam Sunrise" ending, the hunter escapes the night of the hunt, awakens from the dream, and is free to live an embodied existence without further contemplation of the Great Ones' mysteries. In "Honouring Wishes," the hunter instead gives up the physical world and takes over for Gehrman, living on eternally in the ephemeral dreamland, albeit as a slave. Their body wilts and weakens, and the Doll must push them around. In "Childhood's Beginning," the hunter resists both awakening and becoming prisoner to the dream. Instead, the final cinematic shows the Doll cradling the hunter, who has been transformed into a slimy, brown-ish, meter-long slug- or squid-like creature. Like many of Lovecraft's monsters, it is somewhat difficult to describe such a being, except by using the closest earthly analogues, as the author himself does with Cthulhu when he describes the creature as "…a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head… prodigious claws… and long, narrow wings…" (Lovecraft 1982, 79). The text for this ending's trophy says that the hunter "became an infant Great One, lifting humanity into its next childhood." Here we have the game's final interrogation of monstrosity. Clearly, the hunter's new form is embodied, for the Doll asks the little slug-being, "[a]re you cold?" as she picks it up to comfort it. Paradoxically, it is now free from its bodily pains: there are no more beasts to slay or deaths to die. Troublingly, however,

there is scant evidence that the hunter has actually *evolved*, if that term means (as it does for both the Healing Church and the scholars at Byrgenwerth) some definitive positive improvement. Players and critics may ponder or gape at the hunter's new body, while the question of whether or not, or to what extent, its external form bears upon its internal phenomenology is left unanswered. Its mind is free to finally comprehend the cosmos—or nothing at all. As video essayist SolePorpoise put it, "[this] ending of *Bloodborne* sees its hero ascend to godhood, but without the player. The player is trapped on this plane." The distance that this ending produces between player and avatar is astutely observed, although I would add that the game's version of "godhood" is not exactly aspirational. We are left without any assurance of the true properties or capabilities of the infant Great One's body or its mind; including whether the hunter is still *experientially* human within its new form, or is something else entirely. In making the precise nature of the hunter's fate unrecognizable, even incomprehensible, the supposed distinction between the human and the alien likewise melts away. If monstrosity—as it is metaphorized in the Amagdalae (and conjured within the amagdala)—is both the recognition of difference *and* the subsequent process of binary partitioning which requires an elevation of one, a demonization of the other, then this final form is a puzzle. Our comprehension effectively halts. This, I suggest, is the rebirth promised by "Childhood's Beginning:" it exists not in the creature the player's avatar has become, but in the player as they wrestle with the old possibilities and dream up new ones. A new, alien whole that cannot be so easily summed, classified, or divided; a being that is both avatar and other.

Bloodborne clearly and cleverly identifies the attractions of Lovecraft's model, with its stark division between the human and the monstrous, where the concerns of the intellect are elevated, and the concerns of the flesh—leading only to subhuman beastliness—are denigrated. Miyazaki and his team leave us without any real sense of solace in the supposedly higher realms, nor do they ask us to devalue the physical one, because *Bloodborne*'s worldview does not just deconstruct Lovecraft's tired hierarchies, it goes further, illustrating how the division of the human, either within itself or against the other, *is* monstrosity. The horror of the game's critique of Lovecraftian horror rests in its observation that the recognition of difference and separateness is, too often, enough to reify and enforce it (and re-enact and re-enforce it, just as the schism between Byrgenwerth and the Healing Church was repeated and intensified in the subsequent schism between the Choir and the Scholars of Mensis). This explains the uncomfortable fact that the game's ultimate villains are not, in fact, ontological monsters of any kind; but rather a kind of collective epistemological monstrosity infecting the scholars whose various specialties and relentless foci on disparate parts of a forgotten whole unleashed two different scourges: one bursting forth from their bodies, the other leaking from their brains as they grasped for the heavens.

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Horror, Intimacy, and Uncanny Biology:

Representing the Lovecraftian Perception in *The Song of Saya*

ABSTRACT

Scholars have argued that the realization of cosmic horror in H. P. Lovecraft's fiction depends on the characters' perceptions of and reactions to Lovecraft's monsters. However, horror is not the only affect such encounter can arouse. This paper studies what I term "Lovecraftian perception," or the embodied and situated experiences which shape the understanding of radical otherness, by examining the video game The Song of Saya *(2003). My focus in on the representation of Saya, a character who appears to the cognitively impaired protagonist as an adorable girl but is actually a shapeless monster. I argue that the game appropriates the Lovecraftian perception to juxtapose the cosmic indifference of Lovecraftian monsters and the domestic intimacy the game portrays, thereby achieving its goal of crafting a highly emotional melodrama revolving around the romance between the protagonist and Saya. I nonetheless problematize the gendered narrative that limits Saya to a caring and sacrificing role. In my conclusion, applying Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledge, I demonstrate how Lovecraftian perception can create alternative narratives if Saya's encounter with humanity occurs not only in a heteronormative relationship but in contexts that better appreciate the radical otherness of her uncanny biology.*

Keywords: Cosmic horror, Perception, Visual novel, Domesticity, Science

In "Pickman's Model," Lovecraft presents Richard Upton Pickman as a "realist" whose paintings "coldly and sardonically reflected some stable, mechanistic, and well-established horror-world which he saw fully, brilliantly, squarely, and unfalteringly" (Lovecraft 2001, 86). Confronted by his work, one cannot help but wonder how he can "take such glee in the torture of brain and flesh and the degradation of the mortal tenement" (Lovecraft 2001, 86). The ultimate horror then arrives in the revelation that the grotesque beings Pickman depicted are real and alive. The encroachment of the sane world by the unspeakable terror of another thus becomes irreversible. By pitting human experience against extraordinary entities, Lovecraft challenges his reader with ineffable otherness. If modern subjectivity is defined through the strict demarcation of "self" and "other," Lovecraft's cosmic beings destroy people's sanity by escaping classification and thus disrupting the self-other boundary.

However, the destruction brought by Lovecraft's monsters is not immanently retained in their bodies but realized through a human being's encounter with them. According to Vivian Ralickas, the encounter with Lovecraft's monsters is horrible because of their subversion of the aesthetics of the sublime by illustrating how "our human perspective [...] poses a genuine threat to our existence in an environment dominated by alien beings far superior to us" (Ralickas 2007, 367). In other words, people's reactions to cosmic forces also participate in the materialization of horror. Artworks play an important role in this process. In addition to luring the viewer to the inexplicable darkness they mediate, artworks can elicit the viewer's "enlivening" gaze "which is at once complicit in and an assistant to the all engulfing nothingness of Lovecraft's universe" (Ralickas 2008, 309). This paper, however, analyzes not only how Lovecraftian horror can be mediated by different objects but how subjective perception of Lovecraftian monsters participates in the realization of the horror they unleash. While the narrator of "Pickman's Model" reacts to Pickman's paintings with dread and disgust, could Pickman see his models differently because he is an artist? If subjective perception influences the affects one feels in the encounter with cosmic beings, their incomprehensible otherness might evoke emotions other than fear. I aim to approach this question of "Lovecraftian perception" by studying the video game *The Song of Saya* (*Saya no Uta*), released by Japanese studio Nitroplus in 2003. I define Lovecraftian perception as the embodied and situated sensory experiences which shape the affects and understanding of the radical otherness one encounters. The intimacy, rather than the abhorrence, that the protagonist feels for the Lovecraftian monster in the game is the main focus of my analysis. By scrutinizing how the game represents the protagonist's perception of, and interaction with, a cosmic entity, this paper explores the various affects Lovecraftian texts can potentially arouse.

The Song of Saya is a game belonging to the "visual novel" genre, which is played by reading texts accompanied by still images. The genre creates a Lovecraftian atmosphere by minimizing the interactivity typical of video games. Like many visual novels that "prioritize the player's engagement with text and static graphics over dynamic spectacle" (Cavallaro 2009, 11), *The Song of Saya* offers players little agency other than making choices in certain "branch points." The game

contains no jump scares, but it does exploit the player's passivity to create an immersive horror experience. Its story centres on the abnormal world of the protagonist, Sakisaka Fuminori, who undergoes brain surgery to restore his vision after a car accident. Unexpectedly, his senses are completely altered as a result: people appear as horrid monsters, their voices become creepy noises, and objects like streets and buildings are buried in miasmic offal. While staying in the hospital, he meets Saya, a mysterious girl who is looking for her "father" and, for unknown reasons, seems "normal" to Fuminori. The two start a relationship and what follows is the heart of the game. This paper will investigate how different characters' perceptions of Saya participates in the construction of the multifarious ontologies she embodies: a formless horror, a loving and caring woman, and an uncanny object of scientific research.

How does the study of *The Song of Saya* help us appreciate the value of Lovecraft's work? If subjective perception is mediated by one's body, the socio-cultural contexts one is embedded within, and the identity one clings to, then the terrifying encounter with Lovecraft's monster also reflects and challenges our own fear of the biases, norms, and assumptions in society. As MacCormack (2010) suggests, since the Cthulhu mythos illustrates the possibility of being infected by radical otherness, the significance of Lovecraft's fiction should be a "functional" one that allows researchers to investigate how this "infection" leads to the "distortion of perception" as well as how this experience of radical alterity contributes to new political imaginations; or, as MacCormack concisely puts it, "what did Lovecraft do to perception and what can we do with Lovecraft" (MacCormack 2010)? As a result, to see, hear, or smell the monster is also to anticipate the affective transformation one may experience; writing about these encounters can therefore be understood as a political act.

In the following sections, I first highlight the Lovecraftian elements in the game by examining Fuminori's futile attempt to remain "normal" in the distorted world he perceives. I argue that the function of Lovecraftian perception in the game is mainly to juxtapose cosmic indifference with an image of domestic intimacy. I will then study how the multi-perspective narrative both materializes and neutralizes Saya's otherness by creating a melodrama about excavating the secrets of her origin and destiny. Finally, this paper criticizes the gendered assumptions in the game that appear to limit Saya to a narrowly defined "feminine" role of caring and sacrificing in order to explore the alternative narratives made possible through her uncanny biology.

Representing the Lovecraftian Perception

Before analysing the story of *The Song of Saya*, it is important to introduce its technical features. Like most visual novels, the game includes three types of graphics: characters' images, backgrounds, and illustrations for events. As the story progresses, images of characters and backgrounds are displayed in different combinations to represent the current setting, while illustrations for events capture the "special moments" such as the twists and the climactic moments of the narrative.

Texts—many of them dialogues dubbed by voice artists—are contained in a "textbox" superimposed on these graphics and refreshed by clicks. The gameplay is essentially about reading a story told through texts, graphics, characters' voices, and background music.

The Song of Saya nevertheless has two distinct features. First, while the textbox of a visual novel is typically located at the bottom of screen, the game utilizes a semi-transparent textbox which covers the entire screen. The texts are therefore emphasized to immerse the player in a world of horror constructed equally through words and images. Second, the game allows the player to see both the abnormal world Fuminori perceives and the normal world by shifting the narrative perspective. Fuminori is presented as a complex character subject to the judgement of others. I will now elaborate how this multiperspectivity works in the game.

The game begins by showing a grotesque monster. The first line is ""H#Y," the wriggling mass of flesh burbles, "G$Hsy%3whY&Xtr1p%3?," and noise resembling a heavily distorted human voice follows. More images of monsters appear against a black and red background, random nonsense floods the textbox, and the narrator observes this abhorrent scene: "Three such creatures sit around the table in front of me, slurping filthy sludge from their cups as they trade whines, growls, and sounds that I cannot describe." The narrator admits that, if he pays enough attention, the noise is almost intelligible. When a monster suddenly approaches, its voice remains indiscernible at first. And then readable but wrongly capitalized lines follow: ""hEy FuMInoRi," one of the flesh-beasts says as it swivels its bloodshot eyes toward me." Fuminori, no longer the anonymous narrator, is then forced to join the conversation with these monsters, whom he knows are his friends. The interior of the café in his eyes is like the belly of a beast, covered with blood and rotten flesh. As his friends are all disfigured by his abnormal senses, to talk with any of them means to endure a monster's "spray of stringy slime from the cilia around its voicebox." He is soon overwhelmed: "I want to grab a chair, a desk—anything within reach—and use it to smash the life out of this creature, ending it all." After his departure, the game switches to a third-person point of view and adopts the perspective of other characters, thereby showing the world as perceived by normal people. The characters' normal images replace the images of the monsters, their voices are clear, and the background is restored as the interior of an ordinary café. It repeats the conversation Fuminori hears as noise, and introduces his three friends: Koji, Fuminori's buddy since childhood, Omi, Koji's girlfriend, and Yoh, who confessed her affection to Fuminori before the accident but never received an answer. The trio, like Fuminori, are students at the same college.

The above example demonstrates the rules of narration in *The Song of Saya*: when assuming Fuminori's perspective, the narrative is in first person, and his image is not shown; conversely, when assuming other characters' perspectives, the narrative is in third person, and the images of all the characters, including Fuminori, are displayed. It is nonetheless in the normal world, rather than the abnormal one, that the game creates its own version of Lovecraftian monsters. After all, for Lovecraft, cosmic horror is not "the literature of mere physical fear and the

mundanely gruesome" (Lovecraft 2013, 3). Monsters, blood, or flesh are not horrible in themselves. Instead, it is the "unknown, being likewise the unpredictable" that serves as the origin of cosmic horror— "a terrible and omnipotent source [...] clearly belonging to spheres of existence whereof we *know nothing* and *wherein we have no part*" (Lovecraft 2013, 3). Fuminori's world, populated by monsters that defy understanding and saturated with bodily excrement therefore embodies what Kristeva calls "abjection." As she argues, abjection is "something rejected from which one does not part," something that "does not respect borders, positions, rules" and ceaselessly "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 1982, 4). However, as a medical student, Fuminori is able to convince himself that his experience is nothing but the side-effect of brain surgery. He thus transforms his unknown conditions into a manageable "scientific fact." As a result, while the source of the repugnant anomaly exists within Fuminori himself, this abject reality becomes his "new normal." He lives in despair, but still tries to create a semblance of normality. However, his friends are not so lucky when encountering the nameless horror he knows as "Saya."

The game offers a glimpse of Saya's true identity when Omi decides to confront Fuminori after he verbally abuses Yoh. After arriving at his house, she tries to open the door but is "instantly assaulted by a choking stench." The text ""WeLCoMe HoMe!"" is displayed in the textbox, and a highly distorted human voice is played. The following texts document Omi's shock: "The voice she just heard could not have been human, yet its intonations were too complex for any animal she can imagine." What follows is "the sound of something soft and wet flopping its way deeper into the house." As Omi moves through the unlit hallway, she notices the boiling pot and half-chopped vegetables in kitchen, and the stench of the "vicious, olive green slime like the filthy water from a tank long clogged with algae and dead fish" that covers the floor. She then ventures into the den and turns on the lights. To her horror, the room is flooded by colours that are beyond her description: "The colours say all that needs to be said about the painter's hatred, malice, and insanity."

Immediately afterwards, she saw the source of this nightmare. Intriguingly, the image shown is Omi's frightened eyes, rather than any kind of monster. "Her mouth and nose are sealed before she can scream, and her belly is torn open as something enters to feast on her innards." The texts depict Omi's brutal death, and yet even without the violence, the perception of the monster alone has contaminated and destroyed Omi's subjectivity: "But by the time she feels any of this, Omi has already gone mad."

