# Into the Seething Vortex: Occult Horror and the Subversion of the Realistic

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A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2020

Reading Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English Department

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## Abstract

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*Into the Seething Vortex* examines a fascination with the occult that pervades contemporary popular culture. Whether we look to the neo-Lovecraftian cosmic horror of *True Detective*, the distinctly Satanic spin of the recent *Sabrina* reboot, or even Lana Del Rey's recently admitted hexing of Donald Trump, occult ideas, symbols, and aesthetics are a ubiquitous feature of our present popular imaginary. This dissertation asks what this fascination with the occult—what cultural studies scholars have called "popular occulture"—might mean politically. Ultimately, I read contemporary popular occulture as reflecting a broad impulse towards "the weird"—a concept fundamental to the work of H. P. Lovecraft that has since been taken up by cultural critics and philosophers such as Mark Fisher and Eugene Thacker, who regard it as a useful concept for thinking about that which confounds our sense of "the realistic." In a moment when, as many have observed, the future seems to have been cancelled, we are in desperate need of an

alternative to business as usual, and in this dissertation I look to weird fiction in order to consider what that might look like. Informed by the work of scholars like Cedric Robinson, Sylia Wynter, Alexander Weheliye, and Calvin Warren, I seek to complicate the "realistic" ways in which both the *human* and the *truth* have been deployed as cornerstones of political emancipation, highlighting the role played by racial capitalism in structuring both concepts. I do this primarily through readings of contemporary works of Lovecraftian fiction—focusing specifically on the work of Ruthanna Emrys, Thomas Ligotti, and Victor LaValle—and other artifacts of contemporary popular occulture, which, as I argue, complicate and unsettle received notions of reality and our relation to it. Ultimately, I suggest that occult narratives and practices—fundamental to the genre of weird fiction—often reflect (and perpetuate) a broad impulse to think beyond the realistic and even a recognition that "reality" is itself ideologically conditioned and thus contingent. Such narratives seek out the moments when thought itself falters—when, confronted with its limit, realism becomes impossible—and through such fissures offer the possibility of imagining and producing a different world, however terrifying it might be to do so. This dissertation contributes both to a body of scholarship that exists at the intersection between cultural studies, critical race theory, and political theory and to the contemporary influx in Lovecraft scholarship.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is certainly impossible for me to name every person whose ideas have inspired my work in this dissertation, just as I cannot recall every conversation that has shaped my thinking throughout this process. Thinking, after all, does not occur in a bubble and, for every sentence I have written, I am certainly indebted numerous others. However, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge and thank some of those without whose outstanding support this dissertation would not have been possible, however incomplete these acknowledgements might be.

First, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Eva Cherniavsky for her tireless support of this project, for reading countless drafts of these chapters, and for consistently pushing me to think more carefully, more critically, and with more nuance. I would also like to thank Gillian Harkins, who has both challenged me and supported my work since my first day at the University of Washington, and Mark Purcell, from whom I've learned a great deal about radical democracy and the possibility of imaginative political thought. I would also like to offer my sincerest thanks to Matthew Hitchman, Liz Janssen, Lubna Alzaroo, Belle Kim, Daniel Roberts, and Kathleen Reeves for reading numerous drafts and providing thoughtful and insightful feedback throughout my writing process.

I would like to thank Navid Ebrahimzadeh, Dan Bentson, and Dan Abella, my three officemates whose sharp thinking and conversation have both inspired and challenged me to be a better thinker. I would like to thank Alex McCauley and Sean Landis for challenging me to think about shipping containers in a more radical way. I would like to thank Kori Hensell for collaborating with me creatively in ways that deeply shaped this work. Lastly, I would like to thank Elizabeth St. Clair for her constant support as I fumbled my way through the soul-destroying gauntlet known as graduate school—I could not have done it without you.

## INTRODUCTION:

## THE SUN SHIVERING AND THE STARS AFLAME

"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 paralyzing."
(H. P. Lovecraft, "Shadow out of Time")

"Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shivering and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar, and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations."
(James Baldwin, "A Letter to My Nephew")

In 1962, James Baldwin published "A Letter to My Nephew," an essay which the next year would be included in his best-selling collection *The Fire Next Time* and, for many years after that, would be anthologized and taught in schools across the country. A meditation on the seemingly intractable problem of antiblackness in America, the essay includes the striking image of blackness as "a fixed star, an immovable pillar" that structures the world we inhabit. Indeed, later theoretical work on issues like racial capitalism and the metaphysics of blackness has only revealed the degree to which blackness—and the production of race in general—structures our world: Without the institution of race and its ongoing reproduction, the world would not be what it is today. However, Baldwin provides another image—one of "the sun shivering and all the stars aflame." Baldwin likens this apocalyptic vision to the liberation of black subjectivity from the chains of blackness: For black people to be liberated from the deeply entrenched structures of antiblack racism would mean breaking apart and subverting the very structure of reality.

Despite the important gains of the Civil Rights Movement, antiblackness remains fundamental to the structure of our world today. From police shootings to mass incarceration to ongoing colonialist projects to the exploitation of racial value by the market, antiblackness is a

fundamental structuring element of life as we know it. To this day, true black liberation might feel something like, to use in Baldwin's words, "an upheaval in the universe" through which "heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations." As contemporary philosopher Calvin Warren puts it, "Because anti-blackness infuses itself into every fabric of social existence, it is impossible to emancipate blacks without literally destroying the world" ("Black Nihilism" 239). Black freedom, in other words, requires a complete undoing of the world as we know it.

I'm struck by the parallels between a black liberation that "profoundly attacks one's sense of reality" and H. P. Lovecraft's notion of cosmic horror. Arguably one of the most influential horror writers of all time, Lovecraft pioneered a brand of horror writing based on the notion that the most terrifying thing in the world is not that which threatens one's *life*—for instance, a murderer—but, rather, that which threatens one's sense of *reality*. Accordingly, Lovecraft's "cosmic horror" stories repeatedly stage encounters with that which transcends the capacities of human thought and language: ineffable celestial entities, staggering views of deep time, indescribable monsters, histories that undermine our conception of what and who we are. The horror in these stories is not that a scary monster can *kill* you—in fact, Lovecraft's protagonists rarely die—but that, because you have seen this monstrous thing, you can never look at the world in the same way again. As a result of this "weird" or "cosmic" encounter, one must, as Lovecraft puts it, "accept notions of the cosmos, and of [one's] own place in the seething vortex of time, whose merest mention is paralyzing" (335). One might imagine a Lovecraft story in which a character awakens, quite literally, to "the sun shivering and all the stars aflame"—after all, such a horror is inexplicable: To accept it as *actually happening* requires one to cast away all previous understandings of how the universe works. What horrible thing, one might ask, has set these events in motion?

For Baldwin, it is black freedom that sets these events in motion. Black freedom is a matter of *cosmic horror*, in other words, in that it represents an encounter with the unthinkable, radically upending the world as we know it. Because the so-called order of nature is structured by anti-blackness, in other words, the free black subverts "nature" itself. It is notable in this context that Lovecraft was not only a purveyor of cosmic dread but also a virulent racist. Lovecraft's letters and stories drip with racial prejudice just as much as they do cosmic terror. In his letters, the rhetoric that he uses to describe racialized others—i.e., "monstrous and nebulous adumbrations of the pithecanthropoid and amoebal" (quoted in Houllebecq 106)—is nearly indistinguishable from that which he uses to describe cosmic monstrosities in his fiction. In a rather perverse sense, it seems that Lovecraft might have agreed with Baldwin on the gravity of black liberation, its undoing of the very world we inhabit—the difference, of course, being that Baldwin *welcomes* this cosmic subversion while Lovecraft trembles in terror at its prospect.

In this sense, Baldwin's letter suggests, albeit indirectly, a subversive and radically different way of reading Lovecraft. What if, instead of reading Lovecraft's cosmic horrors simply as *horrors*, we were to read them also as *possibilities*? What if, instead of reading cosmic monstrosity merely as something to *fear*, we were to read it as something to *embrace* and even *become*? What if, rather than seeking refuge in the *realistic* and the *knowable*, we were to reach beyond the constraints of realism towards the *weird* and perhaps *liberatory*? It is precisely this endeavor—a transvaluation of values, so to speak—that I wish to undertake and explore in this dissertation. What might it mean to embrace the weird—whatever horrific prospects it might contain—in the hopes of subverting an oppressive reality?

**Hermeneutical Revolt**

Lovecraft wrote the bulk of his stories in the 1920s and the 1930s, publishing them in pulp magazines like *Weird Tales* and *Astounding Stories*. His status as an author of pulp fiction brought him little critical respect and, during his lifetime, his readership was limited to a small but loyal group of fans, many of whom were themselves amateur fantasy, horror, and science fiction writers. Through prodigious letter writing, Lovecraft nurtured the efforts of these young writers and, when Lovecraft died in 1937, his fans carried his legacy forward, crafting their own Lovecraftian horror stories, expanding on Lovecraft's mythos and keeping his memory alive. In a turn of events that no one in the 1930s would have predicted, Lovecraft's legacy has exploded in recent years. Like the tentacles of his monsters, Lovecraft's influence reaches in countless, often unexpected directions. We can see the hand of Lovecraft at work in contemporary 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." Certainly, in comparison to Lovecraft's own lifetime, the label seems apt. Straying far beyond the pages of pulp magazines, Lovecraft's ghost seems to lurk around every corner of popular culture.

My interest at present is in this *contemporary* explosion of the Lovecraftian: That is, I am interested in the *legacy* of this complex and problematic writer more so than in the writer himself. After all, legacies are strange things. They twist and turn and move in directions that one might never have anticipated or hoped. This is because to take up the work of Lovecraft—whether as a critic, a fiction writer, a filmmaker, or a game designer—is also to *interpret* Lovecraft, to carry forward those ideas deemed valuable, to cast others to the side, and to subvert or reroute others towards new ends. It is the latter of these possibilities—the act of subversion

and creative manipulation—that most interests me here, largely because we can track a preponderance of such moves across contemporary Lovecraftian cultural engagements. Whether we look to the "perverse interpretations" forwarded by academics like Patricia MacCormac or the subversive retellings of Lovecraft's stories collected, for instance, in Sylvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles' anthology *She Walks in Shadows*, Lovecraft has often been taken up in ways that the man himself would never have wanted. Through these new and dissident engagements, horrors invite possibilities, monstrosity becomes an aspiration, and the weird suggests a field of liberatory possibility.

To carry forth Lovecraft's legacy in this way is, however, to read Lovecraft radically against the grain and, in a certain sense, to throw authorial intention to the wind. Whatever Lovecraft might have thought about his stories, at present there seems a strong desire to read these stories differently, seeking out that liberatory element that Lovecraft so rigorously sought to condemn and disparage. However, to say that we might read Lovecraft subversively is not to say that that one might simply fabricate readings having nothing to do with the original texts—to throw *all* meaning to the wind and say whatever we'd like. Of course, such a radical disregard for stable meaning is certainly possible, but at such a point it may become difficult to speak of a "legacy" in any coherent sense. Far from a simple disregard for meaning, I am interested in what Nietzsche might call a "transvaluation of values," in reading these texts, for instance, from a different moral perspective that inverts Lovecraft's terms of value while nevertheless seriously engaging his work and ideas. Religious historian Per Faxneld uses the terms "protest exegesis," "inverse exegesis," and "the hermeneutical principle of revolt," to describe counter-readings such as these, looking, for instance, towards liberation theology as a key example of such dissident reading practices (11). In this dissertation, I ask what we might be able to accomplish

through such dissident hermeneutics, and I do so through readings of precisely such attempts at hermeneutical revolt in popular culture.

I find the concept of *reanimation* to be useful here. After all, Lovecraft himself was quite fond of the notion.[1] Crucially, to reanimate the dead is to bring them back to life—but never quite as themselves. These undead bodies may walk and talk as they once did, but there is always something deeply uncanny about them. This is how, for instance, the zombie is imagined in Hatian folklore: not in terms of *contagion* but in terms of *reanimation*. The Hatian zombie myth developed, in part, as slave owners would threaten their slaves with such reanimation to discourage suicide as a means of escape. To commit suicide, in other words, was to risk being reanimated as into an even worse form of slavery, deprived of all agency, controlled by the reanimator, little more than a puppet. I would like to suggest that, in our present moment, Lovecraft has been reanimated in a similar fashion: Nearly a century later, he walks and he talks as he once did—but this time, through perverse interpretations and dissident hermeneutics, he is being made to say and to do things he never would have dreamed in life.

**Lovecraft Today**

It's reasonable to ask, however, why Lovecraft? Why now? After all, the catalog of racist authors whose legacies we might hijack runs deep—certainly, one would surmise, there are better options than a 1930s pulp writer whose purple prose has long infuriated both fans and critics. How do we account for the reanimation of *this* particular writer? And why, for that matter, is it worth highlighting and perpetuating such discourses?

[1] Take, for instance, his 1922 short story "Herbert West—Reanimator," famously adapted by Stuart Gordon in the *Re-Animator* film trilogy.

To fully account for Lovecraft's contemporary prominence would, of course, be a deeply complex and nuanced endeavor, requiring attention to both the contemporary resonances of his ideas and the dynamics of fandom and influence. Such an account is not my aim in this dissertation. However, there are a number of reasons that, in my view, Lovecraft resonates in the present moment, many of these having to do with the fact that, in a sense, Lovecraft's concerns are precisely the concerns of our present moment.

Perhaps foremost of these concerns is Lovecraft's preoccupation with the status of the human. While I will ultimately suggest that Lovecraft's view of the human is more complex—and more contradictory—than often understood, it is nevertheless true that Lovecraft's corpus represents a persistent attempt to undermine the privileged status of the human. In Lovecraft's view, the more humans learned about their history and their universe, the more they would be forced to confront their own insignificance. We might even describe cosmic horror as fundamentally preoccupied with the absolute insignificance and transience of humanity: The encounter with cosmic alterity not only collapses our notions of reality but, perhaps more importantly, is collapses our sense of our own position within that reality. If cosmic horror has one message, after all, it is this: That we are not the center of the universe and that, on the scale of the cosmos, our lives, our civilizations, and indeed our world are nothing more than a meaningless and accidental blip.

This pessimistic outlook certainly appears to resonate today. In a moment when climate apocalypse looms on the horizon, humanity is forced to confront its own frailty and impermanence. As visions of the end of the world crystalize—if not, however, for the first time—humanity cannot help but to feel small and insignificant. It often seems that we've reached the end of the world as we know it. Alongside these apocalyptic popular imaginaries,

intellectual discourses related to post-humanisms, new materialisms, and object-oriented ontologies have proliferated attempts to rethink (and in many ways displace) the human. While conversations about the Anthropocene often attempt to re-center humanity within such discourses, we might read these conversations as further evidence of the contested nature of humanity and the human. Lovecraft's preoccupation with the human—and, more to the point, with a cosmos that threatens the privileged status of the human at every turn—clearly resonates today.

Deeply intertwined with his concerns about human exceptionalism, however, is Lovecraft's virulent racism. As Alexander Weheliye points out, the question of race, after all, is fundamentally a question about humanness: Racialization, Weheliye writes, is "a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (3). Whether articulated explicitly or suggested implicitly, race has always been a question of which people ought and ought not to be granted the rights and privileges ascribed to the human: human "rights" like life and liberty, from which racialized others have always been, to varying degrees, excluded. To be racialized is to be cast as less than fully human, but it's also to be cast as that against which the human defines itself—a "fixed star" so to speak. To unthink racism is thus in many ways to unthink the human. In this sense, I read Lovecraft's racism as fundamentally tied up with his concerns about the status of the human. The primacy of the human, in Lovecraft, is threatened not merely from *above*, so to speak, but also from *below*. While cosmic alterity might threaten to destroy or disempower the human in its own way, racial difference also represents an encroachment on human (i.e., white) privilege from the position of the *de*humanized. Lovecraft feared his own decentering above all else and, in his view, the liberation of the racially oppressed threatened to do just that. It is no surprise that, in Lovecraft's

fiction, it is nearly *always* racialized others who work to awaken the cosmic forces that will end humanity's earthly reign: Racialized others and cosmic others, after all, share a type of relation vis-à-vis the privileged status of the human.

That such a discourse would resonate in our present moment is unsurprising. Questions about race are at the center of many social, political, and academic discourses. Proclamations like #BlackLivesMatter assert the full humanity of those long deprived of basic human rights. Discourses on #wokeness attempt to deepen popular understandings of racialization, white privilege, and the history of racial domination. While Lovecraft's eugenicist white supremacy is rightly condemned by many in our present moment, his preoccupation with the question of race seems to resonate. It is perhaps no surprise that so many writers and artists have taken up Lovecraft's legacy as a way to think through racism in our present moment. Matt Ruff's 2016 novel *Lovecraft Country* and the forthcoming HBO series based on it reflect precisely this impulse. While we certainly don't want to cheerlead Lovecraft's racism, there seems to be a broad sense that we might find value in taking it up and thinking it through.

In a more general sense, however, it seems to me that Lovecaft's preoccupation with *the weird* may have a lot to do with his contemporary resurgence. Lovecraft's work is fundamentally about imagining something *else*, something unimaginable, something beyond the mundane world as we know it. While Lovecraft saw this something as ultimately a horror that could only upend our sense of reality and our place in it, many contemporary writers and artists embrace this same sense of the strange not simply as something horrific but also as something potentially hopeful. Lovecraft saw the weird as that which would destroy our sense of stability and undermine the human altogether—and this, for Lovecraft, was indeed a horrific possibility. But when the world as we know it is, for so many, such a horror, the weird represents the possibility of something

different—whatever horrors might accompany it. If, to use Baldwin's metaphor, heaven and earth are the source and structure of suffering, then why not take a risk and shake them to their foundations?

**Occulted Possibilities**

While the bulk of this dissertation focuses on dissident contemporary engagements with Lovecraft, my broader aim is to reach beyond Lovecraft. After all, the desire to embrace the weird, the fearful, and the adversarial as a space of possibility is not limited to Lovecraftian cosmic horror. Indeed, one fundamental assumption of this dissertation is that this orientation towards the weird, the strange, or the otherworldly finds expression throughout contemporary culture and in a range of idioms. What these impulses have in common is a sense that the "realistic" has doomed us, and that our only hope is to somehow embrace the weird. The realistic way of viewing and engaging the world has only led to suffering, and now our only hope is to abandon the realistic, however frightening or uncertain that might be.

While this sense of refusal might be tracked in a number of areas, I'm presently interested in examining a discourse that is in many ways adjacent to the Lovecraftian weird: namely, the occult. For Lovecraft, the weird represented that which renders our frameworks for understanding the world obsolete: An encounter with the weird thing reveals to us that *our world* is not and *we* are not what we have long perceived the world and ourselves to be. Lovecraft's lasting influence, fundamentally defined by this preoccupation, has cemented his status as the father of "weird fiction"—a genre of speculative fiction taken up by writers ranging from Arthur Machen and Clarke Ashton Smith (contemporaries of Lovecraft) to present-day writers like China Miéville, Jeff VanderMeer, and Caitlín R. Kiernan, to name a handful of the most

prominent. However, the term "occult horror" is often used as a synonym for "weird fiction." There is good reason for this. The "occult," after all, describes that which is hidden, obscured, or secret. An encounter with the weird is in many ways an encounter with the occult: with that which is beyond *perception* and *comprehension* and nevertheless *is*.

"Occult," however, is a slippery term. As communication scholar Joshua Gunn writes, "Today the contexts in which the term 'occult' are used are so varied that it is difficult to mention the term in any precise sense without ample qualification. The occult can refer to everything from comic books to horror films to rock music motifs and vague 'moods' or states of mind" (xxiii). Demons are occult; Satanists are occult; Lovecraft is occult; heavy metal is occult; *Stranger Things* is occult; zombies are occult; mall goths, Ouija boards, pentagrams, the list goes on. Scholars of the occult have dealt with this range of meanings in a number of ways, but unfortunately many of these debates take the form of theological or metaphysical arguments among occultists and other religious adherents. Such disagreements can often be reduced to arguments for or against the existence of this or that deity or force, rather than attempts to understand and explain the term's broad applications. Gunn's own response is a bit more useful. In *Modern Occult Rhetoric*, Gunn distinguishes between the historical occult *tradition*—"a historical content obsessed with books, spells, and secrets"—and occult *rhetoric*, "which concerns a logic of secrecy, interpretation, and discrimination" (xxvii). Through both of Gunn's definitions, we can track a kind of epistemological orientation that favors the weird (as figured in spells and secrets) over the realistic. Indeed, if there is one thing that all occult traditions seem to have in common it is an interest in producing knowledges that reach beyond our notions of the real and the normal into the territory of the surreal and the paranormal.

With respect to my own project, the occult offers an important analog to the weird, which might be articulated in a few different ways. First, if the weird describes an aesthetic experience marked by *an encounter with that which does not belong*, the occult represents a political, social, and epistemological orientation towards the esoteric and the hidden *with the purpose of producing such encounters in the real world*. If, in other words, the *weird* is the experience of destabilization that occurs when something disrupts the categories by which "reality" is delineated and made sense of, then the *occult* describes a wide range of practices oriented towards the production of such disruptions and the expansion of one's sense of reality. Second, the weird has come to denote a genre which might be described, with some qualification, as "stories about the occult"—occult here meaning that which is *occulted*, obscured, hidden away. Third, while weird fiction seeks to *imagine* a rupture in the fabric of reality as we know it, the occult seeks to *produce* such ruptures in the real world—and yet, because the status of reality is the very thing in question, the distinction between the imaginary world of weird fiction and the real world of occult practices is unsettled, in a sense. Ultimately, the weird and the occult represent congruent positionings vis-à-vis realism: undergirded by the assumption that our experience of reality is only a small slice of the whole truth and that our "realism" is thus supremely limiting. Both accordingly seek to produce ruptures in what we perceive to be realistic.

In terms of its cultural relevance, however, there is more to the occult than simply the translation of the weird into another modality. There have been many connections drawn between the darker aesthetics of the occult—i.e., Satanism, demonology, and so forth—and what we might call a kind of popular nihilism. Teenagers wear black t-shirts emblazoned with pentagrams not through some devotion to occult spiritualties but, rather, as a gesture of

rebelliousness and disaffection. Kids play with Ouija boards, not often through any genuine attempt to contact the supernatural, but as a gesture of rebelliousness and withdrawn indifference towards that which their parents fear. And yet, this semi-nihilistic gesture ("oh, none of it means anything anyway") also comes attached to a thrill: but what if? What if it did mean something? We might read this, then, not as nihilism in the mundane sense of the term (i.e., a pure sense of meaninglessness) but, on the other hand, a recognition that life as circumscribed by the banalities of "reality" has *become* meaningless, alongside a willingness to beckon that which is beyond, no matter how horrifying it may be. When contemporary capitalism is causing ecological disaster and loss of life on unprecedented scales, when racism and prejudice appear to be intractable elements of modern life, and when the powers that be continue to exploit humanity and the environment with no concern for the welfare or autonomy of either, the question seems to be, how bad can the devil really be? The dark aesthetics often associated with the occult in a sense *dare* the beyond to make itself known, beckoning the both the fearsome and—more importantly—the possible.

**Beyond Realism, Beyond Humanism**

Mark Fisher's 2009 book *Capitalist Realism* argues that realism—what we perceive to be real or possible—is itself fundamentally ideological: that our sense of the realistic, in other words, is conditioned largely by capitalism. Accordingly, Fisher argues that our present moment is marked by an overwhelming and "widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). Fisher calls this prevailing sense "capitalist realism" and argues that capitalism has itself become congruent with what we call the realistic, that, in other words,

"[c]apitalist realism is not a particular type of realism; it is more like realism in itself" (4). Due to its capacity to disrupt the so-called realistic, I see the weird as offering a useful political language for thinking beyond precisely this type of realism.

In this dissertation, I'm interested in thinking beyond capitalist realism, but I wish to do so while giving specific attention to the racial dynamics of capitalism. Cedric Robinson has used the term "racial capitalism" to highlight the centrality of racialization to the production of capitalist social relations. Robinson argues that capitalism is from its inception a racialist regime, relying on things like race and gender to legitimate its uneven forms of social organization. Indeed, the development of capitalism is unthinkable outside of its racializing function. However, while capitalism's racializing aspects are perhaps most visible when it comes to things like slavery and colonialism, such aspects do not simply vanish with the supposed end of these institutions—as if they are components of capitalism's development that are no longer essential to its reproduction. The racial dynamics of capitalism, rather, have continued to evolve, taking on a multitude of new forms. Accordingly, in this dissertation, I stress the fact that race is a fundamental component of capitalist realism, from its inception to the present. Insofar as *capitalist* realism is "like realism in itself," so too is *racial capitalist* realism; and, insofar as we are incapable of imagining a coherent alternative to capitalism, so too with race. What this means is that to think beyond the deeply embedded structures of racism, we must also think beyond what we conceive of as the "realistic." It is my sense that weird fiction may help us to do precisely this, particularly due to the genre's continued preoccupation with the question of race.