Cosmic Horror and Domestic Intimacy

The terror Saya inflicts on people with normal perception raises the question: why does Fuminori, like Pickman, choose to live with such a creature? What does Saya look like in Fuminori's eyes? In fact, before hinting at Saya's uncanny nature, the game first illustrates her intimate relationship with the protagonist. After the fuss in the café, Fuminori went home, and his sensory experience was entirely different

from the abominable horror others would later face. The voice that greets him "is beautiful and clear as a bell." "Even the patter of feet coming down the hallway is music to my ears." The image of Saya—a slender girl with green hair—is superimposed on the background of a hallway covered in bloody flesh and entrails. Even his own house looks terrible to Fuminori, but Saya is different. He believes that Saya appears "normal" because she is *not* altered by his cognitive disorder. Fuminori goes on to describe, almost perversely, her touch, smell, and warmth: "She knows that she is my salvation, and for some reason is happy that I need her."

Although the game cannot represent all five senses, it captures the protagonist's perception through both visuals and audio. Visually, the game overlays 3D graphics on 2D backgrounds to represent Fuminori's tactile experiences, including the swelling of intestines embedded in walls and the muddiness of a viscera-covered floor. Audio effects and music are, on the other hand, indispensable for depicting Saya's uncanny identities. When adopting the protagonists' point of view, not only is Saya's voice distinguished from other female characters for its deliberately "childish" quality, but the background music played during the intimate scenes is different. Nevertheless, for other characters, Saya's voice is a distorted mess, and when they approach her, a "slippery" sound effect is played to represent the rancid taste and acrid smell of her slime. And yet Saya's true form is never graphically represented. This absence of a direct visual depiction of Saya works as an attempt to emphasize her unspeakable ontologies, but this arrangement also heightens the importance of audio representation in the creation of a horror narrative.

Notably, Fuminori's desperate attempt to live with his altered perception is not the only reason that brings him and Saya together. The game repeatedly emphasizes her romantic and erotic attachment to Fuminori. The domestic intimacy Saya happily offers is presented as the last hope in, if not an antidote to, his insane world. As he tries in vain to behave "normally" in public, he quickly embraces domestic life. A paradox then appears. Although the game suggests that Fuminori is complicit in his own ostracization from society, it also presents his action as "rational" under the circumstances. If he considers his perception an insurmountable obstacle to retain normal social existence, to immerse himself in Saya's companionship—without really understanding Saya's motivation—becomes a necessary means to secure his sanity. In this process of immersion, however, the otherness and horror embodied by Saya seems to be neutralized by her unconditional kindness and affection towards Fuminori. The game thus turns MacCormack's idea of Lovecraftian perception upside down: instead of a "distortion of perception" emerging from the "becoming(s) of protagonists as they begin to corporeally and psychologically articulate inflection with alternate genera" (MacCormack 2010), the game assimilates the otherness of Lovecraftian monsters to reinforce a patriarchal and fantastic vision of the protagonist whose perception is already altered.

How does the game juxtapose the portrayals of Saya as a woman who perfectly matches the male protagonist's (or a male player's) imagination of

domesticity and as an inexplicable creature invading the life of people who don't share Fuminori's perception? The game frames this duality of Saya as a matter of choice: a choice between the society where the protagonist finds himself utterly rejected and an intimate relationship at the expense of everything. What makes the narrative of *The Song of Saya* "against the world and against life" is not only an "absolute hatred of the world in general, aggravated by a particular disgust for the modern world," but also the *love* the cosmic "other" attempts to provide (Houellebecq 2005, 57). It is a choice between the world that does not love us and a love that will devour the world.

The game elaborates the theme of choices and consequences through a "branch point" system in which a player makes decisions at certain key points that influence the narrative (Figure 1). The first branch point occurs after Saya stole Fuminori's dossier from the hospital and deciphered the cause of his altered perception based on magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) pictures of his brain. Claiming that modern science can yet treat Fuminori's condition, Saya decided to "experiment on" their neighbour first to test her "hypothesis." The game shifts to a third-person perspective to delineate the terror Saya induces. In the dark of the night, Mr. Suzumi, a painter living with his wife and daughter, is assaulted by a creature of unspeakable shape and wakes up in a hellish landscape

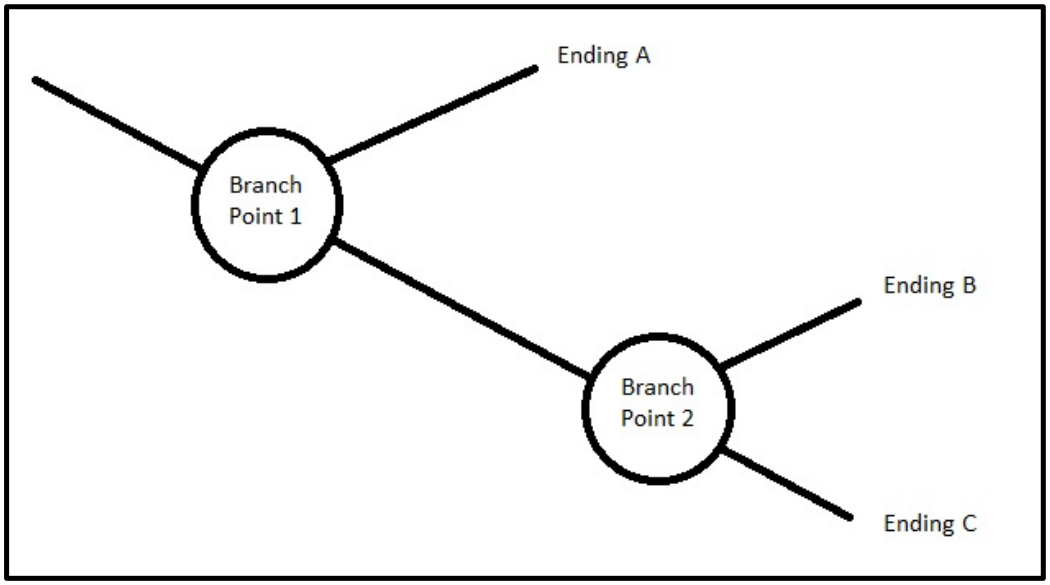

Figure 1 Schematic Diagram of the Branch Point System in *The Song of Saya*

Finding his house and artworks swamped by rotting, twisted flesh, Suzumi tries to call out to his family but is greeted instead by a wave of inhuman noises. Believing that he would again be attacked, he grabs an easel leg, ambush the two "monsters" which are in fact his family, and savagely tears them apart.

On the street, Saya reveals herself and greets her experimental subject. She confirms that Suzumi has acquired the same pathological brain and that he can see her as a "human female" rather than as a shapeless monster. What happens next manifests the problematic representation of gender—and gendered violence—in *The Song of Saya*: the deranged Suzumi, no longer afraid of the girl before his eyes, chases Saya into her house and rapes her before being slain by Fuminori. Holding her in his arms, Fuminori blames the world and himself for the evil done to Saya. Finally becoming a murderer, Fuminori now must choose either to face society's judgement or to completely cut all ties with the world.

Intriguingly, the options in the first branch point are offered by Saya. As she asks whether Fuminori wants to regain his normal perception, two options are shown on the screen. If the protagonist accepts Saya's offer, the game will quickly reach Ending A in which Fuminori is arrested, declared mad, and institutionalized. The price of normal perception is ironically the validation of his insanity. One day, a phone appears in his cell. It is Saya, who is hoping to contact him but fears that her body would now appear terrifying to Fuminori. Explaining that she has resumed the search for her "father," she bids farewell to Fuminori via text message and disappears. Never allowing the protagonist or the player to catch a glimpse of Saya's alterity, the game preserves the intimacy it strives to construct.

To choose the other option—having Fuminori accept his abnormal perception—complicates this fantasy of domesticity. If Fuminori has thus far struggled to live in two worlds—a public one that disgusts him and a private one that satisfies his desires, he now relinquishes even the semblance of normalcy he has put on. If it is totally hopeless for him to reintegrate into society, the rational choice is probably to indulge in Saya's companionship. And yet many questions remain: to what extent can Fuminori defend his relationship with Saya against the unrelenting force of society? And what would be the consequences for siding with the cosmic entity that he barely understands?

Technology, Melodrama, the Beginning and the End

To counter the malice brewing in Fuminori's household, the game introduces a few characters reminiscent of Lovecraft's heroes, who stumble upon terrible secrets and desperately try to re-bury them, only to excavate even more unsayable truths, records, and abnormalities along the way. Dr. Tanbo, for example, is one such character striving to pin down the elusive being known as Saya. While supervising Fuminori's postoperative recovery, she is alerted by his inquiry into the whereabouts of Dr. Ogai, the man who claims to be Saya's father. After the branch point, Tanbo warns Koji and Yoh that Ogai might be involved in Fuminori's madness. Later, she rescues Koji at Ogai's country house after Fuminori tries to murder him by pushing him down a well. The two then discover a passage leading to Ogai's secret laboratory.

Armed with a shotgun, a camera, and a sprayer, Tanbo orders Koji not to look at any objects in the laboratory and quickly covers the room with paint. This cautious demeanour magnifies the Lovecraftian vibe of this haunted space. By

avoiding direct contact with potential "contaminants" and recording the scene only with her camera, Tanbo articulates the inexplicable and imperceptible horror in Ogai's laboratory. However, echoing the mediatory function of artworks, when Lovecraft's heroes use communication technology to capture an anomaly, "monstrosity is produced through mediation, not simply mediated by it" (Kneale 2010, 90). While technology allows curious spectators to witness the cosmic other at a distance, the distance created by technology—the photo of monsters, the uncanny voice transmitted by telephone, or the unsayable message in wireless reports—is not entirely safe. Dark forces can haunt the mediated message, or even usurp the technology itself.

Interestingly, the cosmic alterity in *The Song of Saya* is mediated less by phones or cameras than by the dairies, journals, and research notes Tanbo discovered in Ogai's laboratory. They revealed that Ogai first encountered a dimensional travelling creature during his study of the "silver key." He named this formless but extremely intelligent being after his pet cat, "Saya," and taught it mathematics and physics. Quickly mastering these subjects, an extraordinary transformation happened when Saya learned biology. Saya started assuming a female identity, expressing keen interest in human reproduction, and demonstrated the ability to transform organisms into amorphous chimeras by secreting materials that Ogai speculated were retroviruses. However, before he can conduct further inquiry, Ogai was forced to flee and hid from Tanbo who, terrified by his research, vowed to destroy Saya. He eventually shot himself to protect his secret. I will return to this "scientific" representation of Saya's ontology in the next section. Here I intend to demonstrate how the desire to understand the essence of Saya helps to provide an emotional closure for the game.

The role played by textual evidence is crucial. In his analysis of "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," David Vilaseca discusses the act of reading in Lovecraft's fiction as "melodrama." Since ordinary morality and language appear impotent before Lovecraft's monsters, the act of reading is "a struggle against the disorder and the plurality of the text" and consequently "a *melodramatic* enterprise" (Vilaseca 1991, 487). Willet's investigation of Ward's occultist ancestor, Joseph Curwen, can be seen as a melodrama because it attempts to "appropriate the *spirit*, the origin, the centre" of narrative, but this attempt is "always synonymous with appropriating nothing" in a post-religion, post-spirit age (Vilaseca 1991, 493) To compensate for this lack of origin and conclusion, the story presents "letters, documents, biographical facts" about Curwen and Ward as traces of the unattainable beginning and end proper to traditional forms of narrative. The melodrama for understanding through textual evidence is created precisely by this "opposition between the disparity of elements [...] and Dr. Willett's desire for understanding them, for obtaining out of them a coherent, unified, rational explanation of Charles' madness" (Vilaseca 1991, 485).

Tanbo's fascination with Ogai's diary likewise manifests a struggle to confront the threats posed by Saya's nameless, abject existence through the textual records about her origin and destiny. Just like Willet's failure to understand

Curwen's plan and prevent Ward's murder is compensated by his success in eliminating Curwen using the spell from Curwen's notebook, in *The Song of Saya*, Ending B delineates a similarly melodramatic closure: with Ogai's observational data, Tanbo learns the chemical formula to destroy Saya but is fatally wounded during the struggle. Fuminori then kills himself after Saya's death. Koji, the last witness of Saya's unspeakable form, cannot come to terms with this maddening experience and contemplates suicide. Like the melodrama of Lovecraft's fiction, the heroes may stop the cosmic invasion, but they remain traumatized and bewildered by the inexplicable horror.

However, *The Song of Saya* also tries to explore the other side of this melodramatic narrative: what if the cosmic others do express their reasons for contacting humans? Implying that she gains the ability to manipulate human body because of the genetic materials she receives from Fuminori, Saya explains her origin by using the analogy of a dandelion. She asks Fuminori to picture a lone dandelion seed landing in the middle of a desert. This seed has the potential to strive, and its offspring may populate the whole desert in the future. But what would give this single, tiny seed the strength to do so? Saya answers herself: "All that seed needs is to be loved just by one person in the entire desert." Saya's dimensional travel is thereby presented as a romantic journey. Despite her uncanny body and power, Saya is simply searching for love across the many, many universes she has wandered through.

And yet the end of her interdimensional journey is also the end of the Earth as we know it. In Ending C, Koji tries to confront Fuminori without Tanbo's aid and is brutally murdered by Saya. After this, her body is suddenly enveloped in dazzling light. The screen displays a gigantic structure similar to the combination of wings and branches, emerging from her back and spreading light orbs across the night sky. The game describes the spectacle as follows: "Singing victoriously of their freedom, the shining seeds of life are released into this vast and fertile land." Exhausted but elated, Saya announces that she is giving the whole planet to Fuminori as her "first and last present," and promises that her transformation is not the end of their relationship but a new beginning.

Unsettling Conclusion

Saya kept her promise. As her "shining seeds" spread across the globe, societies collapsed, and all humanity metamorphosed into the formless being Saya was. In the epilogue, Tanbo read the final entry of Ogai's diary while her body underwent a slow, painful mutation. The game ends with Tanbo's conclusion that she too was complicit in the apocalypse. Nonetheless, this apocalypse can be yet another melodrama: a player can enjoy the sense of closure through the romantic fantasy of sacrificing the world to Saya's "love," while altogether ignoring the unsettling effects of such a world-changing story. As the game never challenges the gendered narrative it utilizes in the portrayal of Saya's love, it leaves the player's world and norms intact.

Nevertheless, I argue that the game does provide, though probably intentionally, a means of reflecting on the significance of Lovecraftian perception. If the game adopts Lovecraftian monsters to create the fantasy of domestic intimacy, to reclaim the radical alterity of comic entities requires a critique of the "domesticity" and "monstrosity" constructed by the game. Revealingly, Saya's "monstrosity" can be seen as stemming directly from her commitment to domestic life. As Sarah Goodwin has suggested, the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, literally the "un-homely") is intertwined with gender norms that define the sense of being "at home" (*Heimlichkeit*), and this *Heimlichkeit* is created in patriarchal society by the figure of woman "who carries the burden of care and who at best knows how to please her audience, to bring him pleasure" (Goodwin 1991, 94). The question is how to take seriously Saya's uncanny biology which entangles so thoroughly with the patriarchal imagination of home, family, and love. I argue that *The Song of Saya* retains the potential for reimaging our relationships with radical alterity if we can see Saya's otherness and subjectivity as constructed through a socializing and gendering process that we, as "normal" human beings, have all experienced. This is neither to conflate the "self" and "other" or to essentialize their differences, but to acknowledge, in a non-innocent way, what Haraway describes as "emerging pleasures, experiences, and powers with serious potential for changing the rules of the game" (Haraway 1989, 196).

Unexpectedly, the key to imagine such alternative narratives actually lies in the interaction between Saya and Dr. Ogai. Although Ogai is the first person who subjects Saya to a relationship of power in which she learns to depend on him in a domestic context, use human language, and call him "father," he is also the only person whose subjectivity is not utterly shattered in his encounter with her. Therefore, his experience opens up possibilities for people to interact with Saya even if they do not possess an abnormal perception like Fuminori. Ogai can remain sane after having established contact with Saya not because his scientific observation is "pure" or "detached" but because he actively attempts to understand Saya while transforming her in the process. Donna Haraway's critique of the notion of "unmediated" objectivity in modern science proposes that any knowledge claim "requires instruments of vision," and that such instruments necessarily "mediate standpoints" (Haraway 1988, 586). Consequently, Ogai's desire to understand Saya and the knowledge he taught her are never neutral but mediated by normative values. It nonetheless remains possible to remediate this relationship with different interpretations of what counts as knowledge and understanding. As suggested by Haraway, "rational knowledge does not pretend to disengagement [...] knowledge is a process of ongoing critical interpretation among 'fields' of interpreters and decoders" (Haraway 1988, 590). If Ogai's role as a doctor, scientist, and Saya's father influences how she learns about humans and the world, it is significant to ask how her quest for knowledge can be different if she has a different kind of encounter with the Earth and herself – that is, the affective, transformative potential she possesses as a cosmic being.

Saya's attempt to learn how to love is central to this intervention. According to Ogai's diary, during the last days he spent with Saya, she "consumed vast

quantities of romantic literature from all over the world." He therefore speculated that Saya could not reproduce and conquer the Earth without falling in love first: "In learning all that there was to know about humanity, she herself become hopelessly human." While Saya's cosmic alterity empowers her to transform the world as she desires, her desire is already mediated by values that limit her transformation. Unable to accompany Saya further, Ogai wrote down his final wish: "I have a dream—that one day my daughter will know the blessings of love. I pray that there will come a day when her heart burns with the flames of passion, and her world becomes bright and joyous once more."

We can now appreciate the contingencies involved in Saya's struggle to learn how to love. If a strictly heteronormative relationship that she had with Fuminori led to the destruction of the Earth, could a different encounter between Saya and humanity produce different results? This question opens a variety of counterfactual possibilities: Saya could have met not a single person but collectives of diverse human groups and more-than-human actors who learned to interact with her and inspired her. She could have known intimacy in queer, non-binary, and political forms which infused novel ways to imagine gender, sexuality, and desire into her uncanny biology. The transformation of the Earth and its every creature can not only be a present she gives to her loved ones but also the realization of her love. This is what Donna Haraway calls "worlding," the practice that brings heterogenous partners together and "become who and what they are" within and beyond the "relational material-semiotic" frameworks (Haraway 2016, 13). Transgressing and mixing the categories of slime, fungus, plant, and carnivore, Saya's desire may conjure up futures yet unthought.

To conclude, reclaiming Saya's cosmic alterity means to anticipate consequences that we cannot fully understand or articulate. Although *The Song of Saya* portrays only one kind of entanglement between Saya and our world, it already implies her powerful otherness through the worldly transformation she is capable of. Despite the limitations its narrative imposed on Saya, the game cannot completely reduce her to a mere symbol of domestic intimacy. The inability for the game to totally neutralize Saya's uncanny body demonstrates that the hegemonic social and gender values intertwined with her existence can indeed be challenged and remade by cosmic alterity. In another story, Saya could have learned to love differently, her songs sung in a million different tones, and echoed, across the known and unknown universes, through a million different bodies.

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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 pretences 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.

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Romancing Weird Fiction:

Lovecraftian Reinscriptions in Jordan L. Hawk's *Whyborne and Griffin*[1]

ABSTRACT

The eleven novels and several shorter texts comprising Jordan L. Hawk's Whyborne and Griffin *series (2012-2019) blend two seemingly incompatible genres: Lovecraftian weird fiction and male/male paranormal romance. In an ominously familiar 1890s New England setting, antiquarian scholar Percival Endicott Whyborne and ex-Pinkerton private detective Griffin Flaherty confront the obstacles to their prohibited relationship even as they contend with dark family secrets, deranged sorcerers, and re-emergent Old Ones. Queering Lovecraft's fictional world, however, is a more complex process than merely confronting a same-sex couple with Lovecraftian dangers. To achieve this generic hybrid, Hawk must rework Lovecraft's poetics of atmosphere, plot, and character to craft emotion-driven narratives leading to romance fiction's required "happily ever after" endings. Hawk deploys the port city of Widdershins, so reminiscent of Lovecraft's Arkham, Kingsport, Dunwich, and Innsmouth, as a Gothic "uncanny city" in which a spectrum of queer and taboo-breaking desires can be acknowledged and pursued – and in which Whyborne and Griffin can heal one another's emotional scars. Most important, Hawk rejects and redefines the conceptualizations and treatments of otherness that are both explicitly and implicitly fundamental to Lovecraft's weird tales and so revealing of his prejudices and obsessions. Sexual, magical, and racial differences must face ignorance, bigotry, and danger in Hawk's narratives, but the* Whyborne and Griffin *romances ultimately accept, include, and celebrate those differences in the relationships and in the community at the core of the stories.*

Keywords: Jordan L. Hawk, H. P. Lovecraft, Male/Male Romance, Whyborne and Griffin, Widdershins

[1] Interested readers should also consult Johnson's illuminating forthcoming study of Hawk's queered reworking of Lovecraft in *Whyborne and Griffin*, which by happy serendipity explores several of the questions likewise considered here.

"Lovecraftian romance" would initially appear an unlikely if not oxymoronic genre. Emotions such as love were of scant interest to H. P. Lovecraft in his depiction of characters confronting the insignificance of all things human in a brutally indifferent cosmos, while contemporary romance fiction by definition centres on a couple's inevitable – if obstacle-laden – path to the all-important "HEA" (happily ever after) ending demanded by readers and publishers alike. Given Lovecraft's own notorious pruderies and prejudices, a Lovecraftian romance focused on two men, complete with explicit love scenes, might be even more difficult to imagine. Nevertheless, in a series of eleven novels and several shorter texts, paranormal romance author Jordan L. Hawk places a male couple, the antiquarian scholar Percival Endicott Whyborne and the ex-Pinkerton private detective Griffin Flaherty, in an ominously familiar 1890s New England setting. Bobby Derie contends that *Widdershins* (2012), the opening volume of the series, "may, in fact, be the first homosexual Mythos romance novel" (2019b). This study will explore Hawk's re-inscription of Lovecraft's works and redefinition of Lovecraftian otherness and monstrosity in a generic intersection of weird fiction and male/male romance.

Only relatively recently has male/male (m/m) romance coalesced as a recognized – and profitably marketed – phenomenon. Its roots lie in the homoerotic (and often sexually explicit) fan fiction, first circulated at conventions and by mail in the 1970s, known as "slash" for its shorthand denotation of the principal couple in any given story, such as the Kirk/Spock pairings written and traded by *Star Trek* fans (Whalen 2017, 8). Fan fiction of all kinds, including slash, went online in the 1990s, exponentially increasing the production and the exchange of such narratives: "The creation of Internet-based fandoms allowed for readers and authors to explore their interest in slash, at a time when same-sex relationships were virtually non-existent in mainstream media" (Whalen 2017, 9). M/m genre fiction evolved in these online spaces, subsequently finding a friendly commercial medium in the eBook market. In 2009, Running Press (a division of Hachette) became the first mainstream romance publisher to market print m/m titles (Alimurung 2009; Grimaldi 2015; Whalen 2017, 4-5). Numerous other presses have followed suit, although many m/m romance authors still self-publish and distribute their own work, now through eBook and print-on-demand technologies.[2]

As its history might suggest, male/male fiction should not be understood as synonymous with the broader umbrella of gay male fiction, which likewise includes, for example, James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*, and Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain* – all iconic gay texts with no HEA in sight. M/m fiction is instead a distinct category under that umbrella: specifically, it is commercial genre fiction adhering to expected popular formulas (Lanyon 2013,

[2] Male/male romance has so far received relatively little commentary, much of it exploring questions surrounding women's importance to the genre as both authors and consumers (Alimurung 2009; Grimaldi 2015; Knight 2012; Whalen 2017). Allan specifically considers m/m romance's treatments of masculinity (2020, 69-98). Lanyon's how-to guide for writers of m/m fiction discusses conventions and expectations for the genre (2013).

7).[3] Christine Grimaldi explains: "In an answer to the unpredictability of older gay stories, the newer m/m romance, which is most often written by women, offers heroes the Romance Writers of America definition of a proper romance: a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" (2015).[4] Josh Lanyon agrees with this focus in a guide for m/m fiction writers, but emphasizes that these romance plots can in fact also draw upon a wide range of generic forms:

> The essential definition of M/M fiction is that regardless of the genre—mystery, military, paranormal, historical—the romantic relationship between the two male protagonists is going to be the main story. The romance is the foundation. The superstructure is whatever genre you choose to build on that foundation. So you can have an M/M mystery or an M/M paranormal or an M/M contemporary romance, and the story will have to meet all the requirements of that genre plus it will have to meet the requirements of an M/M romance. (2013, 7-8)

Lanyon's distinction between "foundation" and "superstructure" indicates the prevalence of generic hybridity in m/m fiction. A romance plot arc requires context, and many m/m novels find their superstructures in specific popular genres, from Westerns (an outlaw in love with a sheriff, for example) to mysteries (a detective or attorney in love with a client) to paranormal thrillers (a vampire-hunter in love with – of course – a vampire). Jordan L. Hawk's *Whyborne and Griffin* texts can be similarly classified as m/m romances taking Lovecraftian weird fiction as their superstructure.

Lovecraft's weird stories, however, offer a romance author models that differ significantly from more conventional genres, such as Westerns, mysteries, or thrillers. Joyce Carol Oates notes that his "most effective tales are those in which atmosphere is predominant and plot subordinate" (1996), while Lovecraft himself declared, "Atmosphere, not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction" (2008, 118). This emphasis on atmosphere as the primary means of eliciting desired reactions from readers does not imply that Lovecraft was indifferent to plotting, but for him plot served a specific end. Drawing a distinction between the order of events' occurrence and the order of their narration, he structured his stories to achieve a gradual revelation of "some basic, underlying horror or abnormality" (2008, 115-117). This literary and philosophical end in turn shaped Lovecraft's approach to his characters, the verisimilitude of whose reactions to the revelations was his main concern: "In relation to the central wonder, the characters should shew the same overwhelming emotion which similar characters would shew toward such a wonder in real life" (2008, 117-118). It was for this reason that he famously

[3] See Regis's taxonomy of the romance novel's elements, many of which still apply to m/m narratives (2007, 30-39).
[4] On the debates concerning gay male representation in m/m romances written by and/or for women, see Brooks et al 2015, Fessenden 2014, and Whalen 2017, 30-41.

declared, "Man's relations to man do not captivate my fancy. It is man's relations to the cosmos—to the unknown—which alone arouses in me the spark of creative imagination" (2006, 53). Whether by means of unlucky accident or deliberate but imprudent investigation, Lovecraft's characters typically confront what lies beyond the limits of their knowledge and comprehension, experiencing epiphanies of human impotence and insignificance. This paradigm of atmosphere, plot, and character is Hawk's point of departure.

Essential to Lovecraft's development of atmosphere in his weird fiction were his now-iconic settings with their dark secrets. From the outset of the *Whyborne and Griffin* series, Hawk locates the port city of Widdershins, home to the main characters, within Lovecraft's distinctly Gothic New England of nightmares. Like Edward Pickman Derby in "The Thing on the Doorstep," Percival Endicott Whyborne attended Miskatonic University in Arkham (Lovecraft 2001, 343; Hawk 2012, 184), while seekers of occult power travel to Widdershins from Kingsport, setting of "The Terrible Old Man," "The Festival," and other Lovecraft stories (Hawk 2012, 203; Lovecraft 2001; Lovecraft 1999). With its tell-tale "tall, gambrel-roofed houses, which had fallen into disrepair," Widdershins recalls Lovecraft's characteristic descriptions of his eerie Arkham, Kingsport, Dunwich, and Innsmouth (Hawk 2012, 25).[5] The city, we even learn, was founded by a necromancer in flight from the Salem witch hunters, like Joseph Curwen in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (Hawk 2012, 50-51; Lovecraft 2001, 99). Widdershins thus provides a properly sinister Lovecraftian atmosphere, especially for anyone already familiar with Lovecraft's work and that of his successors: Bobby Derie's "knowing reader" who recognizes the references to the Cthulhu Mythos and suspects what plot developments they might anticipate, but who nevertheless "can't be sure what is next" (2019a).

Hawk does more than merely replicate Lovecraft's settings, however. As Paulina Palmer demonstrates, the Gothic trope of the "uncanny city" has lent itself to both implicit and explicit treatments of queer desires and subjectivities for well over a century (2012, 121-135). The *Whyborne and Griffin* series evokes this tradition, depicting Widdershins as a shadowy city "where one regularly saw cloaked figures scurrying through the streets at night" and where, significantly, even the sheltered (and somewhat envious) Whyborne has heard whispers of men frequenting a bathhouse in a seedy part of town (2014b, I; 2012, 10, 225). Unlike Victorian London for Henry Jekyll or Dorian Gray, however, Widdershins will not be the site of Whyborne and Griffin's doom. There is no shortage of mortal danger or Lovecraftian horror in the city, but it is nevertheless ultimately a haven for Hawk's strong-willed

[5] A search of the Kindle edition of Red Skull Publishing's omnibus Lovecraft collection (62 stories and 5 novellas) yields no fewer than 21 variations on the phrase "gambrel roof" (Lovecraft 2014). S. T. Joshi explains, "This distinctively New England architectural feature was for Lovecraft always an intimation of antiquity, as few houses with the gambrel roof were built after 1750" (Lovecraft 1999, 386n5).

nonconformists. Indeed, its sentient magical essence sought them out and gathered them there: as both the characters and the readers are often reminded, "Widdershins always knows its own" (2014a, chap. 14, et passim).[6] It is a city where Whyborne and Griffin, though wary of the era's legal penalties for same-sex relations, can dare to share a home and imagine a life together, and one where their friend Dr. Christine Putnam can excel in the male-dominated field of archaeology and marry someone of a different race in an elaborate ceremony attended by the Widdershins elite. Widdershins may be a "horrible murder town," as it is repeatedly called (2016, 127, 174, 177), but it is also a horrible murder town in which taboo-breaking desires can be acknowledged and fulfilled. Hawk crafts his superstructure from the foreboding setting and atmosphere of Lovecraft's tales, but Widdershins also provides a foundation that satisfies m/m romance's generic imperatives.