If we wish to think beyond racial capitalist realism, however, we must also rethink the human. After all, as Weheliye argues, race is *fundamentally* about dividing humanity into the fully human, the less-than-human, and the nonhuman. Weird fiction's problematization of the

human, again, makes it an ideal site for this type of thinking. However, contemporary weird fiction deals with this problem of the human in a number of ways. Some writers, for instance, make use of the Lovecraftian mythos to *humanize* those who, for Lovecraft, are less-than-human or nonhuman. 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 in fact was human all along. However, in order to do so, these authors must re-cast monsters in the image of a normative humanity, an act that often amounts to assimilating difference rather than valuing it *as* difference—and, more to the point, as difference that *compels* us to reevaluate our conception of reality. The supposedly weird thing is revealed to be, in the end, not weird, and thus the structures that maintain this oppressive reality remain intact. Ultimately, humanism constitutes a very "realistic" response to the problem of racism, but this "realism" constitutes its flaw: It accepts at face value that the human is the only *realistic* measure of value and that, therefore, only through humanism can we address dehumanization.

Other contemporary writers move in the opposite direction, collapsing the distinction between the human, the less-than-human, and the nonhuman through a radical *devaluation* of the human. Rather than bringing the dehumanized *up* to the level of the human, such writers reject the idea that the human has any value at all and, with it, the question of race as having to do with an uneven distribution of humanness. Such forms of anti-humanism, however, do little to address the very real dynamics of racialization and, in many ways, end up reconstituting the very privileges they aim to repudiate. While such attempts to decenter the human are often well-intentioned, it's worth noting that this form of antihumanism is often fundamental (if disavowedly so) to contemporary right-wing[2] politics, which, at the most extreme, treats the

[2] I should clarify that my use of "right-wing" and "left-wing" in this dissertation should not be taken to mean, for example, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. The avowed commitment of both Republicans

human as little more than a cog in the great machine of capital. It is no surprise that, amid the current coronavirus outbreak, Dan Patrick, the Lieutenant Governor of Texas, has suggested that many grandparents—himself included—would (and should) willingly risk their lives to save the economy. We might read Donald Trump's willful ignorance regarding the threats of coronavirus as representing a similar sense: Human life exists to perpetuate the capitalist economy, and if it must be sacrificed to keep this going, so be it. Of course, explicit examples such as these only serve to highlight and underscore a type of anti-humanism that has always been implicit in capitalist ideology: Human life has no inherent value, deriving all its value instead from its function in the marketplace.

The left, however, continues to cling to the value of the human, reacting against the anti-human hostility of the right in the only way that makes sense: the only way, that is, that seems realistic. In response to those who wish to deny human value and, accordingly, exploit humanity, it only makes realistic sense to re-assert (and even expand) the value of the human. However, we should note that the left has not *always* been committed to humanism and, indeed, critiques of humanism persist on the left today, if largely relegated to the fringes (or to academia, which often amounts to the same thing). And yet, in response to the rather blatant and aggressive antihumanism of the right, the left has largely retreated towards a nostalgic revitalization of the

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and Democrats to an exploitative, oligarchic, capitalist order renders both parties, in my view, "right-wing." While within both parties there are certainly tendencies towards a liberatory, left imaginary, these rarely manifest at the institutional level. While this is perhaps to put things a bit reductively, I follow Kuwasi Balagoon in sketching a definition of "left-wing" politics as a political position that is radically opposed to domination in all its forms, while "right-wing" politics holds that domination is both fundamental and necessary and that the role of politics is to organize that domination. A left politics, in other words, is a politics that pursues liberation as its fundamental goal, while a right politics takes as its goal the struggle for domination. Accordingly, as Michael Hardt, drawing on an interview with Gilles Deleuze, is fond of putting it, there is thus no such thing as a left government: At best, there can be a government that makes room for the left. I largely agree with this stance; however, I would add that the Democratic Party in the United States, as it exists today, aims neither to institute a left government nor to make space for the left. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, I tend to draw on the Republican Party for my examples of "right-wing" politics in the United States, largely because it tends to be most ostentatious and blatant in its pursuit of domination, but in essence, it has far more in common with the Democratic Party than it does in contrast to it.

inept humanism that it once sought to push beyond. However, this is precisely where I find the imaginaries offered by contemporary weird fiction to be helpful. I would like to suggest that humanism might *not* be the only answer to the anti-humanism of capital. In this dissertation, I will specifically look to Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* which rejects both the capitalist anti-humanism of the right and the assimilationist humanism of the left, shifting the terms of value from the *human* to the *monster*, from the *realistic* to the *weird*. What LaValle's version of the weird suggests, in part, is that there might be ways of valuing life that do not rely on the figure of the human.

**Beyond Truth-Telling**

In the same way that the right manifests a blatant disregard for the *human* while the left exhibits a desperate attachment to it, so too, I would suggest, with respect to the *truth*. Many commentators have suggested that we live in a "post-truth" era and, regardless of whether we accept this diagnosis, it's clear that the right has used the indeterminacy of the truth to its advantage. From the beginning of Donald Trump's presidential campaign through Sharpie-gate and into the present, it's been clear that neither Trump nor the right wing more broadly are overly concerned with maintaining any kind of normative relation to the truth. Expediency, rather, is the highest value and, accordingly, what is considered to be "true" changes on a near daily basis. Trump has clearly used this to his advantage, his presidency in many ways defined by his endless onslaught of contradictory Tweets and official statements. The sheer volume of falsehoods has made it difficult for the general public to make heads or tails of what's going on and, amid the confusion, the right has only further consolidated power. In this sense, we might describe the right as committed to a type of epistemological nihilism: Nothing is true or untrue.

Rather, meanings are produced in order to achieve certain effects and owe no allegiance to the so-called actual state of affairs.

This utter disregard for the truth, of course, endlessly infuriates the left, who have generated a constant supply of memes, articles, and tweets exposing the fraudulence of the right. The left, it would seem, is deeply committed to the notion that the truth, as they say, will set you free. Every new scandal is a new opportunity to expose Trump for the fraud that he is—and yet, somehow, none of these scandals seem to change anything. It is as if the truth, however blatant and obvious, has little *real* power to undermine exploitative and oppressive social relations. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that truth itself—meaning itself—is deeply structured by racial capitalism and western imperialism. This is true in a number of different ways. On the one hand, as Jean-François Lyotard has argued, postmodernity has altered the rules of the game through which knowledge is produced and legitimated. As knowledge becomes commodified as information, it is legitimated not through its capacity to bring about emancipation or understanding, but, rather, in terms of its performative capacities and in terms of efficiency. In other words, the very means by which we legitimate knowledge as valuable, meaningful, and worthwhile is a product of late capitalism (not unlike our sense of the human). On the other hand, capitalism's conditioning of truth predates what we might call "post-modernity." As Calvin Warren argues, the devaluation of black life occurs at the level of metaphysics: "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'" ("Black Nihilism" 237). When the left grasps for the truth as its salvation, we might reasonably ask what structures this truth and, perhaps more importantly, whether or not that structure offers any truly liberatory potential. In

Warren's view, it does not and cannot: Truth itself, for Warren, is structured by antiblackness and, within the regime of western metaphysics, will always be so.

It is perhaps, then, no wonder that the right is appears to be winning: While they've largely abandoned anchoring categories such as truth, the left remains chiseling away at the master's house with the master's broken tools. Truth, it would appear, is inept to affect real change just as much as the human is incapable of offering true liberation. In short, the "normal" and "realistic" forms of struggle—speaking truth to power and fighting tirelessly for human rights—can do little more than reproduce domination, exploitation, and suffering. In both cases, the left's attachments to humanism and to the politics of truth-telling constitute little more than a form of cruel optimism, to borrow Lauren Berlant's term. As Berlant describes it, "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy about the good life, or a political project…. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (1). Indeed, it strikes me that the left's attachments to the human and to the truth—while not, perhaps, *inherently* cruel—must be understood as cruel optimisms, often impeding precisely the forms of progress towards which the left strives. Further, as Berlant notes, cruel optimism involves so strong an attachment to an object that one fears the loss of it "will defeat the capacity to have hope about anything" (24). Indeed, the fact that it is so hard to imagine a contemporary left that does not place its hope in the human and in truth-telling is perhaps evidence of how cruelly optimistic these attachments are. They are, after all, the only *realistic* steps forward.

We are in desperate need of a weird alternative to this inept realism, and in this dissertation I look to weird fiction in order to consider what that might look like. What might it mean, for example, to imagine a left anti-humanism suited to the present moment? This would need to be an antihumanism based not on subordinating the human to capital but, rather, rejecting the human as the fundamental measure of value. What might it mean, also, to imagine a contemporary left nihilism? This would need to be a nihilism based not on the obfuscation of truth in the interest of power and profit but, rather, a rejection of the structures of meaning which continually reproduce exploitation and suffering. Ultimately, how might we begin to imagine a politics capable of breaking through the "realistic" to something truly weird and liberatory?

**Dissident Cultural Politics**

In this dissertation, I look to the domain of popular culture—a term that I use in a broad sense that includes subcultures and countercultures—for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, popular culture can be read as a reflection and expression of contemporary political, social, and economic realities. On the other hand, popular culture constitutes in many ways a crucial domain of struggle—particularly due to the role it plays in the formation of the citizen-subject.[3] To read culture as a domain of struggle, however, is not to read popular culture's capacities to shape individual subjects in a merely propagandistic sense or in the crassly reductive sense that, for example, violent videogames beget violent individuals. Rather, I find popular culture valuable due to the role it plays in the propagation and popularization of new forms of, for instance, identification, attachment, and meaning-making.

[3] See, for instance, David Lloyd and Paul Thomas's *Culture and the State* (Routledge, 1998). Lloyd and Thomas suggest that through culture we become capable of seeing ourselves represented in the state apparatus—that, in other words, through culture we *learn* to be represented.

Broadly speaking my project constitutes an examination of the cultural politics of the occult in contemporary popular culture. This is to emphasize two things: first, that my methodology foregrounds *cultural politics*—which is to say the various ways in which cultural forms express, shape, and respond to political and economic realities—and, second, that my archive is constituted primarily by *popular representations* of the occult and various occultic phenomena—a body of cultural productions and practices that cultural studies scholars have called "popular occulture." Due to the present influx of occult narratives and themes in popular culture—specifically within spaces of political and social engagement—popular occulture constitutes a privileged site at which to examine the relays between cultural production and political formation. Focusing on these relays, this project opens onto broader questions about the role that popular culture plays in constituting political subjects and shaping citizenship and, perhaps more importantly, its potential to undermine dominant forms of subject formation.

The weird's disruption of the realistic, after all, isn't simply a matter of introducing new *ideas*—i.e., consciously adopting some *other* measure of value or some *other* articulation of meaning. Certainly this is part of it, but a truly weird politics must also operate on the level of subject formation. One cannot simply choose to value the monster. Rather, one must become monstrous, and these monstrous becomings must occur in relation to others. It is precisely on the level of popular culture, subculture, and counterculture that I see such subject formation as a distinct possibility.

It is in part for this reason that I am drawn to protest exegesis and the hermeneutics of revolt. In countless forms of contemporary popular culture, we find we find monsters being reawakened as symbols of popular power and revolt. Popular narratives that have historically functioned to discipline subjects—for example, witch lore's function in the disciplining of

gendered subjects—are being inverted. I read this inversion as, at its best, engaged in a liberatory form of subject (de)formation and (re)formation. However, the *types* of liberation that such practices approach often look quite unlike "liberation" in, say, the liberal humanist sense of the term. These weird (de)formations of political subjectivity, rather, complicate liberal notions of the sovereign subject in favor of more monstrous freedoms and mutual becomings. In fact, a central aim of this dissertation is to disarticulate notions of liberation and freedom from the all-too-familiar liberal notions of the autonomous subject and to suggest radically different ways of thinking about liberation.[4] To this end, I read protest exegesis as demonstrating a capacity to invert and shift our affective attachments towards new liberatory imaginaries—resulting in, for instance, the rejection of "salvation" that I explore in Chapter 4.

I also find value in protest exegesis because it suggests a productive response to the perennial question of "what we do with problematic art." Specifically, it offers a means of moving beyond the tired critiques that simply call out problematic art for its racism, its sexism, or its other forms of prejudice. While it's certainly important to acknowledge such flaws when they appear, call-out culture is fundamentally limited in its transformative capacities. Hermeneutical revolt, on the other hand, enables us to transform problematic art into something useful. In this sense, we might understand protest exegesis as in many ways akin to the Situationist practice of détournement, an act of artistic "hijacking" and "rerouting."

Ultimately, when we look to practices like protest exegesis and détournement, it becomes clear that popular culture has been and remains a fundamental domain of struggle. My aim in this dissertation is to examine some of these struggles and to consider how these struggles might help

[4] In this sense, I see my project as in many ways parallel to Calvin Warren's attempt to disarticulate *hope* from the logic of the political. For more on this, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

us to imagine a weird politics and, with it, weird political subjectivities beyond the domain of the realistic.

**Chapter Overview**

This dissertation unfolds primarily through a discussion of H. P. Lovecraft and the reverberations of his legacy into the present moment. However, I conclude with a discussion of a couple adjacent forms of popular occulture: namely, witch lore and the mythology of Satan. In each of these discourses, I track an embrace of the demonized and adversarial which, in my view, can help us to think the types of subversions of the normal that might constitute a weird politics.

In Chapter 1, I examine the relationship between two fundamental aspects of Lovecraft's thought that, in my view, find strong resonances in our present cultural moment: his cosmic pessimism and his racism. My specific interest in this chapter is in how the relationship between these two structuring ideas has been understood, critiqued, and theorized—and often misunderstood—by critics of Lovecraft. What I ultimately wish to argue is that, for Lovecraft, cosmic pessimism and racism are deeply intertwined, both grounded in a fundamental anxiety about his own decentering. I suggest that, by recognizing these essential connections, we might glean insights into both the genre of cosmic horror and the function of race more broadly.

In Chapter 2, I look to the ways that these same components of Lovecraft's legacy have been taken up and reimagined by authors of contemporary Lovecraftian weird fiction. In this chapter, I track two contemporary trends in Lovecraftian fiction that, I suggest, represent a misunderstanding of the fundamental role played by race in structuring not only Lovecraft's thought but modern thought in general: namely, a prevailing divide between humanist critiques

of Lovecraftian racism and cosmicist erasures of it. Both perspectives, I suggest, appear to read Lovecraft's exploitation of racist tropes as largely an expression of the author's prejudices, rather than an indication that the problem of race is, in a certain sense, a cosmically horrific one.

In Chapter 3, I take up Victor LaValle's 2016 novel *The Ballad of Black Tom*, a re-telling of Lovecraft's notoriously racist "The Horror at Red Hook" that explores the deeply intertwined nature of Lovecraft's cosmic pessimism and his racism. Drawing on afro-pessimist accounts of race as itself a contradictory category—the "human-but-not"—I suggest that, in both Lovecraft's fiction and LaValle's reworking of it, racialized otherness represents not merely difference, but rather *the weird* itself: in other words, that which confounds the categories by which we construct reality and our place in it. Pivoting on neither a humanist anti-racism nor a race-neutralizing cosmic pessimism, LaValle's revision of Lovecraft *embraces* the cosmically dreadful *in the figure of the racialized other*. In its embrace of the weird, LaValle's narrative suggests that there is something valuable in Lovecraft's nihilistic, anti-humanist cosmic vision, but that this value is something Lovecraft—in his (often disavowed) commitment to the human—was unable to embrace. I ultimately suggest that 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.

In Chapter 4, I pivot away from Lovecraft to focus on a couple other contemporary manifestations of "popular occulture": witchcraft and Satanism. My specific interest in this chapter is the ways that these historical discourses have been taken up and subverted through very purposeful forms of protest exegesis. I suggest that, while both stories about witches and stories about Satan have long served to discipline dissident political subjects and produce normative subjectivities, contemporary reworkings of these stories have turned both the witch

and the devil into liberatory figures. I read this embrace of the witch and of the devil as having much in common with the embrace of Cthulhu that LaValle imagines in *The Ballad of Black Tom*.

As the ironic cynicism of much contemporary culture reflects, many of our long-standing political myths are in a state of collapse. Weird, nihilistic popular occulture often acts as if to hasten this collapse and, in doing so, makes space for new political forms. While nihilism is by no means inherently revolutionary or progressive (nor is the weird or the occult), it bears within itself certain potentialities which often find inchoate expression in culture—specifically, possibilities that may empower those who dominant myths have long disempowered. By focusing on the nihilistic gestures of contemporary popular occulture, this dissertation examines, explores, and critiques a crucial sphere in which political potentialities are culturally produced in our present moment. What might it take, I wish to ask, to set the sun shivering and the stars aflame? What kind of people must we become to enter the seething vortex?

# CHAPTER 1

## THE WEIRD AND THE OTHER:

## LOVECRAFT THE COSMICIST, LOVECRAFT THE RACIST

"Somehow, against all odds," write Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "Howard Phillips Lovecraft has become a twenty-first century star. The author of 'weird tales' who died in 1937 impoverished and relatively unknown… now seems to be everywhere" (1). Indeed, while relatively few would have predicted it, H. P. Lovecraft has become a ubiquitous presence in contemporary popular culture. While Lovecraft has been called the father of weird fiction, his influence now extends far beyond the relatively niche genre he pioneered and developed. From his monstrous Cthulhu, the sleeping god beneath the sea, to the blind god Azathoth, the embodiment of chaos, Lovecraft's creations have lived on in all forms of popular media, finding new expression in genres ranging from the comedic to the dramatic to the horrific. From John Carpenter films to Metallica songs, one need not look far to find the disembodied hand of Lovecraft still at work. Popular television shows like *Rick and Morty* self-consciously acknowledge their indebtedness to Lovecraft's cosmic vision while children's shows like *Adventure Time* adapt Lovecraft's themes for even younger audiences. The internet, perhaps more than anything else, has enabled a new generation of Lovecraftian writers, creators, and aficionados to find one another and further extend Lovecraft's project, as is evidenced by the proliferation of independently produced Lovecraftian stories, videos, games, podcasts, forums, and other media that multiply on a near-daily basis. While Lovecraft's writing has always been a cult phenomenon—in more than one sense of the word—the cult of Lovecraft, as it were, now seems larger and stronger than ever. As Sederholm and Weinstock have suggested, our present moment in popular culture might arguably be labeled "the Age of Lovecraft."

Sederholm and Weinstock describe the present cultural moment as one "in which the themes and influence of Lovecraft's writings have bubbled up from the chthonic depths of 1930s pulp writing to assume an unexpected intellectual and cultural influence" (3). Indeed, if any cultural moment deserves to be called "the Age of Lovecraft," the present would more deservedly bear the title than Lovecraft's own time. In his lifetime, Lovecraft was a more-or-less unknown writer of pulp stories, earning little critical respect and exerting little influence beyond his own circle of like-minded writers. While he did develop a small cult following, this community was generally relegated to the fringes and was by no means cause for any serious critical attention. It was not until roughly eight years after his early death in 1937 that mainstream critics gave Lovecraft any attention at all, and even then this attention was largely negative, prompted primarily by the passions of his cult following who demanded his inclusion in discussions of serious horror writing. A number of biographers and Lovecraft scholars have suggested that the cult of Lovecraft grew as much (if not more) as a result of Lovecraft's prodigious letter-writing than through his actual fiction. In his very short lifetime, Lovecraft published almost nothing in book form—his publications limited to pulp magazines that would be discarded after a time and forgotten—but it has been estimated that he wrote nearly 100 thousand letters, many of these nurturing the efforts of the young writers who would continue to develop his mythos long after his death. It is fair to assume that even Lovecraft could not have imagined the surge in popularity that would come decades after his death.

This reanimation of Lovecraft has taken on many forms. From Penguin Classics editions and academic journals edited by S. T. Joshi to Lovecraftian videogames, films, and television, Lovecraft's influence seems to be everywhere. Sederholm and Weinstock offer a range of examples in their introduction to *The Age of Lovecraft*, highlighting the many collected and

annotated editions of Lovecraft's work to be published in the past 20 years, the range of stories and novels that build on and develop Lovecraft's mythos, comic book adaptations of Lovecraft's stories, visual art inspired by Lovecraft, music—particularly goth and heavy metal—that draws on and references Lovecraft's work, adaptations and inspiration in film and television, and even transmedia adaptations and reworkings of Lovecraftian stories and ideas. But even the impressive range of examples collected by Sederholm and Weinstock only scratches the surface of Lovecraft's contemporary prevalence within popular culture. Last year HBO and AMC announced two television shows based on contemporary works of self-consciously Lovecraftian fiction: Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* and Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*. Lovecraftian podcasts of all forms have exploded across the internet in the past few years, taking up Lovecraft's work from different angles. These range from Chad Fifer and Chris Lackey's very popular *H. P. Podcraft: The H. P. Lovecraft Literary Podcast* to Ruthanna Emrys and Anne Pillsworth's more critically oriented *Lovecraft Reread* to Jay Beccus and BSC White's newly minted *Unrequited Lovecraft*, a podcast brings queer perspectives to the work of Lovecraft. In addition, Lovecraftian board games, videogames, and role playing games continue to be developed and released. It is through games such as these that many newly minted fans of the weird and Lovecraftian (including a number of my own students) have first connected with the work of Lovecraft.

This resurgence in popular culture has brought with it a significant influx of critical and academic work focused on Lovecraft and his legacy. As Sederholm and Weinstock point out, "A January 2015 search of the MLA International Bibliography using 'Lovecraft' as a keyword yields 525 hits, including 374 journal articles, 100 book chapters, and 33 monographs or edited collections. Over 45 percent of these were published in 2000 or later" (4). The same search in

2019 yields 695 results, and the percentage published since 2000 is now 57. Perhaps most notable is the fact that almost 13 percent of these results were published in the past two years. The earliest result comes from 1945, eight years after Lovecraft's death, and since that time, the nature of Lovecraft criticism has shifted dramatically. In an oft-quoted 1945 *New Yorker* article titled "Tales of the Marvelous and the Ridiculous," Edmund Wilson contends that "[Lovecraft's] stories were hack-work contributed to such publications as *Weird Tales* and *Amazing Stories*, where, in my opinion, they ought to have been left" and that "[t]he only real horror in most of these fictions is the horror of bad taste and bad art. Lovecraft was not a good writer" (47-48). S. T. Joshi has argued that, due to Wilson's status at the time, this widely-disseminated article's influence may be a primary reason for Lovecraft's belated entrance into mainstream academic and critical discourse (Wilson 46). As Joshi summarizes, prior to the 1970s, the number of scholars and mainstream critics seriously engaging Lovecraft's work "could be counted on the fingers of one hand" (quoted in Sederholm and Weinstock 3). Since then, we have seen an huge influx in Lovecraft scholarship, and this shift has not been limited to the field of literary studies. As Sederholm and Weinstock note,

> Perhaps most surprising in relation to Lovecraft's academic fortunes is his contemporary significance to a variety of related philosophical schools that go variously under the names of new materialism, posthumanism, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology, as well as human-animal studies. What these theoretical paradigms have in common—and what they tend to embrace in Lovecraft—is an antihumanist orientation that challenges universal human supremacy and rethinks the relation of the human to the nonhuman. (4)

This newfound attention has produced a greater awareness of the complexities of Lovecraft's work, thought, and life.

This dissertation focuses on two fundamental lines of thought that can often be found at the center of these critical discourses. The first of these has to do with the attention given to Lovecraft's cosmicism—often described as "cosmic pessimism" or "cosmic indifferentism"—and the second has to do with his racism and xenophobia. I ultimately wish to suggest that the critical discourse on Lovecraft has often left the deep *interconnectedness* of Lovecraft's cosmicism and his racism largely unattended to, choosing instead to deal with *either* Lovecraft's racism *or* his cosmicism. It is my contention, on the contrary, that to understand the importance of Lovecraft *in our present moment*—to understand, that is, the significance of Lovecraft's *reanimation*—we must think critically and deeply about how Lovecraft's cosmic pessimism and his racism inform one another. This chapter aims to contextualize the present reanimation of Lovecraft through a brief overview and evaluation of these prominent critical discourses.

**Cosmic Dread, Bigotry, and the Anxiety of Racist Influence**

When it comes to Lovecraft's thought, particularly as expressed in his fiction, his cosmic pessimism looms front and center. Lovecraft understood human life to be absolutely insignificant, particularly when considered from the vantage of an infinite and unknowable cosmos. For Lovecraft, the greatest horror was to confront that insignificance directly, to experience first-hand the vastness and hostile indifference of the cosmos with respect to human life. A committed materialist, Lovecraft's cosmic vision—though often labeled, even by Lovecraft himself, as "supernatural horror"—was rooted in the belief that as science developed, the significance of the human would be continuously diminished while our sense of the unknown

and unknowable nature of reality would grow. As the contents of scientific discovery were correlated and connected, humans would be forced to confront in the most devastating way their own deep insignificance and ephemerality. Not only would humanity appear smaller and smaller in the scheme of the cosmos, but the category of the human would grow less and less stable as the sciences would reveal our shared evolutionary history with other forms of life. What the sciences would ultimately reveal—and, indeed, had already begun to reveal, particularly in the fields of evolutionary biology and theoretical physics—was, for Lovecraft, deeply unsettling and disturbing.

This general idea has been termed "cosmic pessimism," "cosmic indifferentism," or simply "cosmicism," and can easily be read as the unifying theme expressed throughout Lovecraft's corpus. Human life is utterly insignificant and the more that we learn, the more we will realize this. Lovecraft's monsters, accordingly, are not horrifying because they can kill you: They're horrifying because they deeply unsettle our fundamental beliefs about the nature of human life and of its place in the universe. While Lovecraft feared this radical decentering of the human, many scholars and critics have taken it up in a more positive light, in an effort to read Lovecraft against the grain. If for Lovecraft the instability of the human was cause for deep pessimism and dread, it is for many contemporary thinkers cause for optimism and hope: The world doesn't begin and end with humanity—and perhaps that's a good thing. It is in this manner that we see Lovecraft's cosmicism taken up, for instance, in posthumanist thought or in human-animal studies. However, whether we view cosmic alterity as a measure of human helplessness and insignificance or, on the other hand, as a welcome escape from a stifling and inept anthropocentrism, it's clear that Lovecraft's cosmicism resonates for a number of reasons in our

present political and cultural moment. This resonance may have a good deal to do with Lovecraft's current cultural status and, certainly, it beckons attention and examination.

If the study of Lovecraft's *thought* has orbited around his cosmicism, however, the study of Lovecraft's *life* has brought to the fore another aspect of his character: namely, his virulent racism. While some of this racism is immediately apparent in his literary output—perhaps most glaringly in stories like "The Horror at Red Hook" and "Medusa's Coil" and in his infamous poem "On the Creation of Niggers"—his published works just scrape the tip of the iceberg. His letters contain evidence of what is often described by commentators as a near "pathological racism," as do first-hand accounts of those close to him. In a letter to Belknap Long, for example, Lovecraft complains about New York's immigrant population in terms that may as well have been lifted from one of his monster stories:

> The organic things—Italo-Semitico-Mongoloid—inhabiting that awful cesspool could not by any stretch of the imagination be call'd human. They were monstrous and nebulous adumbrations of the pithecanthropoid and amoebal; vaguely molded from some stinking viscous slime of earth's corruption, and slithering and oozing in an on the filthy streets or in an out of windows and doorways in a fashion suggestive of nothing but infesting worms or deep-sea unnamabilities. (quoted in Houllebecq 106)

This passage is often cited as exemplary of Lovecraft's racist attitudes, as well as the style through which they would often find expression, but it is by no means a singular occurrence. In many of the letters Lovecraft wrote to his aunts, friends, and literary collaborators, he expresses such sentiments. Accounts given by Lovecraft's friends and acquaintances similarly note the extreme racism that marked his day-to-day life. His wife Sonia, for instance, explains that

> Although he once said he loved New York and that henceforth it would be his 'adopted state,' I soon learned that he hated it and all its 'alien hordes.' When I protested that I too was one of them [Sonia was Jewish], he'd tell me I 'no longer belonged to these mongrels.' '*You are now Mrs. H. P. Lovecraft of 598 Angell St., Providence, Rhode Island!*' (quoted in Joshi, *A Dreamer and a Visionary* 222)

Sonia goes on to explain that Howard "would become livid with anger and rage" whenever he encountered groups of immigrant workers on lunchbreak in the city (222). Other friends and acquaintances have similarly noted the affective responses that Lovecraft's racial hatred and xenophobia could generate, as he would often struggle to maintain composure in the presence of immigrants or foreigners.

One might, of course, go on to cite the seemingly endless stream of racist comments that appear in Lovecraft's letters along with the first-hand examples that corroborate these, but to do so is both tiresome and unnecessary. Lovecraft's racial attitudes have been well documented and for these he has been rightly criticized, but the critical conversation has not stopped. The question remains—as it does for so many beloved yet deeply flawed writers and artists—how is a reader to respond? Can the work be separated from its creator? Can we (or should we) ignore Lovecraft's racism that we might focus on those aspects of his work we find compelling and valuable? What space does Lovecraft deserve, if any, within the literary canon? Opinions span the gamut, from those who argue that Lovecraft's racism saturates his fiction to such an extent that we ought to abandon him altogether, to those who claim that Lovecraft's racism, while regrettable, has very little to do with his literary output and that therefore Lovecraft's work is in no way deserving of the scorn that might rightfully be leveled against its author.

Some of the most interesting attempts to deal with Lovecraft's mixed legacy come, in my view, from writers of fiction who, conscious of Lovecraft's influence on their own work, must contend with a very peculiar and particular anxiety of influence. This anxiety is expressed, in particular, by writers of color like Victor LaValle who, writing in a Lovecraftian tradition, find themselves forced to acknowledge that this important literary progenitor would have hated them. LaValle has spoken on multiple occasions about his childhood obsession with Lovecraft's stories and his failure, as a child, to notice even the most blatantly racist elements in them. LaValle describes this experience on an episode of NPR's *Fresh Air:*

> I didn't realize it when I was 10 or 11 reading these stories. And I read pretty much all of them. And in some of them, he's pretty blatant about his particular hatred—particularly of black people. When I was 10 or 11 and I read these stories, I read them only for the wild and outlandish plots and the large cosmic dread sort of thing. And in a way, I was naive and I could overlook what should have been blatant clues about the uglier sides of H.P. Lovecraft's personality and his ideas. Like, for instance, the story where he has a cat named Nigger-Man, and he calls him that 19 times in this really short story and takes great pleasure in talking about kicking this cat and all this stuff. And then he has other things—he has a poem that's pretty famous. He has a longer story—"The Case of Charles Dexter Ward"—that gets into some ugly stuff. And when I was, like, 10 or 11, I just didn't even see it. I think I just couldn't have processed it. And then when I was about 15 or 16, I started being like what is this dude—what did he just say? And it was the kind of thing that you would say, like—if you were walking down the street and somebody said that, you'd smack them in the mouth. So why did I say that it was OK on the page? And yet by this point, I already loved the stories, so it made for these very conflicted feelings.

As LaValle points out, for many artists and writers, influence begins with the things they encountered as children, at a time when something like Lovecraft's racial hatred would be more easily overlooked. Often, as LaValle notes, such problems go unnoticed because they are something a child cannot fully process. As these elements become more apparent in adulthood, an anxiety of influence begins to emerge. While this can be true for anyone, it is particularly the case for writers of color, who must contend with the fact that *many* of their literary forebears were also deeply prejudiced. As Nnedi Okorafor, a recipient of the 2011 World Fantasy Award—which, at the time, was a bust of Lovecraft—puts it, "This is something people of color, women, minorities must deal with more than most when striving to be the greatest that they can be in the arts: The fact that many of The Elders we honor and need to learn from hate or hated us."

This difficulty in dealing with Lovecraft's legacy became something of scandal during the first half of the 2010s—at least among fans, writers, and publishers of fantasy, science fiction, and adjacent genres—as debates emerged regarding the continued use of Lovecraft's face as the image of the World Fantasy Awards. Since the inaugural 1975 World Fantasy Convention, held annually in Lovecraft's hometown of Providence, Rhode Island, winners of the World Fantasy Award have received a caricatured bust of Lovecraft as an award trophy. Beginning around 2011, though, a number of authors and recipients of the award—including Okorafor and China Miéville—began publicly to object to the continued use of Lovecraft's bust, citing, specifically, the author's racism. This led to a number of heated conversations about what it means to honor and even respect writers whose opinions, attitudes, and actions, both within their work and beyond it, we deem despicable. Miéville's response is notable:

> So where does that leave the World Fantasy Award? Well, in my case, I have always done something very specific and simple. I consider the award inextricable from but not reducible to Lovecraft himself. Therefore, I was very honoured to receive the award as representative of a particular field of literature. And the award itself, the statuette of the man himself? I put it out of sight, in my study, where only I can see it, and I have turned it to face the wall. So I am punishing the little fucker like the malevolent clown he was, I can look at it and remember the honour, and above all I am writing behind Lovecraft's back. (quoted in Okorafor)

While Lovecraft's image was ultimately removed from the award in 2015, the discussions attempting to grapple with his racism, his writing, and his legacy continue.

**Compartmentalized Racism and Corporeal Semiotics**

Despite the prevalence of conversations that grapple with Lovecraft's racist legacy, it is generally uncommon for writers and commentators to take up and examine Lovecraft's cosmicism and his racism simultaneously. Generally, even in critical work that does engage both, these aspects of Lovecraft's life and thought are either compartmentalized—i.e., cosmicism and racism are treated as distinct and, as a result, can be addressed separately—or, on the other hand, cosmicism is read as *symbolic* of racism—Lovecraft's monsters are simply symbols of his racial hatred. While both of these options can function as critical tools through which to develop valuable insights, it is nevertheless the case that both of these options—compartmentalization or a merely symbolic reading—miss something.

The most crass version of the compartmentalization argument is also the most familiar, as we've seen it applied not only to Lovecraft, but to almost any artist or entertainer whose personal

traits and actions repulse us: The author is separate from the work—end of story. While in a certain sense this is undoubtedly true—almost all works of art produce both real effects and valid interpretations which may exceed and even contradict the author's intents and purposes—to treat this separation as a truism establishing once and for all an impenetrable barrier between the artist and the artwork remains problematic. After all, knowledge of an author's life, influences, and thought can illuminate critical perspectives which might otherwise remain hidden in the shadows. With Lovecraft, this is particularly true. One need only hear about the author's racist views, and suddenly these views are illuminated across the pages of his work in stark clarity. Even so, critical accounts that downplay or entirely disregard Lovecraft's racism persist.

E. F. Bleiler's introduction to the Dover edition of Lovecraft's book-length essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* is a telling example of this. In the essay, Lovecraft gives a critical (and generally well-respected) account of the history of the supernatural horror tale, beginning (basically) with cave paintings. While explicit discussions of race are more or less absent from *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, there is one notable exception early in the essay. In a distinctly racialized version of Margaret Murray's now discredited witch-cult hypothesis[1], Lovecraft writes,

> Much of the power of Western horror-lore was undoubtedly due to the hidden but often suspected presence of a hideous cult of nocturnal worshippers whose strange customs—descended from pre-Aryan and preagricultural times when a squat race of Molgoloids roved over Europe with their flocks and herds—were rooted in the most revolting fertility-rites of immemorial antiquity. This secret religion, stealthily handed down

[1] Murray, an anthropologist, published *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* in 1921—six years before the publication of *Supernatural Horror in Literature*—in which she claimed that the "witches" persecuted in Europe during the Middle Ages were actually adherents of a secret, highly-organized pre-Christian pagan religion.

> amongst peasants for thousands of years despite the outward reign of the Druidic, Graeco-Roman, and Christian faiths in the religions involved, was marked by wild "Witches' Sabbath" in lonely woods and atop distant hills on Walpurgis-Night and Hallowe'en. (18)

This version of the witch-cult hypothesis appears not only in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, but it also seems to inform a great deal of Lovecraft's work. In "The Call of Cthulhu," Lovecraft explicitly alludes to Murray's *Witch-Cult in Western Europe* as being found amongst notes from which the narrator derives the story. The story goes on to depict the tracking down of an ancient and secret world-wide cult—made up almost entirely of mixed-race individuals—that almost precisely fits the description offered in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. "The Shadow over Innsmouth," published eight years later, similarly features members of a related mixed-race[2] cult which engages in wild ceremonies on Walpurgisnacht and Halloween. In many of Lovecraft's works, for instance "Pickman's Model" and "Dreams in the Witch House," allusions to a dark and ancient witch-cult provide a central the link to his larger mythos. And yet, despite this ubiquitous presence throughout Lovecraft's fiction, Bleiler argues that we ought simply ignore this passage about race, ethnicity, and witchcraft in order to move on to the more serious matters:

> No one need take seriously Lovecraft's comments about racial or ethnic origins for supernatural fiction. In this essay these theories are a minor flaw, an unfortunate feature that can be ignored, although they assume cancerous proportions in his letters. The reader can consider the ethnic background a mood-setting device to arouse empathy in the reader, which was probably part of Lovecraft's aim. (*Supernatural Horror in Literature* vii)

[2] This could be—and has been—read as an instance not of race mixing, per se, but of species mixing. I will return to this argument later in this chapter.

In reducing Lovecraft's claims to a mere "mood-setting device," Bleiler seems to suggest that this portion of Lovecraft's essay is merely an *emotional* appeal and not the *historical* argument that a surface read would suggest. Unfortunately, Bleiler never really provides a reason for dismissing the historical content of this particular claim and reading it instead as emotional incitement.

Nevertheless, if we choose to read Bleiler generously, then perhaps can understand him as suggesting that this one aspect of Lovecraft's essay is wrong and, if we skip over it, we can still glean some valuable insights about the genre of supernatural horror. Fair enough—after all, the vast majority of Lovecraft's essay is not given over to such claims. And yet, if we are reading this essay less in the interest in learning about *supernatural horror*, per se, and more as an attempt to understand and develop a critical perspective on *Lovecraft* and *his* approach to supernatural horror, then the passage takes on crucial significance, particularly given that this theory manifests not just in this essay, but throughout Lovecraft's fiction as well. While Bleiler may claim that *his own* readers may disregard the above passage and focus on the rest, it should be very clear to readers of Lovecraft's fiction that the man himself most certainly did *not* understand this passage as an unnecessary addendum to be disregarded at will. From this perspective Bleiler's claim seems patently absurd—at best a misreading of Lovecraft and at worst a disingenuous attempt to downplay the extent of Lovecraft's racism. And yet, it is a move that we find implicitly repeated in many critical works on Lovecraft. While few writers claim quite so boldly that "no one need take seriously Lovecraft's comments about racial or ethnic origins," most would appear to do just that: They acknowledge and lament Lovecraft's virulently racist attitudes—and, at times, even acknowledge their manifestation within Lovecraft's work—but then, in the same breath, they set this aspect of Lovecraft aside to focus on more important

matters. While the division is often managed implicitly, it nevertheless draws on the notion that, yes, Lovecraft's racism is bad, but we can disregard it. I will return to this claim momentarily, but before that, I must (unfortunately) address one more version of the compartmentalization argument.

Of all the critics to argue that, at least from a literary-critical perspective, Lovecraft's racism *does not matter*, Lovecraft biographer and editor S. T. Joshi is without a doubt the most vocal and persistent. As perhaps the most prolific writer on Lovecraft and editor of Lovecraft's work, Joshi is both a gatekeeper of sorts and something of a household name among scholars and writers of Lovecraftian fiction, cosmic horror, and even weird fiction more generally. Indeed, it would not be a stretch to suggest that Joshi, more than any person other than Lovecraft himself, has made possible today's resurgence in Lovecraft scholarship. As numerous writers before me have discovered, to write about Lovecraft's racism and fail to address Joshi's claims is to invite harsh criticism and rebuke. Joshi has written on the problem of Lovecraft's racism a number of times and, insofar as I can tell, he has generally done so in an attempt to defend Lovecraft's reputation from the liberals whose protestations threaten to tarnish it. As Joshi observed following the removal of Lovecraft's image from the World Fantasy Awards trophy in 2015: "Evidently, this move was meant to placate the shrill whining of a handful of social justice warriors who believe that a 'vicious racist' like Lovecraft has no business being honoured by such an award" (Flood). In a letter of protest, accompanying the repudiation of his own World Fantasy Awards, Joshi describes the move as "a craven yielding to the worst sort of political correctness and an explicit acceptance of the crude, ignorant and tendentious slanders against Lovecraft propagated by a small but noisy band of agitators" (Flood). Joshi's arguments do not always reach such an emotional pitch, but they often do.

While Joshi's arguments take on different shapes and forms, they generally amount to the same core idea: While Lovecraft was, in *life*, quite clearly racist, his racism can and should be generally ignored in discussions of his *literary* legacy. Joshi's reasons for this vary, but generally call attention to what he views as the overemphasis on Lovecraft's racism in contemporary critical accounts. There might be some racism here and there, so the argument goes, but it shouldn't overly inform our readings of Lovecraft. In many ways, it's the Bleiler argument in different terms, but Joshi pushes this even further, claiming that "not one actual Lovecraft scholar—Donald R. Burleson, David E. Schultz, Steven J. Mariconda, Robert H. Waugh, and a dozen others one could name—has interpreted racism as central to Lovecraft's work" (qtd. in Colavito). If this is true, then we might thank Joshi for directing our attention to a gaping hole in Lovecraft scholarship. Beyond such appeals to authority, however, Joshi has claimed that "if we did not know of Lovecraft's racial views, it would occur to very few of us to see a racist element in any but a small number of Lovecraft's tales" ("How Not to Read Lovecraft"). Fair enough. Let us then turn to Lovecraft's fiction and determine just how difficult it is to find the "racist element" which Joshi claims is so inconsequential.

I'll ignore Lovecraft's infamous 1912 poem "On the Creation of Niggers," which is regularly cited as the example *par excellence* of Lovecraft's racism as expressed in his literary output. This particular example has been dismissed by Joshi and others as an exception to the rule: After all, Lovecraft was very young when he wrote the poem[3], the piece is certainly not central to his corpus, and it has no real connection to his larger project of cosmic horror. Regardless of whether or not one finds these arguments to be valid, it is true that this poem—for reasons having nothing to do with racism—feels like an outlier with respect to the rest of

[3] Some Lovecraft apologists have claimed he was 16 when he wrote the poem, although it seems likely he was closer to 22.

Lovecraft's work. And yet, the validity of such arguments, to be frank, is neither here nor there, because one need not dig up an obscure poem to find evidence of Lovecraft's racism within his literary output.

After the poem, commentators tend to focus on the racism in Lovecraft's 1925 short story "The Horror at Red Hook," which depicts Brooklyn's Red Hook district as "a maze of hybrid squalor" (119). The story is full of fulminations against immigrants and "swarthy, evil-looking strangers" (122). As Lovecraft explains in a letter to Clark Ashton Smith, in fact, 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" (*Dawnward Spire* 83). Many have accordingly described this story as Lovecraft's most racist. But this story, too, has been dismissed by critics like Joshi for a number of reasons. For one, Lovecraft himself thought the story was quite poorly written and, in later years, regretted publishing it—not, to be clear, because of the racism, but because the story was "rather long and rambling" and not very good (*Selected Letters II* 20). The critical consensus tends to be about the same: Racist or not, the story is simply not very good. The work is hardly a canonical or central piece of Lovecraft's corpus and perhaps it's true that, were we to base our critical perspective largely on this one work, we would be committing a serious error. Fair enough.

The other story which is often referenced as exemplary of Lovecraft's racism is "Medusa's Coil," a collaboration with Zelia Bishop published in 1939, two years after Lovecraft's death. The story is set some years after the Civil War on a former plantation which has since fallen into disrepair. Early in the story, the narrator laments the changes of the past decades: "There had been, at one time, as many as 200 negros in the cabins which stood on the flat ground in the rear—ground that the river had now invaded—and to hear them singing and

laughing and playing banjo at night was to know the fullest charm of a civilization and social order now sadly extinct." Not only is the narrator's nostalgia for the days of slavery telling, but story's final revelation is perhaps the most explicitly racist element in Lovecraft's oeuvre. In the final sentence—intended as the culminating horror—it is revealed to us that the Medusa-esque villain is, despite her caucasian appearance, not actually white: "though in deceitfully slight proportion, Marceline was a negress." A generous (or, let's be honest, defensive) reading would note that the story was published two years after Lovecraft's death and perhaps claim that the racist elements in the story were Bishop's invention—that, when Lovecraft contributed to it, these passages did not exist. Given what we know about Lovecraft, that would appear supremely unlikely, but so as not to appear to be blowing things out of proportion, we must then move on to additional examples. Perhaps the best place to focus our attention, then, is on what is arguably Lovecraft's most famous and most canonical work, "The Call of Cthulhu."

Written in 1926, "The Call of Cthulhu" begins with a memorable and striking account of Lovecraft's cosmicism:

> 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. 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 our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light in the peace and safety of a new dark age. (139)

The passage echoes the opening of Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" in its scornfully low estimation of human knowledge[4] and, at least on the surface, would seem to corroborate Bleiler's claim—namely, that cosmic horror is so far beyond human distinctions like race, ethnicity, animal, human, and so forth that, indeed, while Lovecraft's racism is unfortunate, we should not let it color our sense of his cosmic terror. And yet, a quick skim through "The Call of Cthulhu" reveals abundant references to:

- "a dark cult totally unknown… infinitely more diabolic than even the blackest of the African voodoo circles" (147);
- "a singular tribe or cult of degenerate Esquimaux whose religion" is "a curious form of devil-worship" (149);
- "an astonishing degree of cosmic imagination among such half-castes and pariahs as might be expected to possess it" (150);
- a region "of traditionally evil repute, substantially unknown and untraversed by white men" (151);
- "mongrel celebrants" (153);
- occultists "of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type" (153);
- "a sprinkling of negroes and mulattoes, largely West Indians or Brava Portuguese from the Cape Verde Islands" who "gave a colouring of voodooism to the heterogeneous

[4] The passage in question is, in many ways, just as adequate an account of cosmic pessimism as Lovecraft's—and, in all likelihood, an important influence on Lovecraft. Nietzsche writes: "In some remote corner of the universe, this glittering expanse of countless solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. It was the most arrogant and deceitful minute in the 'history of the world'—and yet, no more than a minute. After nature had taken a few breaths, the star froze, and the clever animals had to die. One could make up such a fable and still not have illustrated adequately just how pitiful, how shadowy and fleeting, how purposeless and arbitrary the human intellect comes across in nature. Eternities passed without it; and when it is gone once more, nothing will have come to pass" (452-453).

> cult"—a cult that, by the way, is "not allied to the European [i.e., *white*] witch-cult" (156);

- and a ship "manned by a queer and evil-looking crew of Kanakas and half-castes" (161).

One might go on listing such passages, but suffice it to say that "The Call of Cthulhu" is suffuse with paranoia that people of color all around the world are hell bent on bringing about the end of (white, god-fearing) civilization. Throughout the story, in fact, Lovecraft specifically reminds his readers no less than eight times that the Cult of Cthulhu is made up of "mongrels" and "half-breeds"—and the count moves up significantly when we include more specific references to "mulattos" and "mestizos" and more general references to the "swarthy" members of these cults. Given that the story, in most editions, clocks in at around 25-30 pages, it's difficult to deny that Lovecraft wants his readers to be distinctly aware of the race (or, rather, non-whiteness, as references to race are rarely specific) of these cultists. And, of course, there's an important reason for this: Race, as it turns out, is a key piece of evidence that the narrator uses to deduce that his uncle's death was not an accident but, rather, a murder:

> One thing I began to suspect, and which I now fear I *know* is that my uncle's death was far from natural. He fell on a narrow hill street leading up from an ancient waterfront swarming with foreign mongrels, after a careless push from a negro sailor. I did not forget the mixed blood and marine pursuits of the cult-members in Louisiana, and would not be surprised to learn of secret methods and poison needles as ruthless and as anciently known as these cryptic rites and beliefs. (67)

Racist claims and articulations prevail across Lovecraft's stories, in both direct and more thinly allegorical forms. To deny this is to read with one eye closed. While one might attempt to argue (often, I think, wrongly) that these elements are generally superfluous or non-essential to

the narrative, it's difficult to deny that they exist. Implicitly acknowledging the existence of such passages, Joshi offers a different argument in favor of compartmentalization. In a review of *The Love of Ruins: Letters on Lovecraft* by Scott Cutler Shershow and Scott Michaelson, Joshi argues: "Where the two Scotts have erred… is in regarding Lovecraft's fiction as some kind of simple and straightforward guide to his beliefs and opinions. They forget that Lovecraft is writing fiction. They habitually attribute the opinions of Lovecraft's characters to himself, and commit analogous errors in critical analysis" ("How Not to Read Lovecraft"). Joshi rightly reminds us that narrators and authors are not the same thing—and that, accordingly, a narrator's beliefs cannot be uncritically taken as expressive of the author's.