Lovecraft constructed his plots, as noted above, to gradually lay bare alien horrors to his readers and his protagonists. Hawk employs a similar structure in the *Whyborne and Griffin* narratives, as the pair's investigations repeatedly lead them to escalating confrontations with Lovecraftian menaces. In *Widdershins*, for example, Griffin requests the reluctant Whyborne's linguistic expertise to translate a book central to his inquiry into a murder. The book, which Whyborne reports is written in "a mix of Aklo and bastardized Latin" (2012, 31), turns out to be an occult volume familiar to any reader of Lovecraft, here entitled the *Liber Arcanorum* instead of the *Necronomicon*, in which Whyborne finds ominous references to "those from Outside" and passages such as these: "Yog-Sothoth opens the gate. Yog-Sothoth is the gate" (Hawk 2012, 74; Lovecraft 2001, 219). A series of discoveries, most involving near escapes, leads Whyborne and Griffin to a secret brotherhood who have resurrected the long-dead founder of Widdershins, the necromancer Theron Blackbyrne, from his essential salts, again like Joseph Curwen. At the novel's climax, Blackbyrne leads a second ritual that opens an interdimensional portal through which he intends to summon an alien monstrosity bound in a resurrected human body to do his bidding and bend the world to his will. As Faye Ringel observes, "The most essential trope of the Gothic in New England is necromancy," but Lovecraft's "sorcerers had bargained not with Satan but with the Other Gods" (2014b, 142; 2014a, 273). Like Marinus Bicknell Willett in the asylum in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, Whyborne counters the necromancer's summoning spell with the reverse incantation and returns the newly resurrected intended human vessel to the same "fine, bluish-gray dust" to which Willett reduces Curwen (Hawk 2012, 214; Lovecraft 2001, 205). More spectacularly, a "groping pseudopod" reaches through the gateway, seizes Blackbyrne, and pulls him back Outside "toward whatever passed for its mouth:"

[6] Appropriately, "Widdershins Knows Its Own" is the name of Jordan L. Hawk's Facebook group for readers.

> The colours of the portal heaved through a nauseous spectrum, before it abruptly shrank inwards, imploding on itself. The howl of some terrible thing vibrated in my bones, accompanied by Blackbyrne's final scream as the monsters he'd sought to command devoured him body, mind, and soul. (2012, 218)

Like so many of Lovecraft's characters, Whyborne, Griffin, and Christine have faced a reality far beyond what they imagined to be the limits of human existence. Their experiences and reactions, however, are substantially different. Donald R. Burleson notes, "Lovecraft protagonists are virtually always placed in the position of facing their horrors alone, without consolation or even corroborating witnesses to the reality of their perceptions" (1983, 22). Unlike their predecessors, Whyborne, Griffin, and Christine fight the Lovecraftian menace together, and afterwards they likewise share emotional release:

> Griffin fell to his knees and pulled me tight against him, his face pressed into my hair, tears hot against my scalp. A moment later, Christine was there was well, her arms around Griffin and me. "Damn it, Whyborne," she muttered thickly. "I'm not crying, do you hear?"
>
> I couldn't reply, my throat too tight or my heart too big, and simply clung to them both. (2012, 220)

Since romance rather than weird fiction provides the foundation of *Widdershins* and its sequels, the characters' feelings are the motor propelling the plot, rather than serving the primarily reactive function assigned them by Lovecraft. The awkward, shy, and solitary Whyborne might recall more than a few of Lovecraft's outsider protagonists, but he ends up confronting monsters for a very different reason than theirs: he joins Griffin in the nocturnal expeditions of his murder investigation because his strong attraction to the handsome ex-Pinkerton overwhelms the reclusiveness and caution with which he protects but also emotionally imprisons himself.[7] Griffin must in turn reveal to Whyborne his own history with those hybrid creatures, horrific encounters that once confined him to a madhouse and left him haunted by memories and recurrent nightmares that he believes make any lasting emotional connection impossible for him. In her study of the romance novel, Pamela Regis distinguishes between the "dangerous hero," an alpha male whom the heroine must "tame," and the "sentimental hero," who "is hurt or damaged in some way, often emotionally, and the heroine must heal him" (2007, 112-114). In *Widdershins*, a romance with two heroes and no heroine, both Whyborne and Griffin belong to the second category, each man in need of healing by the other. Underpinning the Lovecraftian sequence of events in *Widdershins* is the arc of that healing process, which provides the emotional context within which both men make decisions and take action.

[7] See Dziemianowicz 2015 on Lovecraft's development and uses of outsider figures.

A comparison of the climactic scenes of *Widdershins* and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, the confrontations between Whyborne and Blackbyrne and between Willett and Curwen resulting in the two necromancers' obliteration, offers one illustration of how Hawk reworks his source material. In Lovecraft's novella, Willett employs the reverse incantation without hesitation to stop Curwen from summoning "his one ancient ally" (2001, 204). Having discovered Curwen's machinations, including the murder of Charles Dexter Ward to usurp his identity, Willett acts as a "ruthless and implacable avenger" firm in the belief that "[t]here are abominations and blasphemies which must be stamped out" (2001, 202, 204). Whyborne's emotions, however, are contradictory. He is self-aware enough to recognize his similarities to Blackbyrne, a fellow sexual and intellectual outsider, and he must reject the temptation to dominate others offered by sorcery: "Did Blackbyrne see those dark longings, when he looked at me? Did he know we weren't nearly as different as I might wish?" (2012, 211). Worse, the young man whom Blackbyrne resurrects to contain the alien monster was the love of Whyborne's desperately lonely adolescence: Leander Somersby, for whose accidental death ten years earlier Whyborne still blames himself and whose revitalized body Whyborne must now destroy. In the fleeting moments before Blackbyrne can irrevocably conclude the ritual, the fate of the world hangs on Whyborne's agonizing choice between his past and his present:

> "Damn it, Whyborne, hurry!" Christine shouted.
>
> But I couldn't. Staring into Leander's wide, frightened eyes, I couldn't move, couldn't speak.
>
> "Whyborne!" Griffin called from somewhere behind me. "Hold on—I'm coming!"
>
> At the sound of his voice, the constriction around my throat eased. Drawing all of my breath into my lungs, I shouted: "*Take back what has been given, Yog-Sothoth; let him descend*!" (2012, 214)

Whyborne's victory over Blackbyrne is a victory over himself, one demanding a resolve that, following the logic of romance fiction, he found in his love for Griffin. Finally, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* ends with the guarantee of Joseph Curwen's permanent return to death: "that man of unholy centuries and forbidden secrets never troubled the world again" (2001, 205). Theron Blackbyrne's demise, however, does not conclude *Widdershins*, in accord with Lanyon's advice to authors: "If you're writing a genre M/M novel, wind up the genre plot before the romance" (2013, 85). More important here is the subsequent final chapter, in which Whyborne accepts Griffin's invitation to move into the latter's house and begin a new life together with him (2012, 224-226).

By definition, Hawk's m/m romances explicitly queer Lovecraft's fictional world. However, this is a more complex process than merely confronting a same-sex couple with Lovecraftian dangers. Otherness and monstrosity are among Lovecraft's recurrent themes, and practitioners of the Gothic had interwoven queerness with both long before he set pen to paper. Palmer asserts: "Gothic fiction, with its

ambivalent approach to sexuality and its emphasis on the protagonist's conflicted desires, lends itself especially well to representing the tension that the queer individual experiences between his own desires and societal pressures" (2016, 14).[8] Specific Lovecraft texts have previously been read as allegories (deliberate or not) of gay self-recognition. Robert M. Price famously argued that the protagonist's discovery and acceptance of his own monstrosity in "The Outsider" corresponds to the coming-out process: "the parallel is plainly there, and gay readers of HPL will probably wonder why it has taken the rest of us this long to see it" (1982, 13).[9] Price suggested in a footnote that "The Shadow over Innsmouth" might be read similarly (1982, 13n2), an invitation that Bobby Derie accepted: "Consider a simple allegorical interpretation of 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' as a journey of self-discovery for a closeted homosexual, exposed for the first time to a homosexual community fearful of persecution, asserting his heterosexuality by exposing them, and then discovering and finally embracing his own sexuality" (2015, chap. 2, "Homosexual Interpretation").[10] Indeed, it is tempting to apply a double meaning to the "Innsmouth" narrator's words after he accepts his sea-creature ancestry: "I feel queerly drawn toward the unknown sea-deeps instead of fearing them" (1999, 335).[11] In these readings of Lovecraft, non-human identities within the stories can serve as possible metaphors for non-normative sexualities, but only outside the texts can such sexualities be acknowledged or named by commentators. Likewise, Lovecraft's monstrous others can only thrive, if at all, by fleeing human society to embrace "the bitterness of alienage" (1999, 49). In the *Whyborne and Griffin* series, however, those identities and those sexualities are both explicitly present and unmistakably analogous within the Widdershins milieu. Nor does Widdershins, which always knows its own, demand their exile. On the contrary, the city itself has chosen and adopted precisely those individuals. As a descendant of Widdershins' founders tells Griffin, "This town has a way of collecting things" (2014b, I). Hawk's queering of Lovecraft for the purposes of m/m romance fiction reframes and reconceives the very idea of otherness in the latter author's texts.

From the first chapter of the series onward, Whyborne's homosexuality – encompassing both his romantic and his erotic desires – is intertwined with his

[8] Applications of queer theory to Gothic and horror fiction include Haefele-Thomas 2012, Haggerty 2006, Hughes and Smith 2009, and Palmer 1999, 2012, 2016. For readings of contemporary iterations of the queer monster, see Elliott-Smith 2016, Miller 2011, and Palmer 2016, 111-149.

[9] Price's essay employs one dominant accepted model of coming out in the United States at the time of its 1982 publication. That model, with its assumptions of overcoming traumatic self-disgust and a consequent need to take refuge in a shadowy underground gay subculture invisible to heterosexuals, may surprise some contemporary readers in an era in which LGBTQ public figures routinely share their lives on social media. Other readers, unfortunately, may find the model still applicable to their own experiences or those of people they have known.

[10] See also Pace 2008 and Johnson 2018. Derie provides a useful survey of Lovecraft's recorded opinions on homosexuality (2015, chap. 1, "Views on Gender and Homosexuality").

[11] See also Lord 2004 and Newell 2020, 194 for different perspectives on this passage and on the narrator's disgust with his self-discovery.

sorcery. It is no accident that the action of *Widdershins* begins when Griffin asks Whyborne to decipher the *Liber Arcanorum*: magic brings the two men together, and Whyborne subsequently explores his aptitude for casting the grimoire's spells while he also explores his sexuality for the first time in his life through their developing relationship. This parallel is made still more obvious by Whyborne's ironic resistance to labelling himself a sorcerer, in contrast to his far easier recognition of his own attraction to men. Whyborne refuses to put himself into the same category as the ruthless, malevolent, and utterly inhuman Theron Blackbyrne: "Of course, I was no sorcerer. Just a dabbler in a branch of science not fully understood" (2013a, chap. 2). To embrace his power and use it for good, however, he must in effect come out, both to himself and to others: "In the end, the words were far easier to speak than I'd expected. 'Because I'm a sorcerer'" (2014c, chap. 22). This self-acceptance proves liberating, and Griffin will later attribute Whyborne's growing self-assurance to his proficiency in magic as well as to their love: "I've seen how you've bloomed, my dear. Discovered yourself, your confidence. And although I'd like to think our relationship might have something to do with it, I'm not quite so arrogant as to claim full credit" (2014a, chap. 21). The interconnections between paranormal power and same-sex love, both forms of otherness, become still stronger and more complex later in the series when Griffin acquires complementary supernatural abilities of his own, thereby deepening the couple's bond.

Whyborne subsequently discovers that his exceptional spell-casting ability, already analogous to his outsider sexuality, derives from his own unsuspected nonhuman ancestry. Hawk appropriates specific elements from Lovecraft's "The Shadow over Innsmouth," the story shown above to be so apt for a queer reading, for the revelation of Whyborne's ancestry in the fifth novel, *Bloodline* (2014a).[12] This installment's investigation focuses on the mystery of the ketoi, humanoid undersea creatures with gills, "dolphin-like fins" on their limbs, shark's teeth, and stinging tentacles for hair (2014a, chap. 11). Like Zadok Allen's "frog-fish monsters" in "Innsmouth," the ketoi sometimes mate with land-dwellers, producing hybrids who can live undetected among humans (Lovecraft 1999, 296-97; Hawk 2014a, chap. 11). And like Lovecraft's narrator Robert Olmstead, Whyborne learns that he is a descendant of just such a union, his mother's great-great-grandfather's marriage to a ketoi. Whyborne feels monstrous and tainted by this very Gothic family secret, which he at first considers an ancestral curse, and he is especially horrified to realize that this hybrid heritage lies at the roots of his magical prowess: "No wonder I seemed to have an uncanny knack for the spells. A line of sorcerers, crossed with a line of abominations" (2014a, chap. 20). This initial sense of monstrosity and separation from humanity recalls Olmstead's: "Some frightful influence, I felt, was seeking gradually to drag me out of the sane world of wholesome life into unnameable abysses of blackness and alienage" (Lovecraft 1999, 334). Unlike

[12] The third novel, *Stormhaven* (2013a), likewise draws upon "The Shadow over Innsmouth," laying the groundwork for the revelations of *Bloodline*.

Olmstead, however, Whyborne chooses to come out to his friends as hybrid, sharing a new manifestation of his otherness rather than taking refuge beneath the sea.

"The Shadow over Innsmouth," of course, is noteworthy among Lovecraft's works not only because it is so amenable to a queer reading, but also because it is so revealing of his racism and xenophobia. Jonathan Newell notes: "Yet despite his distaste for eroticism, sex suffuses Lovecraft's fiction – especially and unavoidably his utter horror and simultaneous fascination with miscegenation, often thinly veiled through the interbreeding of human and non-human beings" (2020, 192).[13] "The Shadow over Innsmouth" vividly illustrates this obsession, from the travel agent's account of the "odd specimens" from foreign ports whom sailors brought back to Innsmouth to beget children with the natives to the narrator's own horror at the "bestial abnormality" of the current inhabitants' faces and the "dog-like sub-humanness of their crouching gait" (1999, 272, 323). Hawk simultaneously invokes and rewrites this iconic yet controversial text, making the initially feared undersea ketoi in *Bloodline* articulate rather than unintelligible, delphine rather than batrachian, and visually striking rather than ugly. Whyborne's potential transformation into amphibious form is a matter of choice rather than the ancestral doom that Robert Olmstead cannot escape. (Whyborne declines in order to remain with Griffin.) While Lovecraft focuses on the dangers that the Deep Ones pose to humanity (Alcalá González 2017, 93), Hawk emphasizes the ketoi's egalitarian treatment of all sexualities: when told that Whyborne and Griffin cannot marry, Whyborne's sea-dwelling sister Persephone replies, "'Truly? Land people are stupid, then'" (2014a, chap. 21). Most important, Robert Olmstead's terror changes to "comfort and longing" only once he recognizes himself as a hybrid descendant of the Deep Ones and identifies with "those whom he has learned to be his ancestors" (Alcalá Gonzalez 2017, 93). In contrast, Hawk condemns humans' fearful hostility toward the ketoi and insistence on their otherness, like the disgust demonstrated by the sorcerers Fiona and Theo Endicott, as bigotry beyond rational argument (2014a, chaps. 22-23).

Fortunately for Whyborne, his friends do not share the Endicotts' genocidal certainty that the only good ketoi hybrid is a dead one. His confession to Christine Putnam explicitly links all three manifestations of his otherness: "I've given you rather a lot to look past when it comes to our friendship. Sorcery. My inclinations. I feared inhuman blood might push you to your breaking point" (2014a, chap. 22). Christine, however, is not repelled: "Truthfully, Whyborne, I'm a bit surprised, but you're my dear friend. That hasn't changed. You are still the same person you were yesterday. I really don't see the problem" (2014a, chap. 22). In mocking repudiation of Lovecraftian horror at interracial sexual congress, Griffin even jokes that he does not object in the slightest to having "been buggered by a fish-man" (2014a, chap. 21).

[13] For approaches to Lovecraft's racism, see also Houellebecq 2008, 105-109; Lévy 1988, 26-30; Ringel 2014a, 271-273; Simmons 2013; Wisker 2013, 46-51.

More important, Griffin's reassertion of his feelings for Whyborne, sorcerer and ketoi hybrid, explicitly affirms and weaves together all three forms of his alterity:

> "Magic is a part of you, the way it isn't other people."
>
> I looked away. "You mean humans."
>
> "I mean other people." He let go of one hand so he could catch my chin with his fingers and turn my gaze back to him. "I love you—all of you." (2014a, chap. 21)

Otherness need not be monstrosity in Widdershins. Nor need monstrosity be otherness. Griffin declares of Whyborne's kinship with the ketoi, "If you're one of the monsters we've fought against, then—then they can't be monsters. No more so than humans, at any rate. Some terrible and some good, but not inherently evil" (2014a, chap. 21).

Hawk further emphasizes this reversal of Lovecraft's racism with the series' two other significant romances. In the novella *Undertow* (2017b), Whyborne's undersea twin Persephone woos and wins Whyborne's naïve human secretary, Maggie Pankhurst, despite significant cultural differences:

> "You're the one who left the squid on my windowsill?"
>
> "How else was I to court you?" [Persephone] must have read my shock in the expression on my face, because her brows drew together. "This isn't a human custom?"
>
> "Not…not quite." (2017b, chap. 9)

Not only does this plot give women's same-sex love an important place in Widdershins, but it also foregrounds another interspecies – which is to say, interracial – couple. Indeed, the fact that Persephone has a ketoi body with shark's teeth and tentacles for hair, in contrast to her brother's invisible hybrid heritage, makes Maggie's reciprocation of her ardour an even bolder statement than Griffin's attraction to Whyborne. The third relationship depicted is the romance of Christine Putnam and Iskander Barnett. Although they are an opposite-sex human couple, otherness nevertheless characterizes and presents an obstacle to their marriage: Iskander is multiracial, born of an English father and an Egyptian mother (2014c, chap. 5). Hawk parallels the social stigma experienced by interracial and same-sex partnerships in *Fallow* (2016), when Iskander empathizes with Whyborne over Griffin's mother's refusal to accept his sexuality: "When Christine's parents disowned her for marrying me, I couldn't help but feel, well, guilty…. It isn't easy knowing you cost the one you love most in the world their family" (2016, chap. 12). All three of the principal relationships in the series, then, embrace otherness as they defy conventional boundaries, including the racial boundaries that Lovecraft deployed to provoke horror in his readers a century ago.

To conclude, Jordan L. Hawk demonstrates in his *Whyborne and Griffin* series an effective mode of appropriating H. P. Lovecraft's weird fiction as the unlikely superstructure for m/m romance. It is not enough merely to borrow random Mythos elements such as solitary scholars, gambrel roofs, and dimension-opening grimoires,

nor to contrive "happily ever after" endings for the sake of following the genre's expected formulas. Hawk's project is more radical: to reject and redefine the conceptualizations and treatments of otherness and monstrosity that are so fundamental to Lovecraft's tales and so revealing of his own obsessions. Sexual, magical, and racial differences must face ignorance, prejudice, and danger in these texts, but the *Whyborne and Griffin* romances achieve their narrative closures by ultimately accepting, including, and celebrating those differences in the relationships at the core of the stories. Widdershins knows its own.

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At the Mountains of Madness, "Till a' the Seas" and the Anthropocene of Horror

ABSTRACT

The Anthropocene, a geological epoch in which human impact on the planet has become a cause for major change to entire ecosystems, has been reimagined by fiction in modern times. Geographical exploration and scientific advancement can turn into thematic points of interest for some authors of speculative fiction, including Howard Phillips Lovecraft. His brand of cosmic horror translates many anxieties of the Anthropocene into ancient and powerful monsters that come back to doom and vanquish humanity for the hubris of experimental human endeavours. The objective of the following essay is to investigate the imagination of the Anthropocene from the perspective of H. P. Lovecraft's writing style in two stories: the novella At the Mountains of Madness*, and the short story "*Till a' the Seas*," written together with R. H. Barlow. Both stories envision scenarios of disaster and human perdition, to a greater or lesser extent, due to natural or artificial consequences of environmental danger.*

Keywords: Anthropocene, Environmental Disaster, Cosmic horror, Antarctic Exploration, R. H. Barlow

The marking of geological epochs traditionally takes into consideration natural changes to landscapes, affecting the configurations of natural resources and wildlife. Such changes steer conditions of living in drastically contrasting directions. The combination of factors that culminate in those drastic changes is usually a complex problem to observe, and with the industrialization of human labour and the generally destructive interactions between human societies and the environment, that combination of factors became more unbalanced, having human influence as the main element of ecological change. Urban spread, population growth, and even some measures of preservation[1] and beautification of nature affect this constant and sometimes irreversible shift in the dynamics of human exploration/exploitation and domestication of resources and living beings. Gradual and destructive processes like the disappearance of ice sheets in both polar regions, the rise of sea levels, the warming of the oceans, and higher concentrations of greenhouse gasses as a result of anthropogenic impact have been investigated for decades (IPCC 2013, 4). Climate change has, therefore, become a major subject matter when such an impact is discussed.

The Anthropocene, the geological epoch that is considered the successor to the Holocene, marks the intensification of human technological progress to an extent in which the emission of gases and the excessive waste of several materials have profoundly affected the way ecosystems and atmospheric process's function (Dukes 2011, 127). A clearer and to-the-point description by Yadvinder Malhi (2017) associates the Anthropocene with a "magnitude of human impacts on the Earth system, in particular climate change but also ranging through deforestation, energy use and air pollution, harvesting of fisheries, and climate change" (25.3). Reinhold Leinfelder (2013) adds an important element to the discussion by stating that it is "a scientific hypothesis based on the assumption that humanity has become a global Earth system factor in sectors such as water circulation, climate, biological productivity, biodiversity, geobiochemical cycles, sedimentation patterns, and overall use of lands and seas" (9). The "factor" being that human presence and interaction with other natural agents and systems in itself is now considered to be a major and complex mechanism of change in multiple forces and resources of the planet – a defining factor for a geological epoch.[2]

My objective in this study is to investigate a conceptual imagination of the Anthropocene on the textual and conceptual expressions of specific stories by Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Although it was written long before discussion about the Anthropocene became widespread in academic fields, his fiction gets into details

[1] Non-native tree plantations, sometimes used in forestation or agricultural projects, impact negatively on the abundance and diversity of local fauna and seeds, as well as on natural plant regeneration, as detailed by a study carried out in a Brazilian context (Valduga et al 2016).
[2] The changes that characterize the Anthropocene are not necessarily deemed to be negative by scholars (Leinfelder 2013, 10). The academic perspective on the Anthropocene partly suggests that human change must come under educated and conscious ways to promote reconstruction and planning of healthy interactions among humans and between humans and their environments.

about raw apocalyptic scenarios that involve human interference in uncharted landscapes and the backlash that may come with it. Analysing portrayals of disaster caused by such an interference in texts by the American author as a conceptual imagination of the Anthropocene thus becomes relevant from a critical standpoint.

My focus is tackled in two texts: the novella *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931) and the short story "Till a' the Seas" (1935).[3] In the former, a group of scientists journey to the then mysterious process of studying and exploring the land, unveil horrors too old and otherworldly to be truly understood. The limits of the world, the gelid wastelands of the southern hemisphere, the last uncharted and thus unpopulated area of our planet, becomes the stage of an adventure gone terribly wrong. Exploration, as a process of planning and possibly establishing resource exploitation, becomes humanity's hubris as the irony of the more powerful and destructive horror awaits. Shedding light on *At the Mountains of Madness* as a narrative about the Anthropocene becomes an instigating critical perspective to structure this article around, especially once one has in mind real-world processes directly or indirectly caused by anthropogenic factors, like the gradual deglaciation of the poles. In "Till a' the Seas," Robert Hayward Barlow and H. P. Lovecraft create a tale of a post-apocalyptic Earth, barren and witnessed by a man who reflects upon a purer state of the planet in times long gone. I intend to find conceptual (textual or subtextual) evidence of Lovecraft's approach to human interaction with the Earth and how it is reshaped either by the rise of the Old Ones – the powerful creatures that lie deep within the frosty mountains of Antarctica – or by the vaguely described eschatological events that led to Earth's deterioration in "Till a' the Seas." With the analysis to be developed about those two texts in this article, I intend to contribute to studies concerning the work of H. P. Lovecraft, taking into account his approach and relevance in speculative fiction through the creation of weird monsters that have come to inspire a significant portion of horror and fantasy in fiction to this day. Such studies can help readers better understand the intricacies of his extensive literary production, coming into contact with new texts or new perspectives from which to read them.

In the literature of H. P. Lovecraft, the material conflicts between humankind and nature are elaborated in connection with horror elements of his own. When examining the connections between Gothic fiction and science fiction, Sian MacArthur (2015) approaches the theme of monsters, stating that science fiction "monsters can come from absolutely anywhere," which gives the genre a wide range of weirdness in the composition of unpredictable monsters (72). The author adds that aliens are in one of the most prominent categories of monsters in fiction, and that "at the heart of much alien fiction are power and control – and the ways in which the aliens strive to achieve this over whichever species they are trying to oppress" (MacArthur 2015, 91). This is a central motif in much of Lovecraft's own

[3] An idea initially brought to Lovecraft for collaborative writing by a 17-year-old Robert Hayward Barlow, this short story was published in the summer of 1935 in the *Californian* (Joshi and Schultz 268, 2001).

fiction that combines supernatural elements from previously produced Gothic fiction and science fiction[4] to generate new configurations of monstrous bodies and uncanny occurrences to catapult the horror of his narratives. Lovecraft chose our own world to set most of his stories in and provide a tone of proximity and realism, adding elements of extra-terrestrial life to inspire a sense of suspense and uncanniness and setting a good number of stories in strange and remote locations.[5] In "Notes on Weird Fiction," he writes that "inconceivable events and conditions have a special handicap to overcome, and this can be accomplished only through the maintenance of a careful realism in every phase of the story except that touching on the one given marvel" (Lovecraft 1995, 115). His Cthulhu Mythos introduces that "one given marvel:" creatures described as having horrific appearances and presences that aid in the creation of an unsettling and unfamiliar mood; their physical power is beyond that of our own species, and their ancient nature suggests a cosmic experience that would put our scientific knowledge to shame. When writing such narratives of uncanny horror, Lovecraft plays with the idea of our place in this planet and in the universe, emphasizing the components that create *cosmic horror*: a narrative perspective that "saw the human race as a tiny and insignificant element within the infinities of space and time" (Joshi and Schultz 2001, x) and which is expressed in many of his Cthulhu Mythos stories. For instance, his widely known "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928) begins with the following insight by the protagonist Francis Weyland Thurston: "The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far" (Lovecraft 2008, 355). Statements like this demonstrate the scale of human influence in the grand cosmic order that Lovecraft used to convey his horror style. Written in the early twentieth century, his texts portray human characters that are university professors, geologists, physicists, archaeologists, anthropologists, and other people of academic knowledge who ironically seem puny against the ageless power of those creatures from outer space. The men of science who spearheaded the human enterprise to conquer the Earth go insane and perish when facing the otherworldly menace of the anomalous beings that act very much like the aforementioned exploratory agents of the human species: with destructive will and with a determination to enslave and ravage, explore and settle.

[4] One of his most prominent passions was that for supernatural literature, Gothic and otherwise – the term "supernatural" here refers to texts that present events out of the ordinary realism in fiction, including ghosts, demons, curses, aliens, vampires, undead creatures etc. In his essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (1927, revised and republished in 1934), he provides an in-depth account of literary texts that dealt with themes and styles that were close to his weird fictional format, going from James Macpherson's Ossian poetic cycle to William Blake, Edgar Allan Poe, and Ambrose Bierce.

[5] The remote setting is another peculiar aspect of his narrative style, which can be linked to the McArthur's (2015) idea that "Alien fiction also adopts other features and motifs from the Gothic, quite often using strange and isolated locations as a means of generating the requisite amount of suspense" (91).

Donna Haraway (2015) writes that the "Chthulucene,[6] even burdened with its problematic Greek-ish tendrils, entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages – including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-ashumus" (160). That anomalous nature of Lovecraft's alien monsters suggests both the strangeness of unknown shapes and their familiar resemblance to our own earthly lifeforms. A certain uncanny familiarity – the *unheimlich*[7] of his fiction, so to speak – informs his creation of tension and characterizes his style of cosmic horror, which deals with the immense fear of what hazards – alive or not – may come from outer space to haunt humanity and ultimately take its place as the explorers and exploiters of planet Earth. The uncanny itself is an idea that guides much of Lovecraft's heterocosm for his narratives and can also be noticed in *At the Mountains of Madness*, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs. According to David Punter and Glennis Byron (2004), "the representation of the uncanny is at the core of the Gothic, since it, like the uncanny, deals in the constant troubling of the quotidian, daylight certainties" (286). Scientists that journey into the depths of the Antarctic lands expect to stumble upon new – and exciting – findings that should drive their sense of professional accomplishment, but it is not part of their plans to unravel weird and monstrous secrets as they go about the familiar routines of their scientific procedures. The weird is the driving force behind the suspense that twists the continuity of the characters' routines. Gry Ulstein[8] (2019) calls attention to the importance of critical work concerning "weird narrative as an aesthetic platform with potential for addressing and undressing Anthropocene issues by moulding them into monsters. In engaging with the new weird monsters, audiences are challenged to reposition themselves in relation to multiple forms of nonhuman subjectivities and to question their own degree of agency in the Anthropocene age" (62). In Lovecraft's fiction, the Anthropocene as an evolutionary stage of the planet culminates in the coming and/or the reawakening of Ulstein's "monsters" that once haunted us in ancient myths and legends – thus uncannily familiar –; the co-existence between such monsters and human beings changes what would be a

[6] It is important to note that Haraway, while using the word *Cthulhu* – the main creature/deity in Lovecraft's mythos – to draw her idea of a "Chthulucene" from, makes it clear that she is not referring to the vein of science-fiction written or inspired by the American writer. Instead, she borrows the word to describe "the diverse earth-wide tentacular powers and forces and collected things with names like Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa (burst from water-full Papa), Terra, Haniyasu-hime, Spider Woman, Pachamama, Oya, Gorgo, Raven, A'akuluujjusi, and many many more" (Haraway 2015, 160), discussing more feminist approaches to speculative fiction and imagination. I decided to bring her quote to this particular paragraph in order to establish the view of monstrous, inhuman/metahuman, or other hybrid and nightmarish fictional bodies as a style of speculative or horror fiction that has a lot in common with Lovecraft's narratives or that invariably refers back to his writings.

[7] And here I should comment that Sigmund Freud's widely known concept of the *unheimlich* as that which is familiarly unfamiliar, homely and uncanny, applies to Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. Freud himself writes that "there is no doubt that this [the *uncanny*] belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread" (2003, 123).

[8] In the article "'Age of Lovecraft?' – Anthropocene Monsters in (New) Weird Narrative," Ulstein discusses Lovecraft's influence for new weird fiction authors, and how monsters have been imagined as a result of Anthropocene-driven anxieties.

normal configuration of the Anthropocene, since humans are not the only species to explore, exploit, colonize, and build on Earth.