To an extent, I agree with Joshi: *Even if* Lovecraft is incredibly racist and *even if* the racist remarks of Lovecraft's narrators sound like word-for-word echoes of Lovecraft's letters, *we should nevertheless* avoid conflating Lovecraft the author with his narrators. This has been precisely the critical move of contemporary commentators who wish to read Lovecraft against the grain. Such commentators have suggested, for instance, that we might read Lovecraft's work—against his will, of course—as in a sense *anti*-racist and *anti*-speciesist. Jed Mayer suggests, for example, that "Lovecraft's work offers an extended challenge to what animal rights activists have dubbed speciesism, the privileging of one species (*Homo sapiens*) over all others, the latter of which are deemed void of subject status and hence unworthy of moral concern" (118). This challenge emerges precisely through the racial anxieties that pervade Lovecraft's work. In the climactic moment of "The Shadow over Innsmouth," for instance, Lovecraft's narrator discovers that he is, in fact, a descendent of ocean-dwelling monsters, a discovery that reflects Lovecraft's own documented anxieties that his blood was not quite so Nordic as he might have hoped. Mayer argues that "Lovecraft's work is haunted by the prospect of kinship

with other ethnic groups, even while he avidly explores connections with nonhuman beings both cosmic and earthly" (119). As a result, Mayer contends, "The racism that provided the author with an extensive vocabulary of loathing becomes, paradoxically, the means by which his stories achieve intimate contact with the feared other" (131). Patricia MacCormack similarly chooses to read Lovecraft against the grain, focusing on the paradoxical intimacies with the other that Lovecraft's work explores. MacCormack suggests that "[f]or Lovecraft, the affects of becoming monster and entering into becomings simultaneously with the monsters of his Ancient Ones pantheon are horrific; for contemporary theories of what it means to be human, these stories can be liberatory in many ways…. Lovecraft offers entryways into feminist, ecosophical, queer, and mystical (albeit theist) configurations of difference" (199). Accordingly, MacCormack's work exploits this potentiality through what she calls "a refined and somewhat perverse interpretation of Lovecraft's cosmic horror stories" asking not "what his stories mean" but "how we can *use* them today" (199-200). While there are certainly difficulties attendant to espousing such against-the-grain readings, I nevertheless find such interpretations intriguing and potentially productive.[5]

Nevertheless, Joshi's claim that we ought not conflate authors and narrators entirely misses the point. After all, what critic would ever feel the need to argue that because Lovecraft's *narrators* are racist, Lovecraft must therefore also be racist? It's well established that Lovecraft held racist opinions and no one has ever relied on Lovecraft's fiction to prove this. The more interesting question is whether or not *the fiction itself* relies on racist logics for its legibility—and

[5] In fact, in many ways this dissertation pivots on precisely attempts such as these to engage in, as Per Faxneld puts it, "protest exegesis" or a "hermeneutical principle of revolt" (11). The works of fiction that I take up in Chapters 2 and 3 can, in many ways, be described as exegetical inversions of Lovecraft which inject the language, themes, and symbols of Lovecraft with new and often inverted meanings. Similarly, in Chapter 4, I will look to the tradition of satanic feminism which, in many ways, centers on inverse exegesis of the Bible. What these against-the-grain readings largely have in common is, to use Nietzsche's term, a radical "transvaluation of values." Lovecraft's racist values and the Church's patriarchal values (among others) are taken up by these exegetical dissidents and inverted as a form of protest and revolt.

it would appear that, more often than not, it does. As Brooks Hefner notes, within Lovecraft's universe, the "corporeal semiotics" of race are almost *always* a reliable indicator of character and intent.[6] Because of their race, these cultists *look* evil to Lovecraft's narrators, and time and again these indicators prove reliable. In other words, the racism we see in Lovecraft's fiction is not merely an opinion held by his narrators—it is a reliable means of reading the world. These corporeal semiotics are not always explicitly racial as they are in "The Call of Cthulhu," but they are nevertheless grounded in a consistently reliable legibility of bodies. China Miéville offers a similar critique with regards to J. R. R. Tolkein, noting that "the point about Tolkien and his heirs is that whether or not they are racist, whether or not their characters are racist, theirs are worlds in which racism is true, in that people really are defined by their race. If you are an Orc in Middle-Earth you are, definitionally, a shit; if you are an elf, you might be difficult to deal with but you are, definitionally, noble" ("Appropriate Means"). While it would be wrong uncritically to equate Lovecraft's racial politics with Tolkien's, Miéville's point is illuminating. In Lovecraft's universe, if you look a little swarthy, you're probably up to no good and you're probably hiding something. These corporeal indicators may not operate in the rigidly definitional way that Tolkien's racial divisions do, but they are nevertheless *consistently* reliable in Lovecraft's fictional universe.

Nevertheless, Joshi is quick to argue that while some commentators may regard racism as central to Lovecraft's work,

> they can only make this argument by ambiguity, conjecture, and equivocation. 'Race,' in this context, can only refer to sub-groups within a given species; it is careless and illegitimate—and, I would argue, disingenuous—to extend this idea to members of

[6] Hefner reads Lovecraft against the detective fiction of Dashiell Hammett which, similarly, deploys a semiotics of the body but, unlike Lovecraft, finds such indicators consistently *un*reliable.

> different species. It is as if one were to assert that the 'race' of dogs are prejudiced against the 'race' of cats, or that human beings are prejudiced against mosquitoes. ("How Not to Read Lovecraft")

Let's test Joshi's theory alongside another of Lovecraft's more canonical texts, "The Shadow over Innsmouth," which many commentators have read as a thinly-veiled treatise against miscegenation. The basic premise of the story is that the residents of a seaside town called Innsmouth have been, for some time now, interbreeding with humanoid sea creatures known in the story as the Deep Ones. As a result, the people have acquired what the narrator calls "the Innsmouth look": "a strange kind of streak in the Innsmouth folks…. it sort of makes you crawl…. Some of 'em have queer narrow heads with flat noses and bulgy, stary eyes that never seem to shut, and their skin ain't quite right. Rough and scabby, and the sides of their necks are all shrivelled or creased up. Get bald, too, very young. The older fellows look the worst" (272-273). The people of neighboring towns are unaware of the origins of the Innsmouth look and, accordingly, interpret these genetic anomalies in terms of race. As a man from the neighboring town of Newburyport explains: "[T]he real thing behind the way folks feel is simply race prejudice—and I don't say I'm blaming those that hold it. I hate those Innsmouth folks myself, and I wouldn't care to go to their town. I s'pose you know… what a lot our new England ships used to have to do with queer ports in Africa, Asia, the South Seas, and everywhere else, and what queer kinds of people they sometimes brought back with 'em" (272). In a certain sense, as I'm sure Joshi would have it, race functions as something of a red herring in this story. We are meant to *believe* that the people of Innsmouth have acquired their look through a history of race-mixing, but what is ultimately revealed to us is not *race*-mixing but, rather, *species*-mixing. As a result, someone holding Joshi's opinion might argue, readings that interpret "The Shadow over

Innsmouth" as a story about racial miscegenation are sorely mistaken: It's about species, and therefore racism does not apply. When we fear the people of Innsmouth, we are not fearing "people," strictly speaking, but rather, hybrids that exist beyond the bounds of the human. And yet, to draw Joshi's hard distinction between species and race, is to make exactly the opposite move that Lovecraft makes.

For Lovecraft, Innsmouthian hybridity cannot be interpreted as clear species separation. Instead, this hybridity serves to unsettle of the boundary between the human and the "Deep One," and, in doing so, to unsettle the very category of "species." What may have appeared as a species distinction proves to be anything but. The very fact that humans are capable of procreating with Deep Ones suggests that humans and Deep Ones are *not* distinct species and, accordingly, the category of the human is not quite what we previously thought it was. This instability of the category of the human, after all, is precisely the horror Lovecraft wishes to invoke. While Joshi would have it that Lovecraft's stories provoke us to fear non-human monsters, this misses Lovecraft's point entirely. For Lovecraft, the horror is not that monsters exist: It's that, in some deep way, "we" are *related to* these monsters. In Lovecraft's fiction, monsters are never horrifying simply because they are scary—they're horrific because of what they signify about *us*. This is, of course, the ultimate revelation in "The Shadow over Innsmouth." In the final pages, our narrator learns that he is, in fact, a descendent of both humans and deep ones—that the miscegenation he finds so repulsive is precisely what brought him into existence. Not only is the category of the human unsettled, but the narrator finds himself to be the embodiment of this displacement.[7]

[7] In Chapter 3, I will take up Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*, in which the protagonist, Tommy Tester, finds himself similarly embodying the very contradictoriness of the human as a category, but to very different ends.

One might nevertheless argue that the category of the human is *not* unsettled in this story—that, on the contrary, the narrator's horror is rooted in the recognition that he is categorically *not human*. Through such hermeneutic acrobatics one might continue to claim that this story is fundamentally about species and *not race*. And yet, such a conclusion ignores that Lovecraft's racism—like most racism—is premised on the notion that racial minorities are not fully human. As Alexander Weheliye argues, "The volatile rapport between race and the human is defined above all by two constellations: first, there exists no portion of the modern human that is not subject to racialization, which determines the hierarchical ordering of Homo sapiens into humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans; second, as a result, humanity has held a very different status for the traditions of the racially oppressed" (8). While racialization is not always directly or explicitly articulated in terms of "species," per se, it is nevertheless undergirded by a logic that parses humanity in terms of the fully human and the less-than-human.

It's notable, however, that Joshi uses the example of cats and dogs to make his argument, as it recalls an essay Lovecraft wrote titled "Cats and Dogs," in which Lovecraft argues that cats are superior to dogs. As a part of this argument, Lovecraft offers the following: "I have no active dislike for dogs, any more than I have for monkeys, human beings, negroes, cows, sheep, or pterodactyls." While Lovecraft's self-assessment should perhaps give us pause—his "active dislike" for all non-white persons seems patently clear—it's nevertheless worth noting that in this list of species, Lovecraft cateogorizes "human beings" and "negroes" separately. I certainly don't believe that Joshi would have us assume that, in this *specific* instance, because Lovecraft is drawing what appears to be a *species* distinction rather than a *race* distinction, his utterance is therefore not racist. And yet, Joshi asks us to assume as much when such distinctions are transposed to a fictional context. In "The Shadow over Innsmouth," Joshi would have us

assume—despite Lovecraft's very purposeful unsettling of the distinction between species and race—that the prejudice is *fundamentally* speciesist, *not* racist, and therefore does not justify claims that the story reflects Lovecraft's racist anxieties.

One might go on to produce a litany of racist claims made by Lovecraft, his characters, and his narrators, but this somewhat obscures the point. Whether or not Lovecraft was a racist (he was) and whether or not he directly expressed racist opinions in his writing (he did), he created fictional worlds where racist corporeal semiotics are almost *always* a reliable means of understanding the world. One cannot help but to read Joshi's arguments as desperate attempts to save Lovecraft's legacy from the swath of scholars and critics who aim, as Joshi puts it, "to seize on this one aspect of Lovecraft's life and thought as a way of knocking him down a few pegs in critical esteem" ("How Not to Read Lovecraft"). In Joshi's view, it would appear, any engagement with Lovecraft's racial politics can only be understood as a calculating and malicious attempt to besmirch and devalue a great writer. While such a devaluation may be inevitable from some perspectives, critics like Mayer and MacCormack have shown that we might engage questions of species and race in compelling ways that encourage us to *value* Lovecraft's work—albeit in ways that Lovecraft himself may not have wanted or expected. These "perverse interpretations," as MacCormack calls them, offer ways of reading Lovecraft that may even knock him *up* a few pegs (199). But, importantly, in order to develop these arguments, Mayer and MacCormick first recognize and accept the fact that Lovecraft's work is deeply informed by his racist opinions and they build their critical accounts on this recognition. One cannot build stable critical foundation upon the willful avoidance of textual evidence.

The above examples should suffice to show that Lovecraft's racism is no minor detail in his writing. Despite the protestations of critics like Joshi, readers of Lovecraft must acknowledge

and accept the fact that not only was *Lovecraft* incredibly racist, but that this racism informs *his stories* as well. When it comes to Lovecraft's racism, an uncritical division between the author and the work simply doesn't hold. And yet, we should return to the relationship between the two features of Lovecraft's legacy which spawned this discussion: his cosmicism and his racism. While it is clear that Lovecraft's fiction and his racism cannot be separated, it may nevertheless be true that his notion of cosmicism can be separated from his racial prejudice.

**Untangling Cosmicism and Racism**

One might argue that, despite the fundamental role of racism in Lovecraft's thought and work, such prejudice is nevertheless *not* fundamental to his philosophy of cosmicism. Perhaps, in other words, we can engage Lovecraft's thinking on cosmicism and pessimism *without* engaging his thoughts on race. Ultimately, if the function of cosmic horror is to reduce the human to a speck of dust, one might reasonably ask how this could be racist or prejudiced in any sense. In theory, this makes a bit of sense: From the perspective of an infinitely vast and indifferent cosmos, what's the difference between one speck of dust and another speck of dust? This seems to be the logic driving many attempts to separate Lovecraft the (racist, bigoted, xenophobic) person from Lovecraft the (cosmically-inclined) writer. We can condemn or ignore the racist elements—despite whatever prominence they might hold—while celebrating those elements that presumably transcend race.

There may be some truth to this argument. From a cosmic perspective, one cannot underestimate the sheer transience and insignificance of all human life. Humans are but a minor blip in history, a grain of sand in an infinite cosmos. Simply to acknowledge human existence is to overestimate human importance. Insofar as we can gesture towards this cosmic perspective, a

perspective centered on what Eugene Thacker calls "the world-without-us" (*In the Dust of this Planet* 5), we are gesturing towards a world without the human (all too human) mechanisms of prejudice, oppression, hatred, and so forth. Cosmicism, one might reasonably claim, effectively reduces questions of race and ethnicity to irrelevant matters no more significant than the miserable humans who deploy such categories. Lovecraft himself expresses this idea quite explicitly in one of his letters: "All my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos at large" (quoted in Mayer 117). One would certainly suspect that questions of racial prejudice (or, for that matter, speciesism) would fall under the broad category of "common human laws and interests and emotions." It is for this reason that Thomas Ligotti sees Lovecraft's racism as in fundamental contradiction with his own espoused cosmic philosophy. Ligotti argues that

> Lovecraft [was] a perfectionist of cosmic disillusion. But relatively dissociated from Lovecraft the cosmic disillusionist was another Lovecraft, one who reveled in protectionist illusions that could not be more alien to the propensities of his alter ego. In this latter identity, he took refuge from what he specified as his cynicism (also his "cosmic pessimism") in a world of distractions and anchorings he had amassed over the years. Among them was his sentimental immersion in the past. Especially dear to him was the traditional way of life emblemized by architectural remnants of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England. Old towns with winding streets, houses with semi-circular fanlight doors, and other postcard images of Yankeedom conjured up for Lovecraft a picture of bygone times as an aesthetic phenomenon that often tailed into a Blood-and-Soil mysticism. (44-45)

Ligotti concludes that "[l]ike most of us, Lovecraft distracted himself with fabricated values…. Concerned as a fiction writer with smashing to bits humanity's grand illusion about its place in the universe, Lovecraft welcomed any illusions he could accept in good faith" (45).

If we accept Ligotti's analysis, then it might make sense to regard Lovecraft's racism, however prevalent in his writing, as a "fabricated value" or a "diversion," as fragments shored against the crushing ruination of cosmic indifference. In fact, Lovecraft admits as much in another letter, writing,

> In a cosmos without absolute values... there is only one anchor of fixity[8]..., and that anchor is tradition, the potent emotional legacy bequeathed to us by the massed experience of our ancestors, individual or national, biological or cultural. Tradition means nothing cosmically, but it means everything locally and pragmatically because we have nothing else to shield us from a devastating sense of "lostness" in endless time and space. (*Selected Letters* quoted in Evans 99)

The insignificance and cosmic pointlessness of human life can be a devastating notion to accept and, for Lovecraft, attaching a sense of superiority to his own race was perhaps a means of coping with this bleak truth. No matter how deeply intertwined, then, racism and cosmicism might be in Lovecraft's *artistic* output, we might arguably separate these *ideas* philosophically: Lovecraft's work is *really* about cosmic indifference and, regrettably, his expression of this notion was often bound up in a racist worldview (read: "tradition") that Lovecraft used as a crutch.

From a purely abstract and conceptual standpoint, this argument seems valid: Cosmicism is one thing and racism is another and, as concepts, we can quite easily render them as distinct.

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[8] We should recall Baldwin's use of the "fixed star" as a metaphor for blackness.

Such a claim would appear to be supported by the fact that many of the contemporary works that build on Lovecraft's legacy manage this separation by taking up his cosmicism and *not* his racism. And yet, as much as we might like to think cosmically and to speak of a world-without-us, our culturally structured and semantically limited perspectives confine us to only vague gestures at such an unfathomable idea. The world-without-us is, as Thacker reminds us, an "unthinkable world" (1). While we might name it, the world-without-us remains a distant, conceptual category. Lovecraft is not interested in producing abstract concepts of this sort. Lovecraft's depictions of the weird attempt to facilitate an irruption of the world-without-us into the world as we know it. The goal of cosmic horror is that we might *experience*, however partially and momentarily, a direct confrontation with the absolute beyond. Lovecraft is not interested in conceptual abstraction but experiential encounter. It is here that the theoretical separation of Lovecraft's cosmicism from his racism begins to fall apart. In the same way that content cannot be separated from form, conceptual abstraction cannot be separated from the aesthetic formulations which express it—which means, in the case of Lovecraft, that cosmicism cannot be separated from racism. To do so would be to produce a *different* cosmicism than Lovecraft's.

This is not to say that every writer who makes the move to separate Lovecraft's cosmicism from his racism does so irresponsibly—a great many writers have offered remarkable insights deriving from Lovecraft which do not engage his racism. Thacker, for instance, explores the concept of the unthinkable world and, to do so, draws usefully on Lovecraft. Thacker is not attempting to produce a reading of Lovecraft, per se, and is thus able to borrow from what's useful and leave the rest behind.[9] Similarly, Mark Fisher, in his elucidation of the concepts of the

[9] In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, however, I will put some pressure on Thacker's notion of the "world-without-us," suggesting that, while it offers a useful optic for understanding cosmic horror, it also takes for granted a

"weird" and the "eerie," draws on Lovecraft, but only insofar as it is helpful for understanding these terms. Fisher draws some useful insights from Lovecraft and his decision not to engage Lovecraft's racism is not, I would argue, irresponsible. But to say that these separations are not *irresponsible*—in the sense that they nevertheless generate useful insights—is not to say that they are without an element of loss. When we choose to focus on one aspect of Lovecraft's thought while ignoring another—in this instance, focusing on his cosmicism while ignoring his racism—something is lost in the process. And this does not only occur when we focus overly on the cosmicism while ignoring the racism—the opposite is also true.

**The Symbolics of Racism**

Another critical trajectory, then, has been to read Lovecraft's monsters as only or primarily symbols of racial difference. N. K. Jemisin expresses this sentiment in an interview with *Vulture*: "Lovecraft's fiction was all about his idealized hatred and fear of people of color…. In an allegorical form, Lovecraft was trying to gentrify every city he lived in" (Shapiro). In its most extreme version, the general argument is that Lovecraft's horrifying creatures exist *solely as expressions* of his racial anxieties. In many ways such a reading seems entirely valid. After all, a number of Lovecraft's stories and passages do read as little more than thinly veiled racial commentaries. Take, for example, a pivotal moment in Lovecraft's novella "At the Mountains of Madness." The narrator, a geologist exploring Antarctica, has discovered the remains of a long-lost pre-human civilization. The civilization is made up of absolutely alien entities which the narrator regards with horror and repulsion. And yet, as the narrator learns of

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coherent, unified, and stable "us." I will ultimately suggest that Victor LaValle's version of cosmic horror actually pushes beyond the schema that Thacker (rightly, I think) attributes to Lovecraft, precisely by destabilizing the "us" against which the "world" is defined.

the history of these Elder Beings, he discovers that these creatures had at one point created a race of beings called *shoggoths* who were to serve as their slaves. Over time, the *shoggoths* developed a conscious awareness of their enslaved state and eventually revolted. When the narrator discovers evidence of this slave revolt, his opinion of the Elder Beings suddenly shifts from one of repulsion to one of empathy: "Poor devils! After all, they were not evil things of their kind. They were the men of another age and another order of being…. They had not been savages—for what indeed had they done?... Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star-spawn—whatever they had been, they were men!" (330). It is only in seeing the Elder Beings as a sort of master race in decline amid the uprising of an inferior race that he is able to empathize with their plight.[10]

Nevertheless, as James Kneale writes, expressing some of Joshi's anxieties in less polarizing terms, "once Lovecraft's racism is discovered, it is difficult not to read him *solely* in terms of these fears and hatreds. His pathology represents a critical singularity, from which interpretations struggle to escape" (quoted in Sederholm and Weinstock 27). If we view Lovecraft's monsters as mere symbols, we're reducing his cosmicism to racial prejudice and—while that is certainly *part* of it—we will miss the fact that there is something compelling about Lovecraft's cosmicism that is *not* simply reducible to prejudice. Lovecraft's obsession with the vastness of space, the sheer incomprehensibility of the universe, and the infinitesimal role of humanity in the scheme of the cosmos cannot be reduced simply to a fear of the racialized other. In fact, while I'm hesitant to psychologize, I'm inclined to follow Ligotti's reading and to suggest that Lovecraft's racism was, in part, a way to *displace* his deep sense of cosmic dread. If foreigners struck fear in Lovecraft, they did so in a way that was small, manageable, local, and

[10] Elizabeth Bear's Hugo Award-winning novelette "Shoggoths in Bloom" attempts to invert this narrative by following a black protagonist who, identifying with the *shoggoths'* historical enslavement and their revolt against their masters, comes to empathize with them.

temporary. While many commentators have argued that Lovecraft's cosmic dread should be read as an expression of his racial fears, it may make more sense to read his racial fears as a more localized expression of his cosmic dread. Lovecraft's literary aim is to invoke a type of terror beyond human conception—a terror emerging from the ineffable "world-without-us"—but this can only be achieved through analogy. As a result, Lovecraft draws on that which he deems most terrifying in the mundane world and uses this to gesture towards the extraordinary beyond. Racial difference becomes a particular instantiation of a far more profound and unsettling sense of alterity. Accordingly, the sense of displacement felt by Lovecraft's white, bourgeois male protagonists through the encounter with racialized others is a specific instantiation of a much profounder sense of cosmic displacement. It is easy to imagine an analogous comparison that would resonate with many people today: "If you, as a white person, feel that your status is being unsettled successes of people of color, then let show you an entity called Cthulhu who will really knock you down a few pegs! If you, as a man, feel insignificant because your new boss is a woman, well let me tell you about the cold, dark, limitless cosmos and you will know the true depths of insignificance!"[11]

And yet, to read Lovecraft's racism as *merely* a tool used to express by analogy a more transcendent horror might lead us to assume that his racism is little more than a product of his time, an attempt as it were to play off his *audience*'s fears. A number of commentators have made this argument in one way or another, as if, because of the time Lovecraft lived, racism was simply the most useful tool to communicate a fear of the unknown and, had he lived at a different time, he would have used different tools. Such an argument assumes at least two things: First, it assumes that Lovecraft's racism was simply the only possible position at his time—that it

[11] For a close-reading of how Lovecraft renders comparisons such as these syntactically, see Harman 61-63.

was normal and, while regrettable, inevitable. We know, of course, that this is untrue—that in Lovecraft's time, like any other time in which racism has existed, there have been people committed to opposing such prejudice. Even Lovecraft's wife attested that, throughout their marriage, she tried to "cure" him of his racism. The second thing that this argument assumes, though, is that at another time—say, for instance, our time—racial fears would have no resonance: that, were Lovecraft writing now, the exploitation of racial prejudice would not be an effective way to produce horror. But as anyone who pays any attention knows, racism has neither disappeared nor been pushed underground, and it takes no stretch of the imagination to assume that Lovecraft's opinions about race would find a large, receptive audience at the present moment. (One wonders at the fact that Richard Spencer and his ilk have not—yet—taken up Lovecraft as a literary poster-boy for their movement.) This is simply to say that we should be careful neither to reduce Lovecraft's cosmicism to an expression of his racial anxieties nor his racism to an expression of more cosmic fears.

This leaves us with some difficult and largely unsolved problems: If we accept that Lovecraft's racism is fundamental to his work while also accepting that his work is not simply reducible to racism, where does that leave us? It is precisely this question that animates the chapters that follow. While much of this chapter has been dedicated to showing that Lovecraft's racism *does* matter when it comes to discussions of his literary legacy—an admittedly tedious argument that, unfortunately, still needs to be made—my fundamental questions have less to do with whether or not Lovecraft's racism matters and more to do with how it relates to his cosmicism. My interest in cosmic pessimism has largely to do with its prevalence, in various forms, throughout contemporary popular culture: From Rust Cohl's depressive cynicism to

Grandpa Rick's gleeful nihilism, cosmic pessimism seem to be everywhere. While, for very good reasons, this cosmic pessimism is often deployed in ways that avoid Lovecraft's racist rhetoric and imagery, I would like to suggest that cosmic pessimism can be redeployed to far more interesting effect if it does not altogether abandon the question of race.

As I develop this discussion, I will look to the ways in which contemporary fiction writers, specifically, have attempted to manage Lovecraft's mixed legacy through open and self-conscious engagements with his influence. As we will see, approaches by fiction writers often correspond to the (admittedly general) dichotomy I've outlined above: Either their work seems to reflect a sense that Lovecraft's racism can simply be detached from his cosmicism, or it reflects the idea that Lovecraft's cosmicism is reducible to or fundamentally overdetermined by his racism. To be clear, both approaches offer something of value—writers who detach and jettison Lovecraft's racism in favor of cosmicism are able to produce compelling and frighteningly weird horror stories; writers who jettison the cosmicism to focus on the symbolics of racism are able to level broad and compelling critiques of racism both in Lovecraft's work and in society at large. The next chapter will take up two such works: Thomas Ligotti's "Nethescurial" and Ruthanna Emrys's *Winter Tide*.

However, in Chapter 3, I will suggest that Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* offers a third option—specifically, by taking on *both* Lovecraft's racism and his cosmicism in such a way that reveals the intricate relays between them. What sets LaValle's work apart from much of the rest is his choice to foreground and explore the dynamics *between* these two aspects of Lovecraft's thought and work. In the process, LaValle manages simultaneously to invoke *and* to refine the sense of cosmic dread that marks Lovecraftian horror, precisely because he is unwilling to separate cosmicism from racism. I will ultimately suggest that LaValle, to a far

greater degree than those writers who choose to jettison either the racism or the cosmicism, reanimates the *racist* Lovecraft in order to make him say things he would never have wanted to say. Building on a hermeneutical principle of revolt, in other words, LaValle manages to raise and control, in the figure of Lovecraft, a white zombie.

# CHAPTER 2

## ONTOLOGICAL PERVERSION:

## LOVECRAFTIAN FICTION AND THE PROBLEM OF THE HUMAN

In the last chapter, I sought to demonstrate that H. P. Lovecraft's cosmic pessimism cannot be fully or cleanly separated from his racism, despite numerous attempts to do so. I argued that, to the contrary, these two elements are both deeply interrelated and fundamental to Lovecraft's thought and work. The present chapter focuses on later works of Loveraftian weird fiction, specifically examining the ways in which such narratives—written long after Lovecraft's death—take up and respond to Lovecraft's dual legacy as both cosmic pessimist and racist reactionary.[1] In the last chapter, I suggested that critical responses to Lovecraft's racism and his cosmicism often tend in one of two directions: Some critics, animated by Lovecraft's cosmic pessimism, attempt to jettison Lovecraft's racism while otherwise building upon his legacy. Others, aiming to critique Lovecraft's racism, end up largely disregarding Lovecraft's

[1] Here I should perhaps offer a couple of brief explanatory notes: First, not all weird fiction is Lovecraftian. While Lovecraft is often viewed as the father of weird fiction, Jeff VanderMeer, for example, argues that we should challenge such a distinction—after all, there is a large swath of weird fiction that is arguably bereft of what we would term the "Lovecraftian." In his essay, "Moving Past Lovecraft," VanderMeer urges readers to recognize that there are "so many other threads and veins of weird fiction both here and around the globe for which Lovecraftianism is not central." VanderMeer further argues that "to wallow in Lovecraft, to fetishize Lovecraft, to not acknowledge that for all of the expansiveness of the idea of cosmic horror that there is not also an ironic narrowness of vision and repetitive motion in his work…is to be blind to so many other amazing writers and ideas connected to weird fiction—or at the very least to render discussions about weird fiction less nuanced and complex." VanderMeer may very well read my own project as contributing to the fetishization of Lovecraft—a shadow over weird fiction from which VanderMeer wishes to escape. Be that as it may, VanderMeer does not deny that Lovecraft's influence is pervasive, if at times overestimated. In any event, my intention here is neither to argue nor to uncritically assume that the genre of weird fiction strictly belongs to Lovecraft and his followers.

Second, not all fiction dealing with Lovecraft is weird. Paul La Farge's recent novel, *The Night Ocean*, is an excellent example of this—part historical fiction, part biography, part metafiction, La Farge's novel takes up Lovecraft the person by weaving together the stories of those who knew him (both real and fictional). While La Farge offers a fascinating meditation on narrative, memory, and identity, his novel wouldn't be characterized as cosmic horror or weird by any stretch.

My focus in this chapter, though, is on fiction that might be described as Lovecraftian, both in terms of its form and its content—which is to say, broadly speaking, in a generic sense. Specifically, this chapter focuses on fiction that, in a very self-conscious and aware sense, grapples with Lovecraft in an attempt to confront, revise, and complicate his legacy. How, I wish to ask, do writers within the genre so strongly associated with Lovecraft respond to their progenitor's problematic legacy?

cosmicism. This polarizing tendency, I would like to suggest, is reflected not only in scholarship and criticism, but also in many artistic and literary developments of Lovecraft's legacy. In their attempts to reimagine Lovecraft, fiction writers often separate Lovecraft's racism from the rest of his thought, either by setting his racism aside or by focusing on it entirely (and often viewing his other contributions—i.e., cosmicism—as merely reflections or expressions of his racism: as if his racism is at the core of his worldview and everything else is born of this singular obsession). Those who set Lovecraft's racism aside often do so in the service of producing de-racialized versions of Lovecraft's cosmic anti-humanism, giving readers the thrill of Lovecraftian cosmic dread without the problematic racial politics. Those who foreground Lovecraft's racial politics do so in the service of literary critiques of Lovecraft's racism that generally attempt to humanize those Lovecraft monsterized. These contemporary works are a rich source for analysis, in part due to their attentiveness to the genre conventions of Lovecraftian weird fiction. Through the replication and manipulation of such conventions, these works build on and adapt Lovecraft's legacy in nuanced, complex, and sometimes contradictory ways. By examining these works, we can track not only the ways in which Lovecraftian weird fiction has been reworked and refashioned as a genre, but also the ways in which the human, as a sort of genre, is imagined and re-imagined in these works.

However, it is my view that works which focus on *either* Lovecraft's cosmicism *or* his racism miss something important. Both approaches tend to treat Lovecraft's racism primarily as a personal flaw to be corrected, rather than a fundamental structuring component of western thought. Taking cues from afro-pessimist writers like Sylvia Wynter, Frank Wilderson, Calvin Warren, and Alexander Weheliye, I argue that not only is racism fundamental to western metaphysics' ontology of the human but, further, that this ontological understanding of racism is

fundamental to Lovecraftian horror. The racialized other is not horrifying in Lovecraft because of mere difference. Rather, the racialized other is horrifying because racialization perverts ontology: The process of racialization, in other words, subverts the very concept of human *being* by producing that which is human-but-not. The presence of the racialized other exposes a structuring flaw in western rationality, and I would like to suggest that Lovecraft—in some way or another—understood this. It is precisely because of this that Lovecraft's racism and his cosmicism cannot be disarticulated. In this chapter, I suggest that the attempt to correct Lovecraft's racism by focusing *either* on racism *or* on cosmicism ultimately misunderstands both race and racism.

To illustrate and explore these tendencies, along with the problems that both approaches encounter, I will turn to two specific examples of recent Lovecraftian fiction: Ruthanna Emrys's *The Innsmouth Legacy* series and Thomas Ligotti's short story "Nethescurial," two works that, despite many wonderful and insightful elements, miss the mark in their attempts to correct Lovecraft's racism. In the next chapter, I will turn to Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*, a work of recent Lovecraftian horror that, in my reading, refuses to separate questions of racism from questions of cosmicism and, in doing so, offers a profound and incisive intervention in the genre of cosmic horror.

**As Human As You: Ruthanna Emrys's *The Innsmouth Legacy***

"I'm as human as you. Just a different kind."
(Ruthanna Emrys, *Winter Tide*)

In contemporary Lovecraftian fiction, there is a prevalent impulse to reimagine Lovecraft's monsters or monsterized Others such that their humanity (rather than their monstrosity) becomes the focus. While this impulse manifests to varying degrees and in various

ways, it can broadly be traced in recent novels, stories, and collections like Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country*, Elizabeth Bear's Hugo Award-winning "Shoggoths in Bloom," and Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles' collection *She Walks in Shadows*. Particularly representative of this impulse is Ruthanna Emrys's series *The Innsmouth Legacy*. Through her series, presently consisting of one short story and two novels, Emrys has sought to reimagine Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" in such a way that grants the people of Innsmouth a humanity that Lovecraft never offered them. By drawing parallels between Japanese-American internment during WWII and Lovecraft's fictional internment of Innsmouth's residents, Emrys offers some incisive commentaries on both Lovecraft's racial politics and the history of racism in the United States—and yet, her corrective of Lovecraft ultimately tends towards a liberal politics of recognition and assimilation that, on the one hand, fails to adequately account for the deeply imbedded structural nature of white supremacy and, on the other hand, divorces itself from any real sense of Lovecraftian cosmicism.

Lovecraft's original story takes place in the early 1930s. It is narrated by a university student who, traveling around New England, decides to take a detour through the seaside town of Innsmouth, Massachusetts. In nearby towns he has heard rumors about the people of Innsmouth—that they look odd and smell strange. As a man in a neighboring village tells him, "There certainly is a strange kind of streak in the Innsmouth folk today—I don't know how to explain it, but it sort of makes you crawl…. Some of 'em have queer narrow heads with flat noses and bulgy, stary eyes that never seem to shut, and their skin ain't quite right. Rough and scabby, and the sides of their necks are all shriveled or creased up. Get bald, too, very young" (225-226). Rumors suggest that this "Innsmouth look" has been acquired through interbreeding with foreigners, but no one knows for sure: "I s'pose you know… what a lot our New England

used to have to do with queer ports in Africa, Asia, the South Seas, and everywhere else, and what queer kinds of people they sometimes brought back with 'em…. Well, there must be something like that back of the Innsmouth people" (225). Intrigued by the oddities he might find, the student decides to visit Innsmouth, finding it to be an eerie and unsettling place. As the story progresses, he learns that the people of Innsmouth have been interbreeding not with foreigners, per se, but with monsters who live below the sea. From these so-called Deep Ones, the people of Innsmouth have acquired not only their "look," but also their odd cultural practices. They've adopted an occult tradition known as the "Esoteric Order of Dagon" and converted all the local churches into temples of the cultic order. This cult, our narrator is told, regularly practices bizarre and evil rituals, including the sacrifice of children to the Deep Ones. Horrified by these discoveries, he decides to leave town immediately, but is pursued by Innsmouth folk in attempt to keep their secret from getting out. Making a narrow escape, the student alerts the authorities of what he has discovered and the residents of Innsmouth are swiftly dealt with. Through a series of raids and arrests, the city is left almost entirely depopulated. While information about the raids is largely kept from the public, it is generally assumed that the people of Innsmouth have been placed in concentration camps, shipped off to various military prisons, or simply killed. The story concludes as the narrator discovers that he is actually a descendant of the people of Innsmouth and the Deep Ones. This discovery, for Lovecraft, is the story's true horror. It is not simply that monsters exist, but that we might be infected, so to speak, with their monstrosity. The story has thus been read by many critics as little more than a thinly veiled parable against miscegenation and, for that reason, is often considered one of Lovecraft's more racist stories. At the same time, due to its lasting influence and continued popularity among Lovecraft fans, the story is also considered central to Lovecraft's canon and the larger Cthulhu mythos.

Emrys's series takes place a number of years after Lovecraft's story ends. Her protagonist, Aphra Marsh, is a former Innsmouth resident—part human and part Deep One—who was taken away as a child during the raid on Innsmouth. Aphra's childhood was spent in a concentration camp in the desert, where she witnessed all kinds of atrocities: experiments on her mother and others, slow death by dehydration (the Innsmouth residents are dependent on salt water, particularly as they become older), and brutal treatment at the hands of guards. After some years at the camp, Aphra is joined by a new group of captives—Japanese-Americans imprisoned during WWII. She becomes very close with one family, the Kotos, and following the war, when the Kotos are released, she goes with them to live in San Francisco. Aphra gets a job at a bookstore and begins slowly to rebuild her life, taking advantage of the bookstore owner's secret collection of rare, esoteric, and occult texts, many of which were seized from Innsmouth during the raid. Through these books, she nurtures memories of her family and her culture. Before too long, though, she is approached by an FBI agent who needs her help. Cold War tensions are on the rise, and the FBI has reason to believe that Russian spies have managed to steal some dangerous secrets from Miskatonic University's occult archives—magical secrets related to Innsmouth's Esoteric Order of Dagon, which Emrys has re-branded as a religion called Aeonism. While Aphra initially resists any collaboration with the government that imprisoned her, she ultimately decides to work with the FBI, in part so that she might access texts seized from her home and in part because she believes, due to the nature of the stolen secrets, that the Russian threat could be serious. The series, set in Lovecraft's universe, follows Aphra's investigation and explores questions of solidarity, humanity, race, power, and generational memory.

As a corrective to Lovecraft's racism, Emrys's approach is relatively straightforward: Emrys takes up Lovecraft's monsters as protagonists in order to humanize them. Contrary to

Lovecraft's depiction of Innsmouth's residents, Emrys shows her readers that these people are not monsters at all: They're humans just like us. As if in response to the common characterization of Innsmouthians as "fish-people," Emrys reworks Lovecraft's species divisions such that there are three types of "human," those of the air (i.e., Lovecraft, and his protagonists, and probably you, dear reader), those of the sea (the Deep Ones and their Innsmouthian offspring), and those of the rock (who we don't really encounter, but who are said to live underground). These three peoples are described in "The Litany of Earth"—an Aeonist creed of sorts that tells the long history of the planet earth, tracing the various civilizations that have already and will one day inhabit the earth, from its formation to its ultimate destruction. We are regularly reminded that the category of the human includes all three types. Emrys's project of humanization often becomes particularly explicit as Aphra's friends and allies occasionally mislabel her as *not* human and she is forced to remind them that she is, in fact, human just like they are: "I'm human, Mr. Day. We share the world in three parts" (*Winter Tide* 85). And again, "'I'm as human as you. Just a different kind.' And truly sick from having to repeat that assertion to people who supposedly respected me" (166). In other moments, this rhetoric pivots towards another form of universalizing, which highlights the monstrosity in everyone: "We're all monsters, or related to monsters, one way or another" (272). But even in moments such as these, Emrys ultimately aims to humanize: We may all be monsters, metaphorically speaking, but in a truer, more literal sense, we're all fundamentally human: "Entirely human monsters, to be precise," as Aphra's brother Caleb puts it (185).

Despite, however, the constant assertions that the people of the air, sea, and rock are all equally human, it is evident throughout the text that there is a functional hierarchy in place, whereby the people of the air are largely perceived as the most human and those of the rock the

least. The people of the sea, the Deep Ones, occupy the uncomfortable middle territory, asserting their humanity to the people of the air while also maintaining suspicion of the people of the rock, a people they refer to as the "Mad Ones" (310). While we do not encounter the Mad Ones directly, we are made privy to rumors of their madness and violence—in short, their savagery. In a sub-plot with similarities to Lovecraft's "Innsmouth," Aphra's friend Audrey, a student at Miskatonic, learns that she is descended in part from the people of the rock. Just as the "fishy" characteristics of Innsmouthians develop more acutely with age, so too with the people of the rock. Audrey can feel herself changing, becoming like the Mad Ones, and she fears it: "I can feel it in me, growing stronger. I've been able to feel it all day, the dark thing, whispering and shouting and trying to change me and it's doing it, I can feel it" (305). Having long been assimilated to the people of the air, Audrey can now feel herself *dissimilating* against her will, becoming *other*. Aphra attempts to comfort her, reminding Audrey that "the madness" isn't supposed to be inheritable (305). Audrey, however, is both skeptical and fearful. Despite the fact that the Mad Ones are "human" just like everyone else, sharing "the world in three parts," Audrey clearly fears that to become like them will mean losing her humanity (85).

As the distinctions between these three peoples clearly seem to reflect degrees of humanity (a hierarchy that is disavowed but nevertheless present), we should understand them as fundamentally *racial*. Alexander Weheliye describes racialization as "a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (3) and this tripartite division seems neatly to map onto Emrys's "three peoples." Despite Aphra's repeated assertions that all three peoples are just as human as the other, it seems apparent that this is not quite true: The people of the air have been granted the status of *full human*. The Deep Ones—in the process of being assimilated—have taken on a *not-quite-human*

status. And the Mad Ones—unless, like Audrey, they can "pass"—are more-or-less *nonhumans*, despite whatever claims to the contrary. Emrys's exploration of this racializing process adds an important degree of complexity to her project: Humanness, quite unmistakably, is a field of contestation for everyone involved. Even as Aphra—very much a humanist—continually asserts the humanity of herself and those around her, it is also true that in doing so she must continually redeploy a normative (and thus exclusionary) idea of what this "humanity" actually is. In many ways, Emrys's novel—in its repeated assertions of Aphra's humanity—encounters precisely the same problem. While Emrys clearly wishes to complicate our sense of the human, she also sees the human as the primary vehicle through which to recognize and redeem the (presumably) non-human other. Rather than restructuring or abolishing humanity, Emrys's broadened humanity (however unintentionally) cannot but extend the structures of liberal humanism to new oppressed (and soon to be assimilated) groups. The text thus offers not a new vision of humanity so much as an expanded version of the old one.

Despite these strong humanist tendencies, Emrys maintains certain elements of Lovecraft's cosmicism, particularly through the character of Aphra, who often expresses—in generally positive terms—her own understanding of humanity's insignificance. This notion of human insignificance is fundamental to Aeonism, and is arguably the central tenet expressed by The Litany. As Aphra interprets it, The Litany emphasizes the fact that human civilization encompasses only a small fraction of planetary history and, in this sense, we can read Aeonism as a type of cosmicist religion, its creed a reminder above all of humanity's ephemerality. In contrast to Lovecraft's cosmic *pessimism*, Aphra's Aeonist cosmicism is rather *hopeful*: From the perspective of the cosmos, human life is insignificant, and perhaps we can take comfort in that. After all, it can remove some of the pressure of living to be reminded that, ultimately, it's

not going to matter. This recasting of cosmic insignificance as a reason not for pessimism but for optimism is one of the greatest strengths of Emrys's revision of Lovecraft. If for Lovecraft cosmic insignificance prompts a retreat into (racist, reactionary) tradition, Emrys seems to encourage the embrace of insignificance, in a certain sense echoing nihilist philosopher Ray Brassier's claim that "[n]ihilism is not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity" (xi). For Emrys, cosmic insignificance is not a reason for pessimism but an opportunity to abandon inherited notions of human significance and construct our own sense of meaning or value.

However, while Emrys's characters often seem to embrace (at least momentarily) a sense of human insignificance, the humanizing impulse that drives her project suggests that Emrys is still committed (or perhaps unwittingly bound) to a type of human exceptionalism. It is fundamental, for Emrys (and for Aphra), that we see the people of Innsmouth as human. It is precisely by including them within the category of human that they are redeemed and liberated. When we can see them as human, we can empathize with them, reading them not as monsters, but as reflections of ourselves. To the extent that they are monsters, they are monsters of the "entirely human" variety. If Lovecraft's original story, then, is to be read as a racist parable about the dangers of miscegenation, perhaps we ought to read Emrys's story as, ultimately, a humanist parable about salvific capacities of a broadened and more accepting humanity.

This is not to say that Emrys's work doesn't complicate the humanist perspective somewhat. As Professor Trumbull, a Yithian currently inhabiting a human body points out when someone reminds *her* that she's not human, "Most of those who live and die on Earth are not human. Best accustom yourself" (133). The Yith, in Lovecraft's universe, are a civilization who, capable of projecting themselves into different bodies at different points in history, are both

disembodied and effectively timeless. Being "unstuck in time," as it were, the Yith have, as Aphra's friend Charlie puts it, "a long view of history" (167). Trumbull has literally seen the beginning and end of humanity—not to mention the formation and obliteration of the planet itself. In fact, it is from the Yith that Aeonism has received its litany. The Litany is thus not understood simply as religious creed or metaphor: For Aphra and her ilk, the Litany represents the literal past and future of earth. From Trumbull's cosmic perspective, then, the human is far overvalued—for her the distinction between the human and the not-human is irrelevant (as is, for that matter, the distinction between one race and another): In the scope of cosmic history, all species are absolutely ephemeral and ultimately not that different. Aphra, having learned the Litany at a young age, is also capable of adopting this cosmic perspective, albeit in a limited sense. Unlike Trumbull, Aphra has not *seen* the end of humanity—she has not directly encountered, to borrow Eugene Thacker's term, the "world-without-us"—and thus her cosmic perspective remains something of a theoretical abstraction. In any event, while this cosmic perspective suggests a productive tension with Emrys's humanism, the latter impulse ultimately wins out. Whatever cosmic or posthumanist perspective Trumbull might offer, Emrys's corrective of Lovecraft is unable to free itself from humanist forms of valuation. In order for Aphra to be legible to readers and in order for readers to empathize with her, she must demonstrate her humanity. She must, in other words, come across as a "normal" human.

While this impulse to humanize is certainly well-meaning, imbedded in it are a number of inescapable difficulties. When value is only legible in human terms, anything that exceeds the normative sense of the human must either be assimilated (normalized and thus *made* human), rendered inhuman, or left to fluctuate in the murky and uncertain space in between—human in some moments and contexts, inhuman in others. This becomes a significant problem when we

recognize that "human" is not, nor has it ever been, a neutral category. There exists a rich theoretical discourse on the concept of the human and its fraught relationship to racialized bodies, of which I can presently offer only a small glimpse. It is not uncommon for contributions to this discourse to take as their starting point 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" (quoted in Jackson 669). 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. Specifically, Jackson calls attention to Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* which, in Jackson's words, sets before us an urgent question: "How might we *resignify* and *revalue* humanity such that it breaks with the imperialist ontology and metaphysical essentialism of Enlightenment man?" (670)—a question that, in its best moments, Emrys's work seeks to answer. What Césaire (by way of Jackson) calls our attention to is the fact that very notion of human *being*—and, by that note, the very structure of western metaphysics—finds its origins in a colonizing project that defined the human in opposition to both the indigenous savage and the black slave. Jackson offers a succinct account of these critical discourses:

> Like Césaire, critics commonly associated with the theorization of race and colonialism, such as Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter, anticipated and broadened the interrogation and critique of 'man' by placing Western humanism in a broader field of gendered, sexual, racial, and colonial relations. Their work, like that of Foucault, is similarly invested in challenging the epistemological authority of 'man,' but they also stress that 'man's'

> attempts to colonize the field of knowledge was, and continues to be, inextricably linked to the history of Western imperialism. They maintain that the figure 'man' is not synonymous with 'the human,' but rather is a technology of slavery and colonialism that imposes its authority over 'the universal' through a racialized deployment of force. (670)

Uncritical attempts to humanize reinscribe this "technology of slavery and colonialism" through the imposition of a universal humanness, 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 behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves" (260). Wynter's conceptual distinction between western bourgeois "Man" and the "human" species serves as a helpful reminder that any attempt to humanize is also an attempt to represent.