However, Lovecraft's oeuvre does not only incorporate monsters, but also other elements of suspense or speculative fiction. The writer published texts that were later labelled as part of the Cthulhu Mythos; some others belong to a collection of stories known as the Dream Cycle, and others are independent narratives with their own diegesis and themes. However, there is a group of narratives that, regardless of the collection they belong to, all feature the destruction or impending end of an idealized world as part of the drama portrayed. "The Doom that Came to Sarnath" (1920) tells of a kingdom that falls into decay after decimating and pillaging a neighbouring civilization from a place known as Ib and being cursed as a result of such deed. "Polaris" (1920), pertaining to the Dream Cycle as well as the "Sarnath" narrative, portrays a distant city that is under siege and whose inhabitants struggle to escape from attacks by outsiders. Such stories about an end of times constantly bring up the idea of invasion, either from a strange and human *Other*[9] or by ancient supernatural monsters, foreshadowing an unimaginable doom to befall an organized and celebrated society. This is particularly the case with the two narratives I will address here.

In *At the Mountains of Madness*, geologist William Dyer recounts his terrifying expedition to Antarctica in an attempt to prevent other scientists from being exposed to the supernatural horrors that lie in the continent. He feels "forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow [his] advice without knowing why" (Lovecraft 2008, 723). To begin with, the scientific centre portrayed in the story and where Dyer and his fellow scientists studied and come from, is the fictional Miskatonic University at Arkham. The institution features in many other texts by Lovecraft and is portrayed to be an important locus of academic knowledge, from where important authorities base their research. Having established that connection, Lovecraft's narrative generates familiarity, which is an important factor for *Mountains* to build up suspense moving forward – the suspense itself, being partly possible thanks to gradual appearances of uncanny creatures that follow similar patterns of monstrosity from some of his other stories, shares the same aspect of weird familiarity. This weird familiarity is closely linked to Dyer's own scientific curiosity. He acts as a discoverer of secrets, a scientific agent who goes beyond his research duty to unravel never-before-seen realities. Despite the fatalistic tone of Dyer's narration even in its beginning, Antarctica is first described as being a white and desolate expanse, a land of unknown natural riches and uncharted possibilities only superficially explored by figures such as Shackleton and Amundsen before. The desolation and emptiness shown on Antarctica's surface would be later compensated by the discovery of unfathomable horrors and a strong presence

[9] Given Lovecraft's recurring racist standpoint, it is not difficult to view such portrayals as linked to a dread of "invading cultures." In the poem "Providence in 2000 A.D." (1912), for example, the author fears his hometown will be invaded and the names of its places changed by immigrants of Italian, Canadian, Jewish, or Portuguese descent.

hidden beneath. The objective of the mission on the distant continent is to drill the earth and gather substratum and mineral material in general, while also attempting to collect fossilized matter and thus more information on flora and fauna, extant or extinct.

In *Mountains*, Lovecraft demonstrates his recurrent interest in language drawn from geology, and exhaustive descriptions of investigative processes carried out during Dyer's expedition, evidencing an underlying commitment to scientific themes and parlance. The consistent geology-orientated language used also serves to grant Dyer a voice of reason, a last try to hold on to his rational train of thought and resist the insanity that often comes to Lovecraftian protagonists who witness the supernatural and hideous things that lurk in the depths of the Earth. But the attention to detail is indeed apparent and the impression of a text that carries a scientific weight written by a geologist is delivered, although it would possibly not sustain a specialized reading and therefore serves to give *Mountains* a level of authenticity and realism for a lay readership.

However, scientific knowledge fails. Dyer and Danforth are the only survivors of the first expedition. Having been active participants of the exploration of the stone city beneath the Antarctic surface, they are made small and insignificant before the colossal and ancient aspect of the Old Ones and their domain. This is where the cosmic horror is manifested in the story, together with the instances and hints at the Anthropocene and the place of human characters in the world – and the cosmos at large. It is a horrifying place for Lovecraftian protagonists to be as they come to the realization of the scale of the world and of things that come from elsewhere, more powerful and more capable of expressing the same nuances technology and aggressiveness that humans do, thus crushing the hopes of human triumph and individual agency in the face of imminent obliteration.[10] Such overpowering realities become more intense in the wild, where human taming has not taken place and especially where these more powerful and weird creatures have already established their own process of taming nature. In finding the similarities between the Old Ones and human ingenuity, Dyer writes:

> They had not been even savages—for what indeed had they done? That awful awakening in the cold of an unknown epoch—perhaps an attack by the furry, frantically barking quadrupeds, and a dazed defence against them and the equally frantic white simians with the queer wrappings and paraphernalia . . . poor Lake, poor Gedney . . . and poor Old Ones! Scientists to the last—what had they done that we would not have done in their place? God, what intelligence and persistence! What a facing of the incredible, just as those carven kinsmen and forbears had faced things only a little less incredible! Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, starspawn—whatever they had been, they were men! (Lovecraft 2008, 798).

[10] In an interview with Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (2016), the weird fiction writer China Miéville talks of the "impossibility of being human in deep times" as an important factor in Lovecraft's horror (236).

Erecting a gigantic, although incomprehensible city is a feat of intelligence and prowess and braving the icy wilderness of that continent with all the perils that come with it reiterates that. The protagonist laments their loss and their demise. He praises them for not being "savages" and this determines his rhetoric of grievance and fascination for the civilisation that carried out its own version of the Anthropocene in Antarctica.

The Old Ones, therefore being described as sentient and organized beings, operate under the same premises as humans would in such a fictional portrayal. They build, they explore, they settle, they enslave the shoggoth population, and they carve and expand, profoundly altering the environment around them. These creatures illustrate many of the past deeds of human cultures that have explored, settled, exploited, and enslaved in history. When those two cultures clash, there is a clear indication of power relations: the Old Ones are to be respected and feared, whereas the human characters are seen as just another animal species with higher possibilities of development. More discoveries in the tunnels indicate that the Old Ones, under attack from another alien species called Mi-Go and exhausted by recurring shoggoth-driven rebellions, eventually perish as a society (Lovecraft 2008, 775-797). Such a revelation demonstrates that even a scientifically advanced civilization such as that of the Old Ones is not immune to dangers from without and within. Dyer feels sorry for the fall of such ingenious beings, having been awe-struck by the magnitude of their technology and history.[11] The protagonist, however, goes from fascination to disgust, and describes the layout of the passageways at one point as a "blasphemous tunnel with the greasily smooth floors and the degenerate murals aping and mocking the things they had superseded" (ibid, 797). The disgust here is already mixed up with fascination and horror, since it is part of the weird/uncanny element of Lovecraftian fiction that one's curiosity and fascination are two things that usually lead to demise. It could be said that they are also the two things that drive Dyer and Danforth's exploration further and result in the anthropogenically generated release of previously hidden terrors.

Leinfelder (2013) writes that "as a conceptual framework, the Anthropocene could hence provide a solid basis for envisioning a sustainable human presence on Earth in which humans would no longer be 'invaders' but rather participants in shaping the natural environment" (9). That does not happen in *Mountains*. Lovecraft's literary style sometimes sets up narratives that are built upon the premise of scientific investigation and advancement, the premise of a constant work of technological or academic betterment, indicating a constructive tone for the characters in the diegesis. However, given that most of his narratives follow a horror format, climaxes in the plotlines of his stories suggest a gradual worsening of whatever dilemma or conflict is being presented. It is no different in *Mountains*,

[11] Dyer laments their downfall as he seems to sympathise with their scientific prowess: "Scientists to the last—what had they done that we would not have done in their place? God, what intelligence and persistence! What a facing of the incredible, just as those carven kinsmen and forbears had faced things only a little less incredible!" (Lovecraft 2008, 798).

where an instance of what should be a positive geological discovery and study triggers the rise of an unspeakable horror for those involved in the expedition and potentially to the rest of the planet in the future should these creatures leave their stone city and spread across the world. The same is suggested in stories such as "The Call of Cthulhu" or "The Colour Out of Space" (1927). There is no turning back after the discoveries are made and after the impacts of meddling with their environments and the unknown things that inhabit it are established; there is no perspective of reconstruction, but of destruction and perdition. Just like Gustaf Johansen and his curious fellow expeditioners reach the far and deep Pacific Ocean waters near the ancient and lost city of R'Lyeh only to accidentally awaken the monster-god Cthulhu from his aeons-long slumber in "The Call of Cthulhu," in *Mountains* William Dyer and Danforth venture into the caves of the long-forgotten and alien Antarctic city to release the horrors within, bringing back to the surface shoggoths and the Old Ones themselves. In some of Lovecraft's stories this pattern recurs in which intervention in the wilderness and remote areas by curious or scholarly protagonists – mechanisms of the Anthropocene – unravel powerful and destructive forces of a new *Chthulucene*, where humanity is revealed as not in control, but at the mercy of stronger entities that could wipe it out from the planet's surface if they wanted to.

Taking a different thematic turn, Barlow and Lovecraft's collaborative short story "Till A' the Seas" recounts a swan song of humanity in a fictional Earth[12] that is slowly moving towards an ecological apocalypse. The text reads like a prophecy of planetary doom through the language of speculative fiction. It is an escalating narrative development of an idea that the expanses of the Earth are ravaged by a slow and inevitable process of scorching by proximity to the Sun: "It took not years or even centuries, but millennia of ruthless change. And still it kept on—sullen, inevitable, savagely devastating" (Barlow and Lovecraft 1989, 423). Initially, the story –which is entirely told through a third-person perspective– provides a chronological account of the increasing damage caused by the global warming portrayed and the ways through which the various societies coped with it, perished under the pressure of it, or escaped from it. Initial emphasis is given to the tropical populations who would suffer the most from the disaster, then detailing –in verbose language, akin to Lovecraft's common style, full of adjectives, adverbs, and a tragic and ominous tone– the migration of peoples to the poles and a process of fall from grace for some of the ancient and proud civilizations. A second moment of the story focuses on the protagonist Ull, whose only human partner has just died. Ull's perspective now takes over the story, and his search for sustenance and remaining human survivors begins, already marked by a tragic and pessimistic narrative mood as a quest that will not have a happy outcome.

As with *Mountains*, "Till A' the Seas" uses concepts of cosmic horror to convey a message of inevitable geological decline caused by space restriction, in this

[12] Naturally, all portrayals discussed in this article are fictional, but "Till A' the Seas" is different in that it comes closer to the Dream Cycle in which imaginary kingdoms and nations are mentioned: in this case places such as Dath, Yarat, or the cities of Dath and Yuanario.

case an increasing proximity with the Sun. Just like many other characters and groups in Lovecraftian writing, Ull recounts past humans as passively waiting for the end to come, for the horror to catch up, while only seeking protection from it. There is no active measure taken or objective to look forward to for these people, only doom and survival. Corruption, instead, is one of the themes portrayed in "Till A' the Seas." Just like in "The Doom that Came to Sarnath" and "Polaris," civilizations are portrayed going through processes of corruption, or sufferers of some end brought about by that very corruption. Barlow and Lovecraft (1989) write: "[…] when explorers reached that millennial city of bridge-linked towers they found only silence. There was not even the horror of corruption, for the scavenger lizards had been swift" (422). Silence, the only thing left for the fictional Dath to offer, means that the end is announced in the story. And thusly the narrative gradually veers towards its apocalyptic climax. Abandonment means nature taking back territories long lost to human enterprise and urban sprawl. Popularly feared or poisonous animals such as spiders, scorpions, lizards, salamanders, and serpents take over previously human-inhabited areas, now deserted.

The Dream Cycle, not unlike the Cthulhu Mythos but more prevalently, deals with civilizational decline more often than with individual perdition. In "Till A' the Seas," the glories, conquests, and values of humankind are remembered and grieved for being over. But there is, as is common with Lovecraftian lore, an overarching concern for moral decadence as being either a trigger or an intensifier of the end:

> A degeneracy both physical and cultural set in with the insidious heat. For man had so long dwelt in comfort and security that this exodus from past scenes was difficult. Nor were these events received phlegmatically; their very slowness was terrifying. Degradation and debauchery were soon common; government was disorganized, and the civilizations aimlessly slid back toward barbarism (Barlow and Lovecraft 1989, 423).

Moreover, the short story considers the West to be the last bastion of morality in the world, and as soon as the Western population dies out, "chaos was complete" (ibid, 423). There is a focus on the enterprise and ingenuity of "civilised" cultures, and the demise of such cultures represents the downfall of the whole species, and with it, the control over the planet and any hope of progress. Those perspectives are often informed by colonial discourses that presume European and American forces to be the natural agents of scientific progress, while ignoring the matrix of exploitation and industrialisation promoted by such nations that results in much of geological change that constitutes the Anthropocene. In "Till A' the Seas," however, Earth's decay is associated with the death of the entire human population, since "Of the people of Earth's fortunate ages, billions of years before, only a few prophets and madmen could have conceived that which was to come […] the shadow of change upon the planet and the shadow of doom upon the race. For man has always thought himself the immortal master of natural things" (ibid, 425). It then becomes apparent that there is no clear understanding of Earth's freedom without an

understanding of humanity's freedom[13] in the story; Earth and its fate are invariably linked to human prosperity or decline.

Abandonment, however, can be as identifiable as vanishing in the story. In a common eschatological cycle of cataclysm followed by the possibility of renewed social and political structures, many narratives have not fully explored the subject of utter disappearance of the human species, instead tackling themes of a return to the state of nature[14] and the conception of a new social contract. In *The World Without Us* (2007), Alan Weisman proposes the following questions: "Suppose that the worst has happened. Human extinction is a fait accompli […] Picture a world from which we all suddenly vanished […] Might we have left some faint, enduring mark on the universe? […] Is it possible that, instead of heaving a huge biological sigh of relief, the world without us would miss us?" (3-5). Being tiny and helpless in the face of natural changes or disasters functions in similar ways to the helplessness suggested through Dyer's horror when encountering the Old Ones in their magnificent and eldritch caves. As for the vanishing of humanity in "Till A' the Seas," the reader finds Ull's inability to return to an aeon when others like him still existed, crushed by an unfortunate event while in a process of brute survival in a barren world, now wiped out from human memory as the last of humans have perished. The proposed "world without us" is a world without records or memory created by human agency to begin with. Ull's final act is pathetic and painful. He manages to find water in an abandoned village, "slimy, stagnant, and shallow, but water […] And now at last the Earth was dead. The final, pitiful survivor had perished. All the teeming billions; the slow aeons; the empires and civilizations of mankind were summed up in this poor twisted form—and how titanically meaningless it all had been" (Barlow and Lovecraft 1989, 428). Those baroque words give the ending an especially dramatic character.

Whereas "Till A' the Seas" is more explicit and works as a narrative in retrospect of classic apocalyptic imaginations of the post-Industrial Revolution era, *Mountains* suggests a quicker and more brutal doom for the Earth. The release of the Old Ones and their ilk –just like the awakening of Cthulhu in "The Call of Cthulhu"– may indirectly mean more harm to the planet since Lovecraft's monsters themselves tend to collectively act in similar ways to how humankind has developed over the centuries; exploring, expanding, modifying their surroundings to give way to

[13] There is discussion over the anthropocentric view that social elements and power relations are detached from environmental factors, and that the view that science and knowledge as a harbinger of insight, advancement and freedom of peoples is also detached from our relationship with our non-human or non-living surroundings: "[…]in the period since the Enlightenment […] Geological time and the chronology of human histories [have] remained unrelated. This distance between the two calendars, as we have seen, is what climate scientists now claim has collapsed" (Chakrabarty 2009, 208).
[14] Novels such as Walter M. Miller Jr's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), Philip K. Dick's *Dr Bloodmoney: or How We Got Along After the Bomb* (1965), or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) deal with survivors of an apocalyptic event trying to cope with the reality of the post-apocalypse and rebuild, reorganise, or simply endure a ravaged new world as they also try to maintain the value of human morality and knowledge.

buildings and massive architectures, as well as enslavement of other species. By doing so, human characters in the Cthulhu Mythos eventually influence further decay of the Earth by unravelling creatures that invariably modify and submit ecosystems to their predatorial and civilizational structures. They add *Chthulucene* to the Anthropocene as two concurrent forces of change in Earth systems.