In this sense, we should recognize that, while Emrys offers three "types" of human, these are legible as human only to the extent that they look like "Man"—and when they cease to appear as such, they also cease to be fully human, as we see with the Mad Ones. Here humanism's inherent assimilationism is revealed. Emrys's project, however, should not be read as reflecting some kind of stridently antagonistic politics of "assimilate or destroy." Indeed, nowhere does it appear that Emrys's intention is to *assimilate* Aphra, to *make her* like "us." Rather, like all attempts to humanize, Emrys's aim is to *reveal* the humanity that is *already within* Aphra. Emrys, by thinking in the idiom of the human, has *already* extended this representation of "Man" to Aphra on account of her sapience and through her narrative means only to educe it.[2] The result is that, as Weheliye writes, "a particular humanly devised model of

[2] Here I use the term "sapience" to denote not wisdom, per se, but rather the homo sapiens elements of her biology: that she would appear, biologically speaking, to be at least in part "human."

humanity remains isomorphic with the Homo sapiens species" (25). Emrys's move to "reveal" Aphra's humanity doesn't feel like assimilation because the assimilation has already occurred at the conceptual level of the "human," a concept that produces a normative model for all sapient life.

Drawing on the work of Wynter, Frank Wilderson, and Cedric Robinson, Aria Dean reminds us that this "ethno-class conception of the human" is a product of racial capitalism[3] and is a necessary conceptual 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…. The importance of thinking slavery and capital together goes beyond understanding their co-implication in modernity, or their influence on how black individuals engage with capitalist structures like labor and consumer markets. Rather, slavery and capital's entanglement is also about the subjectivation of the slave, the black nonsubject that it engenders. 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 thus draws important links between the concept of the human, capitalist accumulation, and the dehumanization of black bodies. The "human," as a product of racial capitalism, becomes a means by which to objectify, expropriate, and accumulate "inhuman" bodies.

If we read the overrepresentation of "Man," then, as a "technology of slavery and colonialism," it becomes apparent that, well-meaning as it might be, Emrys's humanism is

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[3] For a fuller discussion of racial capitalism and its relation to the human, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

unable to disarticulate itself from a colonizing politics of recognition and assimilation. Rather than radically rethinking what it means to be human, this politics of liberal humanism seeks merely to extend this definition beyond its former bounds. Because this humanism "does not aspire to create a different code for what it means to be human," to quote Weheliye, it "merely sketches a different map of Man's territorializing assemblages" (23). Humanism can only *move* the (permeable) borders between full human, not-quite-human, and nonhuman—it cannot *eliminate* them. Unable to escape from the shadow of "Man," then, Emrys can only extend it. The monster can never be empathized with *as monster*, just as the Other cannot engender sympathy *as Other*, just as the subaltern cannot speak *as subaltern*. Instead, the monster, the Other, and the subaltern must be colonized and made legible through assimilation, uplift, and redemption—this is precisely the function of the concept "human." In Emrys's series, it is "Man" that becomes the "shadow" over Innsmouth.

The humanist politics of recognition and assimilation have important implications not only with respect to how we understand the human, but also with how we understand racism—both in a general sense and with respect to Lovecraft. Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton elaborate this problem in their essay "The Avant Garde of White Supremacy." As Martinot and Sexton argue, "The liberal ethos looks at racism as ignorance, something characteristic of the individual that can be solved at a social level through education and democratic procedure" (178). In Emrys's work, like much racially "progressive" revisionary Lovecraftian fiction, this liberal ethos manifests primarily as an attempt to educate the reader by humanizing the monsters, making visible the prejudices that monsterized them in the first place, and thus curing individuals of the types of ignorance that supposedly constitute racism. If racism is not simply ignorance, though, if it is structural and, furthermore, embedded in the very category of the human, then

teaching people to see the human in everyone cannot adequately confront the structures of white supremacy. This is in part why Frank Wilderson draws a distinction between racism and white supremacy: For Wilderson, the term *racism* invokes "a derivative phenomenon of the capitalist matrix" while *white supremacy* describes "a matrix constituent to the base, if not the base itself" (231). If, in Wilderson's terms, all we had to deal with was *racism* as a derivative phenomenon, it might be reasonable to address it through humanizing efforts. But if we understand *white supremacy* as a structuring component—and, specifically, as a structuring component of liberal humanism—then liberal humanizing can never actually confronting it. Attempts to humanize—inevitably assimilative to at least some degree—simply reinscribe the structure of white supremacy. As Martinot and Sexton describe the problem, "[T]he left's anti-racism becomes its passion. But its passion gives it away. It signifies the passive acceptance of the idea that race, considered to be either a real property of a person or an imaginary projection, is not essential to the social structure, a system of social meanings and categorizations" (179). Liberal attempts to correct Lovecraft's racism misread that racism, in other words, as *Lovecraft's*, reading it as an individual ignorance to be corrected rather than something inherent to both the structure of social life and the structure of meaning itself. The *spectacle* of racism in Lovecraft's fiction is taken to be *racism itself* when, in reality, this spectacular racism becomes a smokescreen that obscures the structuring function of white supremacy. As Martinot and Sexton put it, "Most theories of white supremacy seek to plumb the depths of its excessiveness, beyond the ordinary; they miss the fact that racism is a mundane affair" (173).

Martinot and Sexton illustrate this point through a discussion of derogatory language. Derogatory terms, they write, "express a structure of power and domination, a hierarchy that contextualizes them and gives them their force. As gestures of assault they reflect their user's

status as a member of the dominant group" (174). The point, then, is not that derogatory language incorrectly *describes* an individual in an offensive manner that might be didactically corrected (i.e., "no, Howard—she *is* human"), but rather, that it invokes and reproduces a structure of domination. Similarly, we should read Lovecraft's racism as derogation, as the expression of a structure of power and domination, and thus something that cannot be easily confronted with simple appeals to humanity. If our response is merely to correct Lovecraft's dehumanizing utterances, we perpetuate a flawed view of racism—one that, in fact, contributes to its proliferation. If Lovecraft calls someone inhuman, the liberal response is to say, "no, this person *is* human"—which does not challenge the structuring role of the human-inhuman binary, instead merely asserting that a specific individual or group of individuals has been wrongly categorized. The corrective thus accepts the cultural *logic* of racism, rejecting only this particular *instantiation* of that logic.

João Costa Vargas and Joy James describe this problem not in terms of humanization, but in terms of "impossible redemption."[4] In their view, one common response to anti-blackness is the narrative of redemption. As they write, "Redemption is a precondition of integration into the white-dominated social universe. Integration thus requires that the black become a non-slave, and that the black become a non-sinner…. Thus, to be sinless or angelic in order to be recognized as citizenry has been the charge for postbellum blackness" (194). This is the paradox of blackness, Vargas and James argue, because "[f]or a black person to be integrated, s/he must either become non-black, or display superhuman and/or infrahuman qualities" (194). The broad, popular responses to the murder of Trayvon Martin are the primary texts through which Vargas and James read this, noting that "Trayvon can only be unmistakably innocent if he is angelic. To

[4] This suggests an important relationship to the concept of "salvation," which I take up in Chapter 4.

be angelical is to be supernatural or infantile; to not grow up, to not have autonomous agency, to not reach puberty, to never rebel against authority" (196). Whenever black children are killed by police, this becomes a central point of contention: We are told by the police that these unruly children rebelled or threatened harm and that, therefore, their murder is unfortunate but justified. The strategy of redemption (like that of humanization) accepts the dominant terms by arguing that the black child was *not* a threat—casting them instead as "angelic." ("No, he was *not* a threat. No, she *is* human.") Vargas and James argue that such attempts at redemption, by accepting the anti-black *terms* of redemption, "fail to acknowledge, and ultimately reproduce, anti-blackness" (197). The humanizing strategy is in many ways congruent with the redemption strategy: Integration requires redemption by way of humanization.

Ultimately, liberal humanism disavows and hides the structure of domination that gives the term "human" its legibility in the first place. And as Martinot and Sexton remind us, derogation is not simply a matter of derogatory words: "[D]erogation comes in many different forms—as stories, aphorisms, discourses, legal statutes, political practices" (175). We might add to the list "Lovecraftian cosmic horror." When Lovecraft's horror is premised on the idea that the non-human (read: non-"Man") is horrifying, its narrative legibility both expresses and reinforces the structure of white supremacy. The very legibility of this derogation implies the structure that supports it. To adequately respond one must confront the structure of domination, not simply the instance in which it manifests visibly.

As Thomas Ligotti has observed, Lovecraft, when confronted with otherness, retreats into tradition—racist, reactionary tradition (*Conspiracy* 45). I would like to suggest that the liberal humanist, too, retreats into tradition: a tradition of *humanizing* without truly interrogating what this "human" is, what it's function is, and whether or not "humanizing" is a kind of violence in

its own right—an act of *subjecting* an Other to a specific *notion* of human being, whereby access to the "rights" and privileges of humanness is always contingent upon a whole host of qualifiers (thereby insuring that this benevolent subjection will never be extended to *everyone*). This humanizing tradition, unsurprisingly, can bring a great deal of comfort to (and assuage the guilt of) those who do the humanizing—and it is no wonder that humanizing narratives enjoy a great deal of popularity—but my contention here is that such narratives do very little to address the structures of *dehumanization* that make humanizing acts legible in the first place.

It is in this sense that a consistently cosmicist perspective might of great value. As Ligotti argues, reliance on human tradition is antithetical to a truly cosmic imaginary and, accordingly, to adopt a cosmicist position requires one to resist the pull of tradition and its easy comforts. The cosmicist impulse is to move beyond the human, and it aims to render humanizing forms of valuation meaningless. The human has no value at all and, as a result, attempts to humanize can only be read as vacuous gestures. By exploiting an apparent contradiction in Lovecraft's thought, cosmicist critiques of Lovecraft's racism end up using his own logic against him: After all, if humanity is insignificant, then so are the divisions within it. To be a cosmic pessimist and also a racist, in this view, is simply a contradictory position. This move distinguishes such texts from humanist critiques of Lovecraft, so much that, superficially speaking, we might read them as complete opposites: One operates through the valuation of the human and the other through the radical *de*valuation of the human. Despite this opposition, however, I will suggest that most cosmicist critiques end up reproducing the same logics of the human that humanist critiques do. While cosmicist critiques may, in other words, radically *devalue* the human, they nevertheless still require the human for their legibility.

**Cosmic Anti-Humanism: Thomas Ligotti's "Nethescurial"**

"Consciousness has forced us into the paradoxical position of striving to be unselfconscious of what we are—hunks of spoiling flesh on disintegrating bones."
(Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*)

Describing Thomas Ligotti's relationship to the so-called father of cosmic horror, Jeff VanderMeer writes, "H. P. Lovecraft is a self-admitted early influence on Ligotti's work. However, in a kind of metaphysical horror story of its own, Ligotti early on subsumed Lovecraft and left his dry husk behind, having taken what sustenance he needed for his own devices. (Most other writers are, by contrast, consumed by Lovecraft when them attempt to devour him)" (Ligotti, *Conspiracy*, ix). Indeed, Ligotti's fiction has been widely regarded as some of the most sophisticated, innovative, and unsettling cosmic horror to date and, certainly, it embodies a cosmic pessimism that arguably goes beyond anything Lovecraft ever produced. Ligotti's stories are bleak and devastating, depicting human existence as little more than meaningless suffering and anguish. In many ways, Ligotti doubles down on Lovecraft's pessimism: The horror is not only that human life is insignificant and ultimately meaningless, but also that it is marked by constant suffering. It is not simply, for Ligotti, that *we* amount to nothing, but that *our pain and anguish* also amount to nothing. In Ligotti's view, human existence leads nowhere, has no significance, and is "MALIGNANTLY USELESS."[5] Humanity is a cancer, endlessly proliferating its own suffering (and spreading this suffering to the non-human world), and all for no purpose whatsoever.

In popular and literary culture, Lovecraft's cosmic horror is most frequently represented by the figure of Cthulhu—a giant, winged octopus-monster who sleeps beneath the sea and will one day arise and bring about the apocalypse. For Ligotti, on the other hand, the figure most

[5] Ligotti uses this term frequently in *The Conspiracy against the Human Race*, his treatise on philosophical pessimism. The term is always fully capitalized.

representative of cosmic horror is not a giant monster but, rather, a puppet. If, for Lovecraft, the greatest horror comes from an encounter with a cosmic entity that reduces our significance to nil, Ligotti's greatest horror is that we're all simply puppets—that everyone you've ever known has been nothing more than a mask behind which nothing resembling a person resides, and that you yourself are little more than an observer of your own meaningless life, any sense of agency no more than a cruel illusion. It's a pointless display of suffering that you must, against your will, watch, experience, and participate in.

It is perhaps no surprise that Ligotti expressly identifies as a pessimisist, but it's worth noting that he uses this term, pessimism, in a very specific and absolute sense: Ligotti's pessimism is defined most fundamentally by the belief that non-existence is preferable to existence. As he puts it, "The pessimist's credo, or one of them, is that nonexistence never hurt anyone and existence hurts everyone" (*Conspiracy* 60). In other words, Ligotti's pessimism isn't about the belief something bad is going to happen; it's about the knowledge something bad has already happened: existence. In Ligotti's non-fiction, this pessimism dovetails with an adamant anti-natalism. Ligotti argues that there is no greater harm one can cause to a person than to bring them into existence—after all, the act of conception is that act which predicates and makes possible every bit of suffering the person will experience in their life. Birth, in Ligotti's words, is "the harm that entails all others" (50).

Coming from this perspective, Ligotti's project aims to decenter humanity in at least two ways: First, by representing humanity as puppets, Ligotti critiques any sense of human exceptionalism. The human, for Ligotti, holds no privileged metaphysical status. The cosmos is a dynamic machine and we are little more than cogs in it: "Wound up like toys by some force—call it Will, élan vital, anima mundi, psysiological or psychological processes, nature, or

whatever—organisms go on running as they are bidden until they run down. In pessimistic philosophies, only the force is real, not the things activated by it" (38). If the "human" is to be afforded *any* special status, it is simply that, unlike other cogs, we are aware of our status. For Ligotti, this "special status," this "awareness," only enhances our suffering.

Thus Ligotti seeks to decenter humanity in a second way: Not only are we malignantly useless, but given our capacity to understand this, it is our moral obligation to cease existing. *True Detective's* Rust Cohl, a character based in part on Ligotti, puts this notion quite succinctly: "Maybe the honorable thing for our species to do is deny our programming, stop reproducing, walk hand in hand into extinction, one last midnight, brothers and sisters opting out of a raw deal" (Pizzolatto). Humanity's "raw deal" can only end, in Ligotti's view, when humanity does.[6] Ligotti does not, though, recommend mass suicide or self-annihilation as the solution. His aim is to end suffering, and in Ligotti's view, to self-destruct would be to increase suffering. Rather, Ligotti argues for a strict anti-natalism, a refusal to create more individuals whose existence is defined by meaningless suffering. In this respect, Ligotti's cosmic pessimism has much in common with what Nietzsche would call an "active nihilism," which is distinguished from a "passive nihilism" by its aim of hastening the collapse of the present state of affairs. While Ligotti explicitly distinguishes his pessimism from nihilism, arguing that unlike nihilism his pessimism *does* in fact make moral, metaphysical, and epistemological claims, this seems to be more of a misreading of nihilism than anything else. While certain forms of philosophical nihilism indeed refuse any and all positive claims, this tends to be rare among those who take the term seriously. Regardless of the terms we use, though, Ligotti's pessimism certainly seems to extend and deepen Lovecraft's in important ways. To describe Ligotti's outlook as pessimistic is

[6] The sentiment is echoed in *The Ballad of Black Tom* when Tommy Tester observes that "[m]ankind didn't make messes; mankind was the mess" 76. See Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion of this.

perhaps an understatement. Indeed, Ligotti makes Lovecraft out to be quite the optimist by comparison.

Informed by this bleak worldview, Ligotti's *fiction* tends to take Lovecraft's cosmicist imaginary to a new level. While much of his work is decidedly non-Lovecraftian—distinguishing itself particularly through its metafictionality and formal experimentation—Ligotti remains keenly aware of his Lovecraftian patrimony and, in a number of stories, pays direct homage to this influence. Ligotti's "The Sect of the Idiot," for instance, takes its title from Lovecraft's creation Azathoth, the "blind idiot god" at the center of the universe, and replicates a number of Lovecraftian narrative tropes. Ligotti's "Nethescurial" similarly adopts and adapts Lovecraft's themes, figures, and storytelling techniques in explicit and self-aware ways. Notably, though, Ligotti's Lovecraftian tales strictly avoid Lovecraft's racialized markers of horror. While Lovecraft regularly makes use of racialized others who stand in for greater cosmic terrors, Ligotti rigorously avoids this. In fact, Ligotti's work generally seems to avoid representations of race altogether (insofar, that is, as such an avoidance is possible).

A closer examination of "Nethescurial" reveals a bit more about Ligotti's extension and revision of Lovecraft. The story reads very much like a direct and self-aware pastiche (and at times even parody) of Lovecraft, mimicking both the structure and common tropes of Lovecraft's cosmic horror tales in immediately recognizable ways. The story, like many of Lovecraft's, is written in epistolary form from the perspective of someone who has discovered a strange manuscript. The writer of this manuscript, known only under his self-admitted alias of Bartholomew Gray, has been summoned to an island called Nethescurial, where he will meet with an archaeologist known only as Dr. N—. As he reads the manuscript, the narrator learns that Mr. Gray is a member of an ancient pandemonistic cult ("pandemonism" being much like

pantheism, except that the divine entity inhabiting all things is decidedly malevolent). Operating under the auspices of academic interest, Mr. Gray has arranged a meeting with Dr. N— to retrieve a fragment of an idol once belonging to the cult that, centuries ago, was destroyed due to the evil power it could unleash. Mr. Gray's secret intention is to reassemble the idol and sacrifice Dr. N— to it, thereby releasing pandemonic chaos upon the earth and instituting a new (and likely post-human) era. And so Mr. Gray arrives on the island, retrieves the fragment from Dr. N—, and prepares to sacrifice the archaeologist—but, during the ritual sacrifice, Mr. Gray encounters unexpected horrors (which are never actually described). Experiencing a radical change of heart, he smashes the idol and repents of his wrongdoings. Mr. Gray concludes his manuscript with a warning about the horrors that lurk beneath the fabric of reality. Reflecting on the manuscript, the narrator admires the story's pandemonist mythology, but believes it to be no more than a bizarre fiction. And yet, very soon the narrator is haunted by strange dreams of puppets, masks, and unseen presences. The story culminates when the narrator goes for a walk in the park and comes upon a puppet show. It seems to the narrator as if the puppets are looking directly at him, but the real horror occurs when the audience suddenly turns towards him and stares at him "with expressionless faces and dead puppet eyes" (332). Deeply unsettled, Mr. Gray races home and burns the manuscript, but is horrified when the smoke refuses to rise, simply lingering in the fireplace. The narrator tries desparately to convince himself that none of this is real, that people are not puppets, that the smoke is not lingering in the fireplace and, in short, that he is not living in a pandemonic hellscape.

In terms of its structure, narrative events, and tone, Ligotti's story reads as positively Lovecraftian. It incorporates the expected Lovecraftian tropes of ancient manuscripts and strange idols and, like Lovecraft's stories, it concludes in a realization that shatters the narrator's sense

of human significance and human agency. At times, though, Ligotti's narrative seems to inflect towards parody.[7] For instance, while reading the manuscript, the narrator notes that the "prose style is somewhat plain for my taste" (320) and later reflects that "[t]he incidents in the manuscript are clumsily developed; important details lack proper emphasis; and impossible things are thrown at the reader without any real effort at persuasion of their veracity" (325). One might read such passages both as a winking criticism of Lovecraft's stylistic shortcomings and as a knowing acknowledgement, on Ligotti's part, of the ironically underdeveloped and oddly emphasized aspects of his own story (in other words, its own Lovecraftian stylistics)—for example, when he glosses Mr. Gray's horrific and life-altering encounter in a single sentence "for the sake of brevity" (324). To a degree, then, we might read "Nethescurial" as an ironic critique of Lovecraft's often "purple prose" and its resonances in later horror writing. However much it leans on pastiche and often reads as homage, in other words, Ligotti's use of the Lovecraftian must be read as at least partly ironic and even critical.

Given this positioning of Ligotti's work vis-à-vis Lovecraft's, we should read Ligotti's dealing with race—or lack thereof—as purposeful. Indeed, Ligotti has explicitly 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 reveled in protectionist illusions that could not be more alien to the propensities of his alter ego. In this latter identity, he took refuge from what he specified as his cynicism (also 'cosmic pessimism') in a world of distractions and anchorings he had amassed over the years" (*Conspiracy* 44). For Ligotti, then, Lovecraft's racism (which Ligotti describes as

[7] Following Linda Hutcheon, I distinguish parody from pastiche by its ironic inversion of that which it mimics.

a "Blood-and-Soil mysticism" [45]) is simply inconsistent with his cosmic pessimism. While this reading of Lovecraft elides some of the explicit relays between his cosmic pessimism and his racism—namely, that his fear of the cosmically Other often finds expression in racialized manifestations of otherness—it illuminates Ligotti's motives for revising Lovecraft in the way that he does. For Ligotti, there is no place for racism within a philosophically consistent work of cosmic horror.

Notably, then, while Ligotti's work, like Lovecraft's, incorporates exotic locations (the island of Nethescurial), it avoids the racializing aspects that are fundamental to Lovecraft. Had Lovecraft written the story, we might imagine Mr. Gray encountering a hoard of indigenous people when he arrives at the island, their racialized alterity prefiguring the more radical cosmic alterity which the sacrificial ritual will later conjure (a ritual which, in Lovecraft, would more than likely be performed by a group of racialized cultists). Ligotti does not do this. In fact, in Ligotti's story, Nethescurial appears to be uninhabited. There is not a single mention of race or ethnicity in the story, nor does it appear even to be signaled by the markers that would often invoke it (i.e., exotic geographical location). Nor do Lovecraftian corporeal semiotics inform Ligotti's narrative in any clear sense. While the blankness of the people's faces reveals their puppet-ness, such corporeal markers are generalized across all people and are difficult to read in any racialized sense.

One might read "Nethescurial," then, quite simply as a de-racialized version of Lovecraft's cosmic horror. It replicates Lovecraft's cosmic pessimism (with a few adjustments) in clearly recognizable ways, but it purges the Lovecraftian horror story of its racialized undertones (and overtones). Given Ligotti's expressed take on Lovecraft's racism, this seems an intentional move to "fix" Lovecraft, so to speak, to write Lovecraftian cosmic horror but without

all of Lovecraft's problematic contradictions. And yet, as I will suggest momentarily, purging the Lovecraftian of is explicitly racial elements in favor of a universalizing cosmic pessimism (i.e., we're *all* just puppets, we're *all* insignificant, we're *all* malignantly useless) does not constitute an adequate response to the racism that grounds Lovecraft's work. Well-intentioned as it might be, jettisoning race in this way simply whitewashes Lovecraft: Lovecraft's stories are full of color, so to speak, but this color is racialized, demonized, and monsterized. Ligotti's revision of Lovecraft paints over this color, turning everything white. And yet, below this whitewashing, long processes of racialization, dehumanization, and monsterization still remain. Just as Emrys's attempt to *humanize* is inadequate to address Lovecraft's racism, so too is Ligotti's attempt to radically *de*humanize. Both humanization and dehumanization, in these contexts, largely reproduce the same racialized notions of the human, whether explicitly or implicitly.

While Ligotti's work offers an image of *all* people as machinic puppets, it does so by glossing over the fact that *some* people have been quite literally dehumanized and converted into machines and that western notions of humanity and agency—on which Ligotti relies, if only to reject them—have developed specifically in *opposition* to such racialized, dehumanized, and objectified others. Describing the project of cosmic horror, Ligotti writes,

> In the literature of supernatural horror, 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,' those walking cadavers greedy for eternal presence on earth. (*Conspiracy* xx)

This "ontological perversion" that Ligotti describes 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.[8] Cosmic or supernatural 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. In Mark Fisher's account of the weird, this encounter is described as an intrusion into our reality by "that *which does not belong*" (13). For Fisher, as for Ligotti, it is not merely that our space has been intruded upon by something we don't want around (i.e., a murderer), but rather that this intrusion undermines our entire sense of reality: It is an intrusion by that which, insofar as we've understood reality, *cannot be*. The result is that, if we accept the existence of the 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" (13). In other words, "The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate" (15). It is upon this subversion of reality—this *threat* to our comfortable and reliable sense of reality—that, for Fisher, Ligotti, and Lovecraft, cosmic horror turns. The cosmically horrific thing does not merely threaten our lives and bodies; rather, it threatens our very *being*, subverting our notions of who and what we are and what it means to exist in the universe.

It is notable, then, that in the above passage, Ligotti invokes the undead as a prime example of the ontological perversion that defines cosmic horror: both dead and alive, neither alive nor dead, the zombie perverts our notion of what it means to be a "living being." The

[8] This fuzzy distinction between the ontologically perverse and that which perverts ontology is reflected in Tzvetan Todorov's notion of the "fantastic." We might think of the ontologically perverse as that which simply cannot be: It's a dream or an illusion or, perhaps, we've simply perceived the thing wrongly. That which perverts ontology, however, is that which cannot be and yet *is*: It is in this encounter that, as Todorov writes, one "decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena" (195). The fantastic, for Todorov, refers to the moment of undertainty before we decide one way or the other: Is this encounter an illusion, or has my sense of reality been an illusion all along? Drawing on Todorov, Eugene Thacker reads cosmic horror as, in many ways, an attempt to extend the indeterminacy of the fantastic indefinitely (see *Tentacles Longer than Night*).

zombie, however, finds its origins in Haitian slave folklore. Unlike the zombie of contagion narratives like *Night of the Living Dead* or *Dawn of the Dead*, the zombie of Haitian folklore is understood to be animated 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. That Ligotti should mention the undead as a quintessential example of supernatural 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. In Calvin Warren's view, 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." (237)

In other words, as Warren puts it, "through the violent technology of slavery Being itself was… thoroughly devastated" (237). The slave is the living embodiment of "ontological perversion," the truest example of a "paradox *in the flesh*."[9]

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[9] This suggests a connection to another fundamental concept in the theorization of horror: the uncanny. As Ligotti writes,

> A sibling term of supernatural horror is the "uncanny." Both terms are pertinent in reference to nonhuman forms that disport human qualities. Both may also refer to seemingly animate forms that are not what they seem, as with the undead—monstrosities of paradox, things that are neither one thing nor another, or, more uncannily, and more horrifically supernatural, things that are discovered to be two things at once. (*Conspiracy* xxi)

In a rather perverse sense, Lovecraft seems to have understood this. His intense racism might be read, in other words, as not merely a hatred for that which is *different*, but a revilement in the face of that which is *ontologically perverse* (and, more importantly, *perverts ontology*), that which "should not be, and yet is," that which is human and is not human simultaneously. Ligotti writes that "the most outstanding instance of this phenomenon [the ontological perversion that marks cosmic horror] is a puppet that breaks free of its strings and becomes *self-mobilized*" (*Conspiracy* xx). Given the historical thingification of the slave, is it too much to presume that, for Lovecraft, a similar ontological perversion was 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 have violently revolted against their masters (330).

All of this raises a fundamental question: If cosmic horror is, indeed, triggered by an encounter with that which is ontologically perverse, *whose* encounter are we talking about? If the ultimate horror—what the ontologically perverse thing reveals—is that *we* are not really what *we* have long believed ourselves to be, then who are we to read as the "we" of this ultimate horror?

Eugene Thacker, in his *Horror of Philosophy* trilogy, describes cosmic horror as, fundamentally, an attempt to think about and to confront the "world-without-us": "Horror is about the paradoxical thought of the unthinkable. In so far as it deals with the limits of thought, encapsulated in the phrase the world-without-us, horror is 'philosophical.' But in so far as it evokes the world-without-us as a limit, it is a 'negative philosophy'" (*Dust* 9). Thacker draws a

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This account of ontological perversity certainly resonates with the figure of the slave (both human and not) and also recalls W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "twoness" or "double-consciousness": "One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (3).

parallel here between apophatic or "negative" theology and the work of horror. In the same way that, as apophatic theology claims, we can't actually think about God, we also can't actually think the world-without-us—as soon as we attempt to do so, we've cast the nonhuman world in human terms. Thacker reads the genre of cosmic horror as a privileged site at which, paradoxically, to think the unthinkable—or, more accurately, to think those moments when thought encounters its limit. Thacker's description is based in part on readings of Lovecraft and of Ligotti, specifically, and it indeed seems an apt description of their projects. Nevertheless, Lovecraft and Ligotti imagine this world-without-us in very distinct ways. For Lovecraft, the world-without-us is generally figured as something *external* which intrudes upon our reality and, in doing so, reveals to us that our reality is not what we once thought it to be. In other words, Lovecraft's world is populated by *humans* who, through an encounter with the *cosmically Other* (the "world-without-us"), are forced to confront their inconsequential and meaningless position in an unthinkable universe. This cosmic "Other," for Lovecraft, is often represented in racialized terms and through racialized avatars. We can read in this racializing tendency two related yet distinct horrors: On the surface is the fact that, as Lovecraft saw it, the empowerment of minorities would result in his own decentering. On a deeper level, though, the confrontation with racialized otherness represents a confrontation with an ontological impossibility (which is to say, with "the weird"): the human-but-not. The racialized other thus threatens not only Lovecraft's *socio-politico-economic* superiority but also western metaphysics and the *ontological* superiority it grants Lovecraft. There seems almost an implicit awareness that, within the racialized other lies a fundamental contradiction in western imperialist metaphysics, a perverse ontology that renders human "being" a contradiction.

For Ligotti, on the other hand, the world-without-us has been inside us all along. We are decentered not so much by a cosmic *intrusion* as by the realization that "we" are not really "us"—or at least not the "us" that we've understood ourselves to be.[10] Ligotti's characters are not agents who, encountering a cosmic beast, suddenly feel small and insignificant. Rather, they are conscious marionettes who suddenly becomes aware of their strings, reverse-Pinnochios realizing that there's no such thing as a "real boy," presumed free people discovering that they are, in fact, slaves. In short, Ligotti's is a humanity that finds itself in a state of absolute alienation. For Ligotti, the only agent—if there are any—is the cosmos itself: "[O]nly the force is real, not the things activated by it" (*Conspiracy* 38). The problem, though, is that while Thacker, Ligotti, and Lovecraft wish to invoke the "world-without-us," they do so without ever critically—or at least explicitly—defining who, exactly, the "us" is. There is an "us" being decentered or even negated entirely, but this subject is taken for granted.

Such an oversight is, of course, not unique to Ligotti, Thacker, or Lovecraft, but could arguably be said to define the entirety of western thought. As Gayatri Spivak famously argues, in the west, the "much-publicized critique of the sovereign subject thus actually inaugurates a Subject" (66). To speak of the "world-without-us" similarly inaugurates an "us" against which that "world" is defined. To figure the world-without-us is to figure the world-without-humanity, and, as I suggested in the previous section, this category of "humanity" is a questionable one, emerging, as Sylvia Wynter notes, through an *overrepresentation* of "our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of human, Man," as if it were the human itself (260). When we

[10] Jordan Peele's 2019 film *Us* might be read as a mediation on a similar quandary and, in certain respects, could be a useful site at which to tease out this problem further, particularly given the commentaries on race that Peele offers in the film and throughout his oeuvre.

take the "us" of the world-without-us for granted, we repeat this process of overrepresentation (which, to be clear, "we" have *always* done).

It is notable, however, that this fact emerges with some clarity in Lovecraft's work precisely because of his explicit racism. In his refusal to recognize people of color as human—and, indeed, in his explicit monsterization of racialized others—Lovecraft reminds us that "human" is a heavily loaded term. In Ligotti, on the other hand, this fact is painted over. The binary between the *human* and the *other* against which the human is defined is obscured in Ligotti, not so much by a overrepresentation of the *human*, per se, but by an overrepresentation of the *inhuman* or even the *posthuman* (which, of course, is only legible in terms of the human which it supposedly negates).

When Ligotti purges the Lovecraftian of its explicitly racialized elements, then, the effect is actually to *cover up* the contested nature of "us" that Lovecraft makes apparent. In a move that might *appear* progressive—"get rid of the white supremacy"—Ligotti merely covers over white supremacy by positing "us" as universal. There is thus an assimilative element to Ligotti's cosmicism: However, rather than assimilating the other through a "positive" humanism, Ligotti implicitly assimilates the other through a "negative" anti-humanism. Ligotti's anti-humanism thus assumes a figure of the "human" that has never existed and neglects the fact—very much apparent in Lovecraft's work—that not everyone has been granted access to the category of the human. Only from the perspective of ontological stability can ontological perversion be cast as horror—and Ligotti neglects the fact that ontological perversion already exists within the "us" that overrepresentation creates. There are those, in other words, for whom being rendered a puppet is not a novelty. Ligotti's implicitly normalized sense of the human effectively erases those (non)subjects who occupy the problematic double-space of human-but-not, those who are

called human but are nevertheless excluded from the rights and privileges afforded to "Man." For the Ligotti the cosmic pessimist, in other words, "the human" is insignificant, which is to say "Man" is insignificant—but this also means that those who are not "Man" are rendered less-than-insignificant: They're simply illegible.

Ligotti is not the only writer of cosmic horror operating in this mode—a mode that, in its attempt to reject or decenter the human, nevertheless relies on the racialized category of the "human" to achieve this. Much of Caitlin Kiernan's work similarly builds upon Lovecraft's project, but with the excision of his explicit racism. The assumption seems to be that cosmicism is a compelling idea—it makes for existentially thrilling and philosophically provocative horror stories—so if we excise the racism, we can redeem it. In a sense, this is true. Kiernan's and Ligotti's stories are fascinating, unsettling, and don't leave the same bad taste in one's mouth that Lovecraft's often do. As horror stories, they're often quite good, but *as responses to Lovecraft's racism*, they fall short. In my reading, these moves are indicative of a broader impulse to respond to the problem of white supremacy by decentering the human, claiming that, if humanity is insignificant, then so are racial divisions. Rather than an assimilative humanism, we're presented with an assimilative antihumanism. It is thus my argument that, for all a cosmic pessimist position may have to offer, abandoning the discourse of race in favor of post-racial anti-humanism—which we might describe as, at its purest, an equal opportunity worthlessness bestowed upon humanity—cannot adequately respond to problems like white supremacy, racism, settler-colonialism, or anti-blackness (and, indeed, by disavowing such problems tends to re-inscribe them).[11] To be clear, in my readings of both humanist and cosmicist Lovecraftian

[11] It is in this sense that, I think, well-intentioned critiques of anthropogenic climate change—which similarly, at times, describe humanity as worthless or toxic—can often (unintentionally) dovetail with forms of Malthusianism and eco-fascism. Certainly, in the time of COVID-19, takes such as these have emerged, suggesting that COVID-19 is simply nature's way of fighting off the disease that is humanity. For more on this see Johnson.

narratives, my intent is not to suggest that these narratives are simply failures with nothing of value to offer. My point is that, as critiques and commentaries on their *racist* Lovecraftian patrimony, both of these critical stances miss something, and that what they miss has much to do with the question of the human.

In their attempts to deal with Lovecraft's racism, both fiction writers and critics seem to find themselves caught between two prevailing tendencies: cosmic pessimism (which renders the human utterly insignificant and, with it, race) or liberal-progressivism (which relies on a valuing of the human and an incorporation of racialized others into this category). Those writers and critics who favor Lovecraft's cosmicism are thus often cast as inadequately attending to his racism, as giving him a pass, so to speak. On the other hand, however, those who seek to critique Lovecraft's racism end up relying on humanist assimilation and, furthermore, not actually writing cosmic horror.[12] Dehumanize or humanize, neglect race or make it the focus, adopt a cosmic pessimism or adopt a liberal humanism: While the falseness of this binary is perhaps apparent to many, it is nevertheless a tricky one to navigate productively.

In the next chapter, I will turn to Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* which I read as a unique and divergent example of contemporary Lovecraftian cosmic horror. In my reading, LaValle refuses this binary, managing to critique Lovecraft's racism and without abandoning his cosmic pessimism—and, in fact, deploying cosmic pessimism as a fundamental *component* of his

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[12] To be clear, this binary is somewhat reductive, and I would not argue that every contemporary writer to reimagine Lovecraft falls rigidly within the bounds of one approach or the other. Often these impulses are mixed—as we can see, for instance, with Ruthanna Emrys's incorporation of clearly cosmicist elements within her ultimately humanist project. However, this binary seems to inform much contemporary Lovecraftian fiction, compelling writers to negotiate the tension *between* these opposing impulses, taking the binary between humanism and cosmicism for granted, rather than thinking beyond the binary.

racial critique. It is my contention that, in parsing LaValle's work, a different option presents itself—not just for Lovecraftian fiction, but for the question of the (post)human as well.

# CHAPTER 3

## INHUMAN SUBJECTIVITIES:

## COSMICISM, RACISM, AND *THE BALLAD OF BLACK TOM*

"To be not fully human… and to survive… is a peculiarly black predicament."
(C. Riley Snorton, "What More Can I Say?")

"The political task that remains is neither a restoration nor a restitution, but a creative destruction."
(Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*)

"Nihilism is not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity."
(Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*)

"Nihilism is the righteous and honorable resistance of a people crushed under an iron rule. Nihilism is evidence of life… the last weapon of victims choked and manacled beyond other resistance. It is crushed humanity's only means of making the oppressor tremble. I honor Nihilism since it redeems human nature from the suspicion of being utterly vile, made up of heartless oppressors and contented slaves."
(Wendell Phillips, speech delivered at Harvard University in 1881)

This chapter will take up Victor LaValle's 2016 novel *The Ballad of Black Tom* and will ultimately suggest that, by taking up the question of racism alongside the question of cosmic insignificance, LaValle's approach to contemporary Lovecraftian fiction refuses the cosmicist-humanist binary that I've outlined in the previous chapter and, in doing so, delivers a profounder sense of cosmic horror—one that might more aptly be described using Calvin Warren's notion of "ontological terror"—which resonates deeply in our present political and cultural moment. But before I take up *The Ballad of Black Tom* directly, it is important to contextualize it within the present influx of Lovecraftian horror that Carl Sederholm and Jeffrey Weinstock have called "The Age of Lovecraft." As Sederholm and Weinstock write, "It thus appears we are living in the 'Age of Lovecraft,' a cultural moment in which the themes and influence of Lovecraft's writings have bubbled up from the chthonic depths of 1930s pulp writing to assume an unexpected intellectual and cultural influence…. Of greater interest to us, however, is the

question… concerning what accounts for Lovecraft's increasing prominence" (3). To account for this increasing prominence, Sederholm and Weinstock highlight a number of reasons that Lovecraft's work seems to resonate with contemporary audiences. I read two of these resonances in particular as reflecting in many ways the focus of this dissertation: namely, fears of apocalypse and racial anxieties.

Lovecraft's cosmic pessimism can be read as an apocalyptic imaginary of sorts: It's about the end of the world—or, in any event, it's about the end of the "world-for-us," as Eugene Thacker would put it. In many ways Lovecraft's cosmic dread prefigures contemporary fears regarding climate change: The earth, abused as it has been, is ultimately indifferent to us. It has no obligation to care for humanity (i.e., by remaining inhabitable or fulfilling human needs) and, in all likelihood, it will soon cease to do so. To recognize the existential threat posed by climate change is to recognize that humanity is not at the center of the universe (even while some discourses about the Anthropocene attempt to re-center humanity as both the subject of climate change and of possible salvation). After all, in its grand history, as Lovecraft's tales continually reminds us, human existence is nothing more than a momentary blip.

Not unlike this cosmic dread, Lovecraft's racial prejudices can in many ways be read as largely a fear of his own decentering, of losing his privileged status. This anxiety is reflected in countless ways in our present moment: The president calls for a "Muslim ban" as a measure against potential terrorism.[1] Right-wing pundits call for tighter borders and to "build a wall." White nationalists literally march through the streets with torches, chanting "you will not replace us." The question of decentering leads Nicholas Mirzoeff, Joanna Zylinska, and others to draw

[1] See Trump, Pilkington, and Shear and Cooper.

important parallels, in fact, between climate change and the white supremacist insurgency we seem to be witnessing.[2]

It is unsurprising that, as these and other resonances within his work find new attachments in our present moment—politically, socially, culturally, and academically—Lovecraft has enjoyed a type of reanimation. It should also come as no surprise that so many contemporary writers of Lovecraftian fiction have placed these particular concerns about race and global catastrophe, in one way or another, at the center of their work. However, as I've already argued, the majority of contemporary Lovecraftian writers and critics of Lovecraft tend to emphasize one or the other: *either* a discourse on cosmic pessimism *or* a discourse on race, reflecting the reasonable (but ultimately flawed) assumption that such concerns are incompatible: that to focus on one inevitably renders the other superfluous or inconsequential.[3]

By taking up both of these impulses *together*—and, specifically, by attending to their deep *interconnectedness*—Victor LaValle's narrative resonates even more acutely with our present moment. Far from the assumption that we must take up one or the other—either nihilistic pessimism or humanistic antiracism—LaValle's narrative seems to suggest that anti-racism might also need to be anti-humanist, that liberal humanism is inept to confront the deep-seated dynamics of racialization. What sets LaValle's novel apart is its ability to undermine Lovecraft's racism not by abandoning cosmic dread favor of a humanist politics of assimilation, but through

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[2] Zylinska: "Nicholas Mirzoeff has gone so far as to argue that the Anthropocene is a manifestation of white supremacist tendencies because the threat it heralds pertains to the withering of the imperialist white male as the supposedly timeless subject of geohistory. The rise of the global 'alt-right' movement—which the UK's *Observer* has called a 'nouvelle vogue of racism'—is an example of the recent resurgence of those tendencies. In an interview with the *Observer*'s Sanjiv Bhattacharya, members of the alt-right American Freedom Party have declared a fight against the 'systematic browbeating of the white male' and the 'looming extinction of the white race'" (32). Bhattacharya concludes: "Their point is that white people are melting away like the icecaps, and they have a primal drive to stop it" (quoted in Zylinska 33).

[3] I discuss these trends in more detail Chapter 2 of this dissertation, largely through readings of Ruthanna Emrys's *Innsmouth Legacy* series and Thomas Ligotti's short story "Nethescurial."

an anti-humanist *embrace* of cosmically dreadful. LaValle critiques Lovecraft's racism from a position that finds intimacy with otherness without attempting to assimilate or humanize it. Indeed, LaValle's narrative goes even further, accelerating difference rather than assimilating it. In *The Ballad of Black Tom*, I will suggest, we can read something more akin to an afro-pessimism or black nihilism that both rejects humanism and transcends Lovecraftian cosmic pessimism. By centering racialized otherness within a cosmic horror narrative—rather than avoiding it (like Ligotti) or humanizing it (like Emrys)—LaValle seems to suggest that there *is* something valuable in Lovecraft's nihilistic, anti-humanist cosmic vision, but this value can only be properly understood if taken up alongside the racism with which, in Lovecraft's own work, cosmic terror is deeply intertwined.

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 original story, an immigration enforcement officer named Thomas Malone discovers a devil-worshipping cult in the Brooklyn immigrant neighborhood of Red Hook. While leading a raid on the cult, Malone encounters a horror of cosmic proportions. While we never quite see what it is that Malone encounters—because, after all, it is quite beyond description—the encounter has rendered Malone unable to see the world as he once did. Having glimpsed what lies beyond the veil of our presumed reality, Malone is plagued by a paralyzing sense of terror and cosmic insignificance. In this, the narrative structure is quintessentially Lovecraftian: Some guy (it's always a guy) goes poking around where he shouldn't and encounters a cosmic horror beyond any possibility of comprehension. The traumatic encounter leaves his very sense of reality in shambles and, in the end, he is left with a crushing sense of his own insignificance and the insignificance of human life as a whole.

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, in contrast to a story like “The Call of Cthulhu,” 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” (*Dawnward Spire*, 83). This attitude clearly manifests in depictions of immigrants as “swarthy, evil-looking strangers” (122) and the largely immigrant neighborhood of Red Hook as “a maze of hybrid squalor” (119).

LaValle’s novel retells Lovecraft’s story in two parts. The first section follows a young black man named Charles Thomas “Tommy” Tester. Tommy is a guitar player—although not a good one—and small-time hustler who spends his time making deliveries in order to eke out a meager living. Throughout his day-to-day, Tommy is regularly harassed by police due to his presence making deliveries in white neighborhoods. One of Tommy’s deliveries—an apparently magical text delivered to a mysterious old woman—ultimately leads to Tommy’s encounter with the enigmatic Robert Suydam, the cult leader and primary antagonist in Lovecraft’s version of the story. Suydam invites Tommy to his home under the pretense of hiring him to play guitar at a party. Fully aware that there is something fishy about Suydam’s offer, Tommy nevertheless goes along with it as the monetary promise is simply too good to turn down. Tommy soon discovers that Suydam’s library is unlike any place he has ever been. At certain moments, the doors and windows appear to offer glimpses of other realms, realities, and times, as well as glimpses of our world as if from outside it. Suydam tells Tommy that his library grants access to “the Outside” and that he plans to use this power to awaken “The Sleeping King,” an ancient god who lives beneath the sea. The Sleeping King’s awakening, he tells Tommy, will end the world as we

know it, allowing a new order to rise in its place. Suydam believes that the Sleeping King will reward him with power and asks Tommy to join him. Tommy, incredulous and a bit spooked, leaves Suydam's home with no intention of returning. However, he soon finds that his father has been murdered by two police officers. The loss of his father sends Tommy running back to Suydam, willing to take whatever gamble Suydam might offer. But as he listens to Suydam preach to his followers, Tommy sees Suydam for what he really is—just another power hungry white man. Disgusted by Suydam's spectacle, Tommy open's the library door and—amid Suydam's shrieking protestations—steps, all alone, into the Outside.

The second part of the novel shifts to the perspective of Thomas Malone, the protagonist of Lovecraft's original story and, in LaValle's version, one of the offers responsible for the death of Tommy's father. Picking up immediately after the murder, we follow Malone as he investigates the conspiracy at Red Hook. Through his investigations, he encounters a terrifying figure named Black Tom. Black Tom is, of course, none other than Tommy and yet, somehow, he has changed. He has returned from the Outside with a new name and an aura of power. Malone learns that Tom has become deeply involved in Suydam's cult, and that Tom has developed some terrifying supernatural abilities. Malone knows that his superiors would never believe such a report, however, and feeling that something must be done, he claims that Suydam and Tommy are bootlegging and housing illegal immigrants. What's more, Malone alleges that "the Negro likely kidnapped [an] old woman and dragged her back to a dusky basement to commit crimes of a degraded nature" (114). The rumor quickly snowballs to include reports that "blue-eyed Norwegian" children have been kidnapped and taken to a tenement building owned by Suydam (115). This sufficiently motivates Malone's superiors to call for a raid on the building. As the police open fire on the building with machine guns and artillery, Malone

descends to the basement where he finds Black Tom, Suydam, and his own partner. Tom has already killed Malone's partner and used his scalp to paint occult symbols on the walls, symbols that have opened a portal to the Outside. Black Tom kills Suydam and, forcing Malone to kneel before the portal, cuts Malone's eyelids off with a straight razor, telling him, "You can't choose blindness when it suits you. Not anymore" (133). Unable to look away, Malone watches Black Tom as he steps through the portal, declaring, "I'll take Cthulhu over you devils any day" (143).

The novel concludes with an account of the news reports that emerge in the following weeks—reports that sound very much like Lovecraft's original story—along with a brief narrative about Malone's time spent in therapy attempting to rewrite his memories of the event. In the epilogue, Tom tells his friend Buckeye that he's done something terrible, something that will bring about the end of the world. While he seems to express some regret, the ending is ambiguous.

My present chapter unfolds in three sections. In the first two sections, I will look to the work of Cedric Robinson and Mark Fisher to suggest that LaValle's novel, through its exploration of racial capitalism, represents a form of weird fiction that responds to what we might call "racial capitalist realism." In the third section, I will draw largely on the work of Eugene Thacker and Calvin Warren to suggest that, in its response to racial capitalist realism, the novel undermines the central thought of supernatural horror—the confrontation between the world-for-us and the world-without-us—through an unthinking of the category of the human. I will ultimately suggest that *The Ballad of Black Tom* explores the possibility of a revolutionary nihilism grounded in an anti-humanist subjectivity—a possibility and an impulse that, I suggest, deeply resonates in our present cultural-political moment. In a world where reality itself is

constructed according to capitalist and racialist logics, LaValle's novel seems to suggest that a truly dissident subjectivity must be, at least in part, nihilistic, and that the only real hope for the political might be apostasy.