At the Mountains of Madness portrays nuances of horror as linked to geographic exploration and intervention. The cosmic horror illustrated by the presence of the Old Ones in the story adds the supernatural flavour that is common in Lovecraft's writings, and removes the realism of nature's oppressive forces from the surface of the text, replacing it with something more familiar for readers accustomed to the subject matters of weird or monster fiction. It could be said that such an instance of his cosmic horror brings the uncanny back to the discussion: there is an eerie fragmentation of that which is familiar to us, either through the polar landscape whose bizarre secrets are violated and disturbed by human agents, or through the broken expectations of finding beings that would more clearly resemble Earthly organisms in morphology or social structure. Consequently, the world portrayed in *Mountains is* weird and converges with the idea that "the weird […] is notable for the way in which it opens up an *egress* between this world and others" (Fisher 2016, 19, author's emphasis). "Till A' the Seas," on the other hand, works without the direct and more eldritch tone of horror to delineate its diegetic style. Instead, the story seeks to operate under sentimental tones, resorting to Ull's nostalgic and solitary narrative (Barlow and Lovecraft 1989, 421). He looks back on his planet's past with a longing for company and for an alleged lost glory of a once great civilization. This funereal, celebratory tone is also part of Lovecraft's writing style in other tales of decadence from the Dream Cycle, such as the aforementioned "The Doom that Came to Sarnath" and "Polaris." Both stories investigated here express the danger or the ill-fated consequences of human hubris, either by following the rhetorical devices of a horror story or by offering a literary eulogy to an imagined and ominous future of the Earth.

All things considered, the way the Anthropocene is portrayed in both of the stories considered for this article may not be *directly* related to the issues of climate change, pollution, deglaciation or deforestation, but appear as a subtext of the other allegorical discourses of horror and fantasy being developed. Occurrences such as the monster who wakes from its aeons-long sleep to bring about the end of times, the mysterious forces of alien origin that dwell within, and are an almost indissociable part of certain hostile and remote environments –as is the case of the Old Ones in Antarctica– or the undisclosed decay of the planet mourned by a heroic character are a constant part of Lovecraft's fictional discourse concerning the thresholds of individual agency, science, and interactions with the Earth. In *At the Mountains of Madness*, this discourse is associated with a textual mood of horror and suspense, while in "Till A' the Seas," it is related to the construction of narratives that tackle issues of conflict or nostalgia, but at the same time, the two narratives also share the indication that human activity strongly impacts the environments around the characters and brings about a sense of impending doom, or a past disaster that is revisited.

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Reading Lovecraft in an Era of Post-Truth

ABSTRACT

*This essay investigates the work of H. P. Lovecraft via its relevance in our twenty-first century cultural moment, questioning the multivalent roles that fact, fiction, and evidence play in contemporary politics and myth-making. Our current era of "post-truth," used to signify a new period in which objective truth is rejected and replaced with believably true fabricated narratives, draws surprisingly similar parallels to Lovecraft's stories: "*Nyarlathotep*" depicts a wondrous demagogue figure that successfully manipulates belief in a stable reality, while novellas like "*The Shadow Over Innsmouth*" and* At The Mountains of Madness *warn readers of cover-ups whistle-blower narratives that reveal manufactured absences of truth. Thus, Lovecraftian tales serve as effective cautionary tales of humanity's eventual geopolitical and environmental fate, helping us to understand and prepare for the mistakes of our very real and active present.*

Keywords: H. P. Lovecraft; Post-truth; Simulacra; Defactualization; Credibility

Although little-known during his lifetime, H. P. Lovecraft may nevertheless help us to negotiate the recent debates within philosophical and literary criticism about whether the historical-literary period of postmodernism has finally concluded. One could certainly argue that postmodernity ended with the Cold War and the emergence of the United States of America as the solitary cultural superpower in the globalized, technologically-interconnected world of the 1990s. Terms such as "metamodernism" or "post-postmodernism" have been proposed to signal the new millennium's unique intersection of digital technology and the policies of outdated late capitalist nation-states.[1] However, perhaps the tentative term "post-truth" should be used to name our new period, given the twenty-first century cultural movement's noticeable absence of empirical (or "true") points of reference in the creation of "convincingly true"—but objectively false—narratives by mass media producers, political leaders, and celebrity figures. Indeed, sometimes the twenty-first century in which we exist emphatically feels like a Baudrillardian simulation, the false reality of *The Matrix* (1999), the "*desert of the real itself*," in which the origins of a "proven" fact and the research to support it are instead based upon simulacra—the replacement of the actual objects of study with decidedly unreal and distorted versions of themselves[2]—a strange, new, wasteland world not unlike the modernist 1920s and 1930s that Howard Phillips Lovecraft resisted against and alienated himself from (Baudrillard 1983b, 2).

Lovecraft is quickly becoming much more relevant today in the face of the rapid changes of the twentieth-first century; the undulating movements of the 2000s, 2010s, and now 2020s very closely reflect the cutting-edge cultural and scientific advances of his time. While his work in the then-nascent weird fiction genre helps give today's readers an insightful perspective on the downfall of New England aristocracy (albeit through a backwards and racist worldview),[3] the Lovecraftian tale also helps create a paradigm for a hermeneutic understanding that is perhaps best suited to understand the "fake news," "alternative facts," and identity politics of our own post-truth cultural moment. The characters in Lovecraft's body of work are constantly presented with instances of frightening-yet-verifiable truth that they must choose to accept for themselves as either known fact or convenient fiction, especially if they opt to ignore the reductive false narratives and cover-ups handed down to them by subversive government or academic institutions. For the sake of their own

[1] There are several authors and theorists important to the conception of post-truth since the turn of the twenty-first century, and the list is growing. In addition to Hannah Arendt, Jean Baudrillard, and Slavoj Žižek (all of whom I discuss in this article), see also the work of Alain Badiou, Ralph Keyes, Bruno Latour, and Lee McIntyre.

[2] Amusingly enough, the Wachowskis required the cast of *The Matrix* to read Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* before even opening the script. A copy of the book can be seen in an early scene, and the line "the desert of the real" is spoken by the character of Morpheus.

[3] H. P. Lovecraft's personal ideologies are well-known and well-documented, and influence his fiction in many ways. I do not spend much time on discussing these aspects of his fiction, but for those who are interested, Sophus Reinert's article on Lovecraftian eugenics (see References) is a good place to start. At the very least, it is important to keep in mind the often conservative and/or racist narratives of the post-truth politicians and their supporters that I discuss below.

psychological health and incorrigibly traditionalist worldviews, Lovecraft's characters often reject what is presented to them about the truths of the arts and sciences, and instead abstract the evidence into mythological Darwinian creatures and simulated Einsteinian universes; delusions both supersede and underscore a supposed reality in Lovecraft's world.

A Post-Truth Primer

Our understanding of the indeterminably reversed roles that truth and falsehood play in the twenty-first century is echoed by the early twentieth century's similarly "placid island of ignorance," as described in Lovecraft's iconic opening to "The Call of Cthulhu:"

> The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (Lovecraft 2008a, 355)

Post-truth here thus serves as an effective touchstone to Lovecraft's apocalyptic warnings in the world's scientific, environmental, and geopolitical sectors. In most writing, the credibility of the writing and of the narrator is assumed to be a given; determining whether the text is positive, or negative is left up to the reader, but the writer must do something to undermine their own extant credibility. However, Lovecraft's most common theme is the ambiguous position that knowledge, credibility, and learning occupy in our world from their inception. Should we attempt to understand the mysterious forces at work behind the cosmos, based upon surmises we cannot or are too scared to confirm? For Lovecraft, the answer is often no. The academic pseudo-heroes of his work who do choose to pursue such supernatural investigations—William Dyer of *At the Mountains of Madness* being a good example (see below)—discover that their findings have no real value because of their basis on evidence that in turn has no stable point of reference. A universe that is figuratively or literally impossible to understand (or one that Lovecraftian protagonists outright refuse to acknowledge) profoundly signals Lovecraft's "new dark age:" an era of post-truth. In the turbulent socio-political environment of the contemporary United States, the rejection of communally recognized fact and the replacement of epistemic methodologies with an adherence to one's own emotional opinions or group confirmation biases perpetuates the creation of meaning without stable referents. False narratives distributed by hegemonic authority figures occupy the space of rational thinking and logic, moving beyond what should empirically be "the Truth" to a carefully constructed alternative "reality." Believing manufactured lies comes with very real costs, as evidenced by the way the bizarre final weeks of the Trump presidency culminated in a violent, mistruth-motivated incursion at the United States Capitol.

An early definition of post-truth comes from the well-known critiques of totalitarianism by controversial political theorist Hannah Arendt. She offers the term "defactualization"—meaning the inability of the public to discern objective truth

from its more appealing fabrication—as the basis of modern political and cultural discourse, since "[f]actual truths are never compellingly true" (Arendt 1972, 20, 6). Considering the popularity of "alternative facts" (mistruths) in the construction of a politician's arguments, it is really no surprise that the United States is wrapped-up in more conspiracy theories than a Venetian cabal; supporters with mimetic opinions accept and even advocate for these unsubstantiated falsehoods. Ever since the Kennedy assassination, conspiracy theories in America have spread rapidly. For example, consider how regularly one hears about conspiracies connected to Moon landings; Watergate; the CIA and Project MK Ultra; the 9/11 terrorist attacks; the Clintons and Benghazi; mass shootings and subversive gun control agendas; the celebrity Illuminati; Russian election interference; Jeffrey Epstein's purported suicide; Kevin Spacey's annual and questionably murderous Christmas Eve videos; and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

Celebrities and leaders that can convincingly create and manipulate these falsehoods have been quixotically successful in the past few decades, just as the fascist dictators of interwar Europe a century ago (during Lovecraft's most productive period of writing) manufactured the same conspiracy theories to convert their disciples. The power of these demagogues lies in their creation of defactualized simulacra. A simulacrum, in Baudrillardian terms, refers to the replacement of reality with an abstracted copy or representation; in other words, a leader's skill in crowd manipulation requires a distortion of the reality of a fact or an event—a removal of an objective and scientific referent—thus blurring the line between the real and the unreal. Take, for example, Baudrillard's introductory epigraph to *Simulacra and Simulation*:

> The simulacrum is never what hides the truth—it is truth that hides the fact there is none. The simulacrum is true.
>
> –Ecclesiastes (Baudrillard 1994, 1)[4]

These lines exist nowhere in the book of Ecclesiastes, or even in the Bible, but perhaps one would automatically assume that this quote was genuine based on its apparent similarity to actual proverbs, and Baudrillard's supposed reliability as an influential philosopher. In other words, we might not even question its confident presence or veracity in the text.[5] This is emphatically post-truth: where the abject truth is replaced with a false narrative that—for all intents and purposes—looks, sounds, smells, tastes, and feels like "the Truth," and we accept the resulting ambiguous simulacrum as our primary hermeneutic system from thence. The standout masters of post-truth demagoguery would approach the craft of public manipulation "eager to find formulas, preferably expressed in a pseudo-

[4] I have elected to quote this passage from the more widely referenced *Simulacra and Simulation*, as the quote in the Semiotext[e] version of *Simulations* I primarily use in this essay does not include a quote-like em dash preceding Ecclesiastes.
[5] Of course, Bible scholars will likely find the quote suspicious or even actively recognize its outright falsehood from their initial reading.

mathematical language, that would unify the most disparate phenomena with which reality presented them; that is, they were eager to discover *laws* by which to explain and predict political and historical facts as though they were … natural phenomena (Arendt 1972, 11)."

Nyarlathotep Today

For Lovecraft, many of the non-narrator characters (both allies and enemies) are often under the influence or control of cosmic entities, and possessed of truth manipulation powers reminiscent of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner and his powers of hypnotic influence: the narrator can only listen to the tale of mystery or horror (much like Coleridge's wedding-guest), and must subsequently inform the reader of the cursed story's reality-shaping implications (Coleridge 2006, 430-46).[6] In Lovecraft's work, the list of Mariner-esque figures who challenge narrators with their reality-shattering "truths" is extensive, but perhaps the most important of these memorable individuals with an aptitude for drawing audiences would be the pharaoh-like Nyarlathotep from Lovecraft's prose poem of the same name.[7] It is not difficult to read into Lovecraft's portentous notion of the dangers of interwar fascist leaders (who in the 1930s Lovecraft would ironically go on to support (Reinart 2015, 272)) in the guise of Nyarlathotep, but also of the catastrophic possibilities of corrupting the arcane work of modernist "mad scientists" like Tesla, Einstein, and Freud:

> Into the lands of civilization came Nyarlathotep, swarthy, slender, and sinister, always buying strange instruments of glass and metal and combining them into instruments yet stranger. He spoke much of the sciences—of electricity and psychology—and gave exhibitions of power which sent his spectators away speechless, yet which swelled his fame to exceeding magnitude (Lovecraft 2008c, 121).

He exhibits the same showmanship of both interwar dictators and post-truth politicians, but also masters the same allure of the permeable boundary between magic and science. For the twenty-first century, perhaps billionaire Elon Musk best represents this particular combination of influential figures. Consider Musk's surrounding cult of personality and his simultaneously hypocritical approach towards humanity's technological future: his impressive rocket and energy programs will surely be foundational for future advancements to come, but one wonders as to the untold cosmic depths that SpaceX will penetrate without proper preparation and foreknowledge. Pair this with his scepticism towards the future of

[6] In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the eponymous Mariner is possessed of a supernatural to force certain people to listen to his cursed story.
[7] The "curse" of dangerous knowledge affects a long list of malevolent figures in Lovecraft. It is through these characters and their intimations that both the narrator and/or the reader is made to understand the cosmic forces at work in the story. Although a Lovecraftian ally, Zadok Allen of *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* is worth mentioning here as a near-exact copy of Coleridge's Mariner character.

computer science: Musk believes that "with artificial intelligence we are summoning the demon" (note his rather fitting cabalistic language here) (Musk 2014). Like Nyarlathotep, Musk's public following is aware of "the impelling fascination and allurement of his revelations, and burn[s] with eagerness to explore his utmost mysteries" (Lovecraft 2008c, 122).

Baudrillard identifies that the mastery over simulated control possessed by post-truth leaders is uniquely connected to the empty reassurance of the contemporary "winning smile:" "[t]his smile signifies only the need to smile … Smile and others will smile back" (Baudrillard 1999, 33-4). While Baudrillard is writing *America* during the Reagan administration, one can apply the empty meaninglessness of the political smile to any number of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century celebrities, the media's "talking heads," and the ideological dog-whistle—or as summarized in Nyarlathotep's "mad science" case—the staged exhibition. The exhibited act and its role as ritualistic interaction with common people creates the artistic narrative "formula" that Arendt refers to, crafted for use as consumptive propaganda. Its possible applications will only broaden with the ever-increasing networking together of digital technology, mass media, the twenty-four-hour news cycle, and the sensationalization of emotional, manipulative narratives over empirical evidence that likely began with the unceasing broadcasts of the O. J. Simpson trial (1994-1995).