**Part 1: Cosmic Horror or Ontological Terror: Racial Capitalism and the Human**

Cedric Robinson's notion of "racial capitalism" provides an important optic for reading LaValle's revision of Lovecraft. In fact, I would like to suggest that, in many ways, LaValle's critique of Lovecraft pivots on his depiction of Tommy's environment as fundamentally structured by racial capitalism. As Robinson uses the term, racial capitalism does not refer to a specific type of capitalism (i.e., one form among others) but, instead, it signifies the fact that capitalism has, from its very earliest development, been permeated by structures of racialization. Racial capitalism is, in other words, simply capitalism. In Robinson's account, racialism—which he defines as "the legitimation and corroboration of social organization as natural by reference to the 'racial' components of its elements" (2)—is fundamental to the development (and continuation) of capitalism. As Robinson writes,

> In contradistinction to Marx's and Engels's expectations that bourgeois society would rationalize social relations and demystify social consciousness, the obverse occurred. The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism. I have used the term 'racial capitalism' to refer to this development and to the subsequent structure as a historical agency. (2)

In Robinson's account, capitalism does not develop separately from racialism nor as a de-racializing force but, rather, emerges within and takes form in relation to pre-existing racialist regimes. Racialization, however, should not be understood as a static phenomenon—i.e., as if racial categories pre-exist capital and are unaffected by it. Rather, as Robinson notes, "The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones" (26). Robinson thus draws our attention to the co-evolution of racism and capitalism—a co-constitutive development that is fundamental to social organization under capitalism. In brief, capitalism—rather than doing away with racial categories by reducing all relations to economic ones—actually seizes upon proto-racializing[4] tendencies, exaggerates them, and produces modern conceptions of race as intrinsic to capitalist social relations. The structures of capitalism are thus as much produced by racism as they are (re)productive of racial divisions.

The co-constitutive nature of racism and capitalism is fundamental to LaValle's text and plays a crucial role in structuring Tommy Tester's experience of the world. As we learn within the first few pages, Tommy makes his living through a very peculiar type of hustle: While Tommy is nominally a musician, he is not particularly talented, and he can't compete with the other more talented musicians in Harlem: "The streets of Harlem could get pretty crowded with singers and guitar players, men on brass instruments, and every one of them put his little operation to shame. Where Tommy had three songs in his catalog, each of those men had thirty,

[4] In Robinson's account, racial divisions *precede* capitalism. Capitalism thus takes hold of these racial distinctions and re-shapes, re-orients, and re-produces them. However, not all theorists of racial capitalism subscribe to this narrative, arguing to the contrary that capitalism, drawing on some pre-existing social divisions, actually *produces* what we would now call race. In other words, prior to capitalism, there is no such thing as race—at least insofar as we understand it today. For my present purposes, I am not overly concerned with this distinction. Instead, I would like to emphasize that, whether or not we might describe certain pre-capitalist social divisions as racial, it is nevertheless clear that capitalism is—and has always been—a racialist regime. I use the term "proto-racial" here to signify simply the types of social distinctions—racial or pre-racial—that capitalism seizes upon as it pursues its project of racial formation.

three hundred" (17). In this saturated market, Tommy's talents (or lack thereof) are insufficient to generate any meaningful income. Tommy realizes, however, that if he leaves Harlem, the competition becomes sparse. Because he is black and dresses the part of the "dazzling, down-and-out musician," people in other neighborhoods—specifically, non-black neighborhoods—will believe that he's an authentic jazzman (11). His race and wardrobe give him an aura of authenticity that, Tommy realizes, can be used to generate some revenue. Tommy observes that, specifically, immigrants—who are presumably less familiar with the culture of New York in general and Harlem in particular—will most readily buy into his performance:

> None of the other Harlem players would take a train out to Queens or rural Brooklyn for the chance of getting money from the famously thrifty immigrants homesteading in those parts. But a man like Tommy Tester—who only put on a show of making music—certainly might. Those outer-borough bohunks and Paddys didn't know a damn thing about serious jazz, so Tommy's knockoff version might still stand out. (18)

It's immediately clear that Tommy's hustle—and the market itself—is fundamentally 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 as an authentic jazzman. 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. Indeed, the value of Tommy's "service" is largely dependent on both his own race and the race of his "customers." Quite simply, as Robin Kelly has described racial capitalism, "Value is partially determined by things like race" ("What is Racial Capitalism").

However, the effects of racial capitalism extend beyond Tommy's exploitation of racial value to generate income. When Tommy initially contrives his scheme, he tells his father, Otis, of his plans. In response, Otis offers (and not for the first time) to get Tommy a job as a bricklayer—an honest job working construction like his old man. While Tommy is touched by the offer, he 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 and with little power to confront his employers, 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" (18). While Tommy's hustle may not have been a particularly stable profession, neither was his father's more respectable job. Furthermore, as Tommy sees it, such labor has ultimately left Otis *worse* off, leaving him with little more than "gnarled hands and a stooped back" (18). Though his father "tried to instill a sense of duty" in him, Tommy recognizes that duty doesn't pay—particularly if you're a black man (19). Why have a sense of duty, after all, towards those who will never have a sense of duty towards you? On the contrary, 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" (19). Rather than have his labor exploited through a one-sided sense of duty, Tommy draws on other forms of value to eke out his meager living.

Tommy's move here is analogous to a form of resistance that Robin Kelley tracks in 1990s gangsta rap. Drawing on the work of James C. Scott, Kelly argues that gangsta rap can be read as a type of "hidden transcript" through which resistance is articulated and registered, particularly with respect to wage labor, joblessness, and the criminalization of black youth. For instance, Kelley writes, "M. C. Eiht (pronounced 'eight') of CMW openly declares that crime is his way of resisting wage labor ('I ain't punchin' a clock'), but admits with some remorse that

his victims are usually regular black folk in the hood. Unless conditions change, he insists, neighborhood crime will continue to be a way of life" (*Race Rebels* 195). Tommy's hustle—like M. C. Eiht's—is explicitly framed as a way of resisting wage labor (which, as Tommy recognizes, often turns out to be unwaged labor when you're black) and also involves taking advantage of some of the most vulnerable members of society. In a sense, Tommy refuses the system of capitalist *exploitation*, but in order to do so, he has to perform—not unlike a rapper—certain racial categories, generating value through the commodification of race itself, as opposed to labor power. Within this system, in other words, Tommy's value hinges largely on his ability to commodify his race by *performing* it according to dominant (i.e., white) expectations, rather than an ability to sell his (racialized) *labor* as his father did.

We might read Tommy's position, then, as one where he is excluded (partially by choice) from the market as a laborer 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" (12). To be racialized as Tommy is, in other words, is to be interpellated as a particular type of commodified subject. Aria Dean unpacks this notion a bit further:

> In the 'after-life of slavery,' as Christina Sharpe calls it, black people may not literally be bought and sold, but the logic of racial capitalism persists through embedded white supremacist ideologies. It's Hartman-esque ready-for-the-taking, where black people cannot lay serious claim to our selves or our own images—crystalized, for example, in this summer's prolonged scuffle over white American painter Dana Schutz's

> representation of the famous image of Emmett Till's mutilated body in the Whitney Biennial. As Jared Sexton reflected, 'What is taken to be black is taken for granted, openly available to all.' Perhaps not always immediately available as raw, manual labor, black people and blackness continue to embody a speculative and semiotic value thirsted after by a white marketplace.

In an interview with NPR's Sam Briger, LaValle has spoken of the fraught position that he, as a black writer, shares with his character Tommy Tester, pointing out that the Tommy Tester of 1920s Harlem, living the afterlife of 1860s slavery, is in fact modeled on 2010s Victor LaValle[5]:

> [O]n one level what 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, and so I wanted to funnel that into the book as, like, on some level that's what Tommy's doing.

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. In essence, what LaValle—and Tommy—must contend with is a market that interpellates racialized

[5] Sharpe: "In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (9).

subjects in order to sell them: In other words, a market that *produces* racial categories and identities in order to then *capitalize* on them. What these experiences of the market illustrate is that it is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to conceive of a deracinated capitalism. Under racial capitalism, LaValle will always be a "*black* writer" and Tommy will always be a "*black* musician," and, fight it as they might, this will inevitably become a component of their value (or lack thereof) on the market. Far from flattening social relations in an unraced sphere of exchange, the market is shown to be a key engine of racialization—precisely because *race* drives *profit*—and not merely at its moment of inception. Rather, racialization functions as an ongoing project of primitive accumulation—or, as Iyko Day puts it, "a persistent structure" (quoted in Dean)—producing racialized bodies that can be commodified and converted to capital.

This highlights some important dynamics of racial capitalism. For instance, we see that race is not simply a means of differentiating *labor* value (i.e., as justification for paying racialized workers less) but that race is *itself* a form of value—which has, of course, always been the case: As Robin Kelley reminds us, chattel slavery was not the *exploitation* of *labor* through a wage relation—it was the *ownership* of *property* ("What is Racial Capitalism"). As a dissident and racialized subject, then, Tommy cannot identify with a reductively Marxist proletariat whose status is structured primarily by the wage relation, precisely because this relation is not extended to him in the same way that is to white workers. But, again, this is more than simply an issue of a divided *working class*—i.e., in the sense that blacks and whites ultimately occupy the same structural relation to capital. Rather, racial capitalism assigns value to race itself *outside* of a strictly labor relation. 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" or revolutionary subjectivity capable of

confronting racial capitalism (225). As Wilderson argues, a classically understood proletariat, structured fundamentally by exploitation, cannot account for the positionality of racialized subjects whose primary structuring relation to capital is not simply *wage* slavery but the afterlife of *chattel* slavery. It is for this reason that, in Wilderson's view, "the hegemonic advances within civil society by the Left hold out no more possibility for black life than the coercive backlash of political society" (229). What afro-pessimists like Wilderson tend to argue is that, because of the structurally distinct subject positions occupied black persons, a revolutionary project centered 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-centered revolutionary struggle and black positionality is played out allegorically in *The Ballad of Black Tom*, specifically in the tension between the characters of Tommy Tester and Robert Suydam. Suydam, the antagonist from Lovecraft's original story, first appears in LaValle's story as an eager listener. Tommy is in Flatbush, doing his jazzman routine, when Suydam approaches, compliments Tommy's "git-fiddle," and with little hesitation offers Tommy $500 to play at his home for a party he will be hosting in three days. (By way of comparison, "Otis Tester had never made more than nine hundred in a year" [20].) Tommy is incredulous, but accepts $100 as a retainer before Suydam turns and walks away. Almost as soon as Suydam is out of sight, Tommy is accosted by two police officers—Thomas 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, as it turns out, is part of an ongoing investigation—one that readers of Lovecraft's story will be familiar with. Tommy plays dumb with the officers and they ultimately let him go.

Upon returning home, Tommy tells his father about his upcoming gig and the money he's been promised. Otis, naturally, is skeptical. He's seen how white people exploit black people and knows that his son is no talented musician either. Otis warns Tommy that Suydam is hiding something and, of course, Tommy already knows this: "His whole hustle—*entertainment*—was predicated on the idea that people had ulterior motives for hiring him…. [H]e knew the role bestowed a kind of power on him. Give people what they expect and you can take from them all you need. They won't realize you've juiced them until they're dry" (32). Tommy believes that, despite Suydam's wealth and status, he will be able to "juice" him like he has many others before.

Three days later, Tommy goes to Suydam's house for the party, encountering both far less and far more than he had bargained for. His first discovery is that there is no party—at least not until the next night. But Suydam wants to hear Tommy play before the main event. Suydam takes Tommy to his library and, after a little while, tells Tommy that he can see through his whole 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. I felt a kinship with you, I suppose. Because I, too, understand illusion" (46). Suydam goes on to tell Tommy about his long study of esoteric, occult knowledges. He speaks of "a King who sleeps at the bottom of the ocean" and, out of nowhere it seems, the windows of the mansion begin to shift their colors (50). Soon Tommy is gazing out the window at what appears to be the ocean. Suydam tells Tommy,

> The return of the Sleeping King would mean the end of your people's wretchedness. The end of all the wreck and squalor of a billion lives. When he rises, he wipes away the follies of mankind. And he is only one of many. They are the Great Old Ones. Their footfalls cause mountains to topple. One gaze strikes ten million bodies dead. But

> imagine the fortunes of those of us who were allowed to survive? The reward for those of us who helped the sleeping king wake? (50)

Suydam gestures to the window and now Tommy can see, in the depths of what is undoubtedly an ocean, a massive shape stirring. Deeply unsettled and wishing no part in this crazed white man's occult revolution, Tommy attempts to flee the house. He runs to the library door and is startled to find, on the other side, Detective Malone, standing with his gun drawn. Even more surprisingly, the room in which Malone stands is not Suydam's hall but rather in the lobby of an apartment building: "It was as if the two locations—mansion and tenement lobby—had been stitched together by a haphazard tailor, Tommy Tester and Detective Malone facing each other because of a bad splice in reality's fabric" (52). In a panic, Suydam slams the door and demands to know what Tommy has seen, afraid that Tommy has encountered the Sleeping King directly. He explains that they cannot open the doors until morning due to the much worse things that they might encounter on the other side.

Over the course of the night, Suydam explains to Tommy what he has just seen. The library, Suydam says, "travels beyond human perceptions, human limitations of space, and even time…. Tonight we've traveled quite far, though it seemed to you we were always in Flatbush. We weren't. We went to the shadow-haunted *Outside*" (56). Suydam rattles off the names of various cosmic entities—including the Sleeping King's "true name" (56)—in what readers familiar with Lovecraft will recognize as, more or less, an exposition of Lovecraftian cosmology, the mention of the Sleeping King's true name an oblique reference to Cthulhu. But Suydam goes beyond simply naming gods and other entities, delving directly into Lovecraft's philosophy of cosmic pessimism: "How much did this stone matter to you, before you picked it up to use it on those boys who followed you?" Suydam asks Tommy, indicating a stone Tommy had intended to

use for self-defense against a group of boys he had encountered on his way to Suydam's home (57). Suydam goes on:

> That's how little humanity's silly struggles matter to the Sleeping King. When he returns, all the petty human evils, such as the ones visited on your people, will be swept away by his mighty hand. Isn't that marvelous? And what will become of those of us who are left? The ones who helped him. Think of the rewards. I know you're a man who believes in such things, and you're smart enough to make sure they come to you. (57)

In this brief exposition of Lovecraftian cosmicism, we should note two oddities in Suydam's logic. First, there is something strange about his metaphor. Much like Lovecraft, Suydam describes human existence as—from the cosmic perspective—deeply insignificant, little more than a tool to be used by greater beings until it is no longer needed. And yet, he also believes that these cosmic beings will have reason to reward the humans who have helped them after their job is complete. If humanity is indeed no more important to the Sleeping King than a stone is to Tommy, then why does Suydam believe he will be rewarded? Who, after all, rewards a stone that they've thrown? But Suydam goes further than this. After articulating his own belief in a coming reward, Suydam claims that Tommy is also "a man who believes in such things" (57). This feels quite presumptive, particularly given Tommy's earlier acknowledgement that, if you were black, "[l]ess money and erratic pay *were* the job" (18) and that "this world wasn't trying to make a Negro rich" (19). Tommy knows that, as much as he might deserve to be fairly compensated for his work, the world doesn't 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, who was lucky to receive regular wages at all. Suydam, however, is a wealthy white man. When he enters into an agreement, he expects that other parties

will fulfil their side of the bargain. (After all, Suydam has always had the privilege—whether consciously or not—of relying on the power of the state, the legal system, the criminal justice system, and the police force to back up his contracts and ensure their enforcement.) Suydam, in his privileged position, cannot fathom that the Sleeping King's revolution is unlikely to be a revolution *for him*.

LaValle's version of Suydam thus offers us something that Lovecraft's does not. In Lovecraft's original story, Suydam represents something purely evil. Not only does he seek to call upon the Old Ones in his quest for power, but he does so in collaboration with immigrants and minorities (those racialized others who, throughout Lovecraft's corpus, make up the "cult of Cthulhu"). Suydam is, in Lovecraft's view, a man who civilized society should fear, both due to his aims and his associations. LaValle's version of the story, while narratively consistent with Lovecraft's, offers a very different perspective. While Suydam is presented as a sketchy figure—luring Tommy to his home under false pretenses and dabbling in all sorts of 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 change the world for the better, to save Tommy and others from the "mazes of hybrid squalor"[6] in which they are forced to live (47). He believes the Sleeping King will wipe away human evils, "such as the ones visited on [Tommy's] people" (57).

[6] Lovecraft uses this phrase in his original story to describe the Red Hook district—highlighting its racial hybridity, its poverty, and its dinginess. LaValle lifts the phrase from Lovecraft's text—along with a few others—and places it in the mouth of Suydam. In this transposition, the phrase thus shifts from an expression of disgust to one of pity.

In a sense, Suydam's aims feel just and egalitarian, if a bit misguided and white-saviorish. He wants to rid the world of human evils, particularly those of systemic racism. But at the same time, Suydam presents himself as a politician of sorts, seeking to *represent* Tommy and "his people" in the coming revolution. He wants a revolution, but in order for this revolution to happen, he needs support—black and minority support—and thus he must pander to perceived black and minority interests. His attempt to gain Tommy's support reads almost like the Brotherhood's attempt to gain the support of the Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: "I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same—except now I recognized my invisibility" (508). Suydam *does* offer the possibility of revolutionary change—and Tommy never seems to doubt the revolutionary *potential* of Suydam's plan—but at the same time Tommy seems to know, deep down, that Suydam's revolution won't be a revolution *for him*.[7] While Suydam promises rewards—perhaps in earnest or perhaps not—Tommy knows that he is little more than a tool in Suydam's grand scheme.

In any event, as dawn breaks Suydam finishes his revolutionary pitch and gives Tommy another two hundred dollars, telling Tommy to return for the real party the next day. With cash

[7] Frank Wilderson uses a scenario about meat-packing workers revolting against their exploitative bosses to illustrate a similar idea, asking what good a proletarian revolution is for those outside the proletariat (for, in other words, those whose status is reduced to a type of commodity): "For the sake of our scenario—the impact of a war of position on our hypothetical meat packing plant—let us not refer to the question as 'the negro question'. Instead, let's call it the 'cow question'. Let us suppose that… hegemony has now been called into question and a war of position has now been transposed into a war of maneuver…. [S]till we must ask, what about the cows? The cows are not being exploited, they are being accumulated and, if need be, killed…. Nowhere in Gramsci can one find sufficient reassurance that, once the dream of worker exploitation has been smashed—once the superstructure, civil society, has 'flowered' and the question of hegemony has been posed—the dream of black accumulation and death will be thrown into crisis as well…. [H]ow would the cows fare under a dictatorship of the proletariat? Would cows experience freedom at the mere knowledge that they're no longer being slaughtered in an economy of exchange predicated on exploitation? In other words, would it feel more like freedom to be slaughtered by a workers' collective where there was no exploitation, where the working day was not a minute longer than the time it took to reproduce workers' needs and pleasures, as opposed to being slaughtered in the exploitative context of that dreary old nine to five?" (233).

in hand, Tommy leaves Suydam's house, deeply shaken by what he experienced in the library: "He kept expecting to set one foot off the porch and fall right into an ocean where the Sleeping King waited. And why couldn't this happen? That's what paralyzed him. If all the rest could be true, then why not so much else?" (57). On a certain level, Tommy's paralysis is not unlike that of most Lovecraft protagonists: Having encountered the cosmically dreadful, their entire sense of reality is disrupted. As Tommy explicitly reflects, if this experience was true, then what other unbelievable things might also be true? Significantly, however, Tommy doesn't take it quite as badly as Lovecraft's protagonists often do. When Lovecraft's protagonists encounter the weird, their responses often verge on absolute paralysis: Unable to function with this new knowledge, they often go mad in their attempts to convince themselves that what they've seen was simply an illusion. Tommy, however, shrugs the whole matter off without too much difficulty: He looks at the two hundred dollars in his hand, thinks about the nice meal he plans to buy later that night, and moves on, intending never to see Suydam again: "Whatever Suydam had planned meant less than nothing to him. Let the old man have his magic" (58). For Tommy, the "Outside," however strange and unbelievable it might be, is nothing to lose oneself over. The mundane world has enough horrors of its own, and Tommy soon encounters a horror far more devastating than any "Outside" Suydam could possibly show him.

Returning home, Tommy is stopped outside his apartment 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 one of his deliveries, the police had come to investigate. As Mr. Howard describes the situation, "I approached the home at approximately seven this morning… 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" (63). Otis, rather, had been holding a guitar.

Tommy is distraught but remains outwardly calm, both due to a sense of shock and knowing full well the brutal consequences that any display of emotion might bring about: "A fire ran through his body, but he couldn't show it" (61). 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" (62). Howard's refusal to see Tommy as human reflects the type of ontological perversity I explored in the previous chapter: the human-but-not. It reminds us, too, that the concept of the human is both an exclusionary and prescriptive concept, an overrepresentation of white, western, bourgeois "Man." As Howard speaks, Tommy contemplates taking the stone out of his pocket and bashing both men's skulls open, but remains frozen in shock. All he can do is stand and listen to the policemen degrade him and his father. After a few moments, Malone goes so far as to blame Tommy for his father's death: "[Y]ou weren't home when Mr. Howard arrived….[Y]our father was left vulnerable" (65). Tommy begins to fume and finally asks Mr. Howard directly, "How many times did you shoot my father?" (65). Howard responds, "I felt in danger for my life…. I emptied my revolver. Then I reloaded and did it again" (65).

For both Tommy and LaValle's readers, this devastating yet all-too-familiar scene quickly undermines the cosmic horror of the previous scene at Suydam's home. 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 an "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" (*Ontological Terror* 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. As I argued in the last chapter, following Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton, derogatory utterances such as these "express a structure of power and domination, a hierarchy that that contextualizes them and gives them their force" (13). This structure of power and domination is not merely social or political, but ontological, grounded in the fact that western metaphysics constructs being itself in opposition to black flesh. Howard's statement does not simply *offend*: It invokes and expresses an ontological hierarchy. What Howard expresses is 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." As Warren explains,

> A deep abyss, or a *terrifying question*, engenders the declaration "Black Lives Matter." The declaration, in fact, conceals this question even as it purports to have answered it resolutely. "Black Lives Matter," then, carries a certain terror in its dissemination, a terror we dare to approach with uncertainty, urgency, and exhaustion. This question pertains to the 'metaphysical infrastructure,' as Nahum Chandler might call it, that conditions our world and our thinking about the world…. [C]an blacks have life? What would such life *mean* in an antiblack world? What axiological measurement determines

> the mattering of the life in question? Does the assembly of these terms shatter philosophical coherence or what metaphysical infrastructure provides stability, coherence, and intelligibility for the declaration? (*Ontological Terror* 1)

The very *terrestrial* horror Tommy faces through the murder of his father is, in a remarkable sense, not unlike to the *cosmic* horror that Lovecraft evokes in his work: In both instances, the encounter with the horrific thing 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* decentered, being *made* insignificant, and having one's privileged metaphysical status *revoked*, ontological terror involves the expression of the fact that one has never been centered or significant in the first place, that this ontological hierarchy is imbedded in western metaphysics itself. As Christina Sharpe puts it, "The ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary; it *is* the ground we walk on…. What happens when we proceed as if we *know* this, antiblackness, to be the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we attempt to speak, for instance, an 'I' or a 'we' who know, an 'I' or a 'we' who care?" (7). The fact that, in 2019, 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. The fact that, also 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 the very real ontological hierarchy at play (Harriot). While there are more than enough physical terrors embedded in these scenes, the *ontological* terror here is that black lives are quite clearly disposable and less valuable than white lives: hardly even "lives" at all.

Tommy's thoughts thus return to Suydam and the Sleeping King. Suydam had spoken of cosmic indifference as such a great terror. He had explained that the Sleeping King thinks nothing of humanity and will ultimately destroy it. And yet, having experienced this absolute dehumanization and hostility through the murder of his father, Tommy realizes that indifference could only be a relief: "A fear of cosmic indifference suddenly seemed comical, or downright naïve…. What was indifference compared to malice?" (66). For his whole life, Tommy has lived in a world structured by anti-blackness, a world that requires his less-than-humanness, and a world in which he is the perpetual object of hatred and malice. He is regularly harassed by police and his father has now been murdered by them, all with impunity. 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 has no assurance he would get paid. He could hustle a few dollars, but has no assurance that he would be allowed to keep it. He could stay home and play guitar, but with no promise he wouldn't 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 on Tommy, he realizes that cosmic indifference could *only* be a relief. In a truly indifferent cosmos, after all, the human is *nothing*—clusters of atoms floating through space—and the human-but-not disappears along with the human. No thing is privileged above any other thing. Compared to the ontological terror of anti-blackness, the