Note the intentionally unclear description of Nyarlathotep's exhibited tricks, a common stylistic technique of Lovecraft's work (Harman 2012, 31, 34). This lack of direct narrative requires a buy-in from the reader, necessitating active and imaginative engagement to build upon the system of signs and hints laid out by Lovecraft, and ultimately creating a sort-of reader-directed "conspiracy theory" of the text by indicating the semiotic gaps between the prose itself and the visual image created. Thus the reader will begin to investigate and approach what they determine to be the "Real," to use contemporary philosopher Slavoj Žižek's term. As Juan Luis Pérez de Luque suggests in his essay on the application of Žižek to Lovecraft, "[t]he Real is something that escapes from language, that cannot be apprehended because [of] its own irrepresentability, and has to be distinguished from reality, which is the result of the different representations produced by symbolic and imaginary articulations" (Pérez de Luque 2013, 187). Approaching this "Real" is the ultimate goal for post-truth politicians; by capturing the "Real," they could potentially dominate the socio-political discourse in their nation-state and bend reality to their will by controlling supposedly stable universal referent points, as the ability to discern fact from fiction would then become impossible. When this narrative-shaping power becomes threatened—not by force, as this does not destroy conceptual, reproductive ideas (for example, the futile attempt of the Federal government to snuff out the omnipresent existence of the Deep Ones in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*)—but instead by doubting their truth-manipulation capabilities, these leaders take rapid and emotional action. In the case of "Nyarlathotep," the narrator's "trembling protest [of] 'imposture' and 'static electricity'" at the pharaoh's supernatural spectacle causes Nyarlathotep to disperse the crowd, censor the truth behind his act, and force the dissenting narrator to be driven out of the city and into

a realm of madness (Lovecraft 2008c, 122). Nyarlathotep, it seems, handles his rallies not unlike those of contemporary political leaders such as Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin, in which hecklers and protestors of any sort are swiftly removed, and the pre-approved narrative is placed back on track to be presented to the audience as intended. Twenty-first century politics is thus increasingly approaching a point of predetermined farce, in which opinions and beliefs instead become "facts" and "logic," even if they are disproved by scientific inquiry; whatever research Nyarlathotep wields—his "electricity" and "psychology"—becomes weaponized ideology, misappropriated for a hidden agenda, an intangible "Real."

Lovecraft provides us with cautionary tales of the dangers behind the words of authoritative figures with narrative-shaping abilities and indicates the consequences of heeding their words over the warnings of scientists and researchers with infinitely more experience in handling the "Real." Lovecraft's heroes are usually academic truth-seekers—doddering university professors in the liberal arts and science disciplines ostensibly intelligent enough to use critical thinking skills when presented with unknown factors in little-researched spaces—who are able to discern the semiotics of the "Real" more so than the average citizen. In their own search for knowledge, the Lovecraftian protagonist learns that forces beyond our comprehension (as represented by supernatural beings) possess a much greater capacity for mutating the "Real" otherwise agreed upon by a twentieth century understanding of biology, mathematics, and physics. Although they often lose their lives or minds in the pursuit of knowledge, the intellectually-flawed Lovecraftian antihero is the best character type to argue against unchecked progression in the sciences, serving as powerful examples to the everyday reader of the proper role of research, and warning them of the "terrifying vistas of reality" that humankind should best avoid (Lovecraft 2008a, 355).

Cover-Ups and Whistleblowers

Lovecraft also successfully develops the limited "Real"-shaping capabilities of a solitary all-powerful leader like Nyarlathotep into the expansive level of command and control possessed by hegemonic government organizations, as seen in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*:

> During the winter of 1927–28 officials of the Federal government made a strange and secret investigation of certain conditions in the ancient Massachusetts seaport of Innsmouth. The public first learned of it in February, when a vast series of raids and arrests occurred, followed by the deliberate burning and dynamiting—under suitable precautions—of an enormous number of crumbling, worm-eaten, and supposedly empty houses along the abandoned waterfront. Uninquiring souls let this occurrence pass as one of the major clashes in a spasmodic war on liquor. (Lovecraft 2008d, 808)

The cover-up of the existence of the Deep One colony, as exposed by the narrator of *Innsmouth*, is framed as a narrative logical for the Prohibition Era that connects to the same formulaic myth-making Arendt identifies in the cover-ups of the Vietnam War; the attack on the reef by a military submarine is discounted as the "wild policy" of a

singular tabloid magazine (ibid, 808). The secrecy surrounding a large number of arrests and subsequent placement of the monstrous Innsmouth citizens into prisons and concentration camps sounds quite shocking (and echoes buzzwords of political discourse today), but the "[c]omplaints from many liberal organisations were met with long confidential discussions, and representatives were taken on trips to certain camps and prisons. As a result, these societies became surprisingly passive and reticent" (ibid, 808). The control possessed by the government over both union and media organizations is able to shape the narrative in a way that prevents outright public panic, but avoids the actuality of the "Real," preventing any meaningful interaction. Thus, the submarine fails to completely exterminate the Deep One colony: "[i]t was hurt, but not destroyed. The Deep Ones could never be destroyed," as if they were a transcendental idea rather than a race of humanoid sea creatures (ibid, 858). As Graham Harman succinctly argues, the "danger in [*At the Mountains of Madness*] is that the authorities know too little, and are in danger of learning too much. In the case of [*Innsmouth*], things work in reverse: the authorities already know too much, and prefer that the public should continue to know very little" (Harman 2012, 175-6).

One must then also compare *Innsmouth*'s conspiratorial approach to controlling the "Real" to the academic approach to exposing it in Lovecraft's Antarctic "whistleblower" masterpiece, *At the Mountains of Madness*. As a former amateur journalist, prolific researcher, and autodidact, Lovecraft exhibits his profound awareness of the critical, everyday role reporting and documented evidence play in the construction of an objective truth (for example, through investigation or research), and as such, *Mountains* engages multilaterally with the concerns of post-truth. One will notice in the first three chapters of the novella an almost meticulous obsession with documentation via photograph, drawing, writing, and radio, as well as the constant relaying of information from the expedition between Dyer and Lake, their transport ships, and the Massachusetts press half a world away. The proliferation of these documents establishes a level of superior credibility of Dyer's narration not often portrayed in Lovecraft's fiction, in which, as Harman states, "[t]he usual role of scientists in Lovecraft stories is to conduct tests that lead nowhere, then shrug in puzzlement" (ibid, 151). Given the objective of Dyer's construction of the *Mountains* record—to warn off the upcoming Starkweather-Moore expedition, lest they meet a terrible fate analogous to Lake and Danforth—one hopes that Dyer's account and its measured scientific pacing will be sufficient in its persuasive ability.

Herein enters the issue with simulated "evidence" in the post-truth era: that the viewer will interpret what he wants to find within the evidence itself, already pre-determined by the guiding hand of the post-truth demagogue. Baudrillard refers to television as a "perpetual Rorshach [*sic*] test," and while the technology of Lovecraft's time included the ink pen, wireless radio, mechanical typewriter, and black-and-white photograph, the creation of these easily replicable simulacra that predate television and the Internet will still ultimately work against Dyer's objective (Baudrillard 1983a, 154). For Baudrillard, the "truth" presented by media (including Lovecraft's film, photography, and art) possesses a predetermined reality:

> [I]mages fragment perception into successive sequences, into stimuli toward which there can be only instantaneous response, yes or no—the limit of an abbreviated reaction. Film no longer allows you to question. It questions you, and directly. It is… a greater degree of immediate participation, an incessant response, a total plasticity ([Walter] Benjamin compares the work of the cameraman to that of the surgeon: tactility and manipulation). The role of the message is no longer information, but testing and polling, and finally control… Every image, every media message, any functional environmental object [is] a test… the object is no longer "functional" in the traditional meaning of the word; it no longer serves you, it *tests* you. It has nothing to do with the object of yesteryear, no more than does media news with a "reality" of facts. Both objects and information result already from a selection, a montage, a point-of-view. (ibid 119-20)

This seems to explain Dyer's disheartened opening to *Mountains*, in which he worries that the photographs of the massacre at Lake's camp "will be doubted because of the great lengths to which clever fakery can be carried. The ink drawings, of course, will be jeered at as obvious impostures," despite their "damnably vivid and graphic" technique (Lovecraft 2008b, 723). The simulated media Dyer intends as proof instead exist only as mirrors of the self, creating subconscious expressions that, rather than define the edges of the actual "Real," instead form simulacra of one's desired version of reality. And yet Dyer is actively aware of the damage he may cause by releasing the evidence of Lake's death, as it will likely only spur on the continuation of the second Antarctic sojourn: "[i]t will be hard work deterring others from the great white south, and some of our efforts may directly harm our cause by drawing inquiring notice" (ibid, 750). The desire to see success in abstract symbols that may or may not imply a truth is also reflected in Lake's "strange and dogged insistence on a … prospecting trip before our radical shift to the new base. It seems he had pondered a great deal, and with alarmingly radical daring, over that … marking in the slate; reading into it certain contradictions in Nature" (ibid, 730). Lake's mutinous obsession with this marking, which he interprets as a footprint for a discovery that will "revolutionis[e] the entire sciences of biology and geology," ultimately leads to his and many other expedition member's deaths (ibid, 730). Lake becomes the trite hermetic conspiracy theorist in which the conspiracy is "true," and is unintentionally supported by Dyer's thorough documentation; however, the potential for future scientists to become what Lake desired—to mean "to biology what Einstein has meant to mathematics and physics"—is too great of a rewarding position of power to pass up for Starkweather and Moore (ibid, 736).

It is also interesting to note Dyer's constant concern for the "public's general peace of mind," given his more overt focus on exhaustive reports of supplies, distances, temperatures, and methodologies (ibid, 748). Although the Dyer-Lake expedition is not as well-publicized as the forthcoming Starkweather-Moore one, the public (as well as the actual reader) who did follow the voyage would certainly find it telling the difference between the painstakingly copied radio transcriptions given "literally as Lake sent them, and as … base operator McTighe translated from his pencil shorthand," and the later conversation of Dyer and Danforth summarized as

merely "indecisive whispering" after the "adopt[ion of] an actual rule of strict censorship" (ibid, 736, 744, 785). Dyer's censorship comes from his own discoveries of greater dangers beyond the mountains, driven by his own morbid curiosity and conspiracy-hunting program embodying "something of the same spirit … in the men who stalk deadly beasts through African jungles to photograph them or study their habits" (ibid, 788). However, I suggest Dyer's act of withholding information here comes from a measure of guilt over his very dangerous and unchecked adventure into the Old One city, resulting in their near-death by shoggoth and Danforth's certain insanity. Since Dyer's mimicry of Lake's burning curiosity and encounter with an otherworldly being failed to kill him, he instead becomes a replication of the Ancient Mariner demagogue figure, compelled to disclose his cursed story to prevent the same fate of the Starkweather-Moore expedition.

Inquisitive minds who piece together malevolent "dissociated knowledge" never fare well in Lovecraft's stories, even if they never actually are able to witness or describe the "Real" that they eventually face (Lovecraft 2008a, 355).[8] In Dyer's case, his discovery of the Old One's city brings into question the longevity of the human race and of the planet. Dyer and Danforth uncover the story of the Old One's slow decline millions of years ago in a series of murals and bas-reliefs that prove that humans (in addition to originally being created by the Old Ones) are following the same patterns of dangerously rapid, globalized progress, and too will eventually die out. The Old Ones seem to have been slowly destroyed by a combination of climate change, decadent reliance on mechanical apparatuses, and rebellions of their enslaved shoggoth workers created through unchecked Old One genetic engineering (truly, one can hear the echoes of our twenty-first century hot-button topics reverberating across the intervening span of ninety years since *Mountains* was written). This is the fated "Real" that Dyer is attempting to protect the world from—the knowledge that humanity will lead to its own destruction should it continue on its present path—but "now that Starkweather-Moore party is organising, and with a thoroughness far beyond anything our outfit attempted. If not dissuaded, they will get to the innermost nucleus of the antarctic and melt and bore till they bring up that which may end the world we know" (ibid, 750). Dyer identifies that the particular danger of enterprises like the Starkweather-Moore expedition is not the businessmen and politicians who are the real threats to human existence, but instead the capable scientists who ignore rationality and forge ahead with "mad science," discovering truths about reality that man is not currently ready to handle. This is Lovecraft's plea to the post-truth era: to fall back to empiricism and listen to academics trained to

[8] Most, if not all, Lovecraftian narrators are psychologically disturbed or physiologically harmed by the conclusion of the narrative. Characters that came before the narrator in discovering the truth are almost always dead (for example, the reporter Edwin M. Lillibridge in "The Haunter of the Dark") or certifiably insane (Zadok Allen in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*). Albert Wilmarth, the narrator of "The Whisperer in Darkness," implores the reader at the beginning of the story to "[b]ear in mind closely that [he] did not see any actual horror at the end," despite his insistence on Akeley being a real masked alien presence (Lovecraft 2008e, 668).

think critically about potentially dangerous situations before we enter that ironically "peaceful" and "safe" new dark age (Lovecraft 2008a, 355).

The Last Word

Because of the advent of this century of post-truth, the work of H. P. Lovecraft is more relevant today than ever before—not just due to his meteoric rise via the influence of popular culture and media, but also through his capacity to provide terrifyingly prognostic and relevant scenarios of our current cultural moment in work nearly a century old. One could summarize Lovecraft's warning thesis across his entire bibliography by Dyer's following poignant remarks:

> This will form my last word. If the plain signs of surviving elder horrors in what I disclose be not enough to keep others from meddling with the inner antarctic—or at least from prying too deeply beneath the surface of that ultimate waste of forbidden secrets and unhuman, aeon-cursed desolation—the responsibility for unnamable and perhaps immensurable evils will not be mine. (Lovecraft 2008b, 754)

Lovecraft's personal character is also contemplative for contemporary readers as well—the image of a fantastically self-taught yet anxious high school dropout turned amateur journalist and writer, belonging to a formerly upper-middle class family and eventually becoming near-penniless, possessed of some unfortunately extreme racial views that tempered with the more general misanthropy of age and his advocacy for New Deal social democracy—this a is a man with a life narrative not unheard of by the young American audience of the twenty-first century. His weird fiction is increasingly important at a time in which the consequences of academic exploration without ethical balance is still a pertinent topic, especially when scientific narratives can become greatly commercialized or ideologically expropriated. If, for Dyer's and Lake's discoveries, "[e]xisting biology would have to be wholly revised," who is to say that the Covid-19 crisis will not require a wholesale restructuring of health policy, transportation, and public space architectural design practices for the remainder of the twenty-first century (ibid, 741)? It certainly does not mean that the weavers of false narrative and manipulative truth should charge headfirst into unknown scientific territory with the naïve expectation of returning unscathed. Although many will find Lovecraft's beliefs and literary methods disagreeable and disturbing, just as many will find Trump or Musk disagreeable and disturbing, they are all useful examples that are culturally representative of this nascent post-truth era. Lovecraft will continue to influence and shape the future of the multicultural New Weird that has tapped into this uniquely twenty-first century moment, as we can still learn from and heed the warnings he dispenses to us in his stories.

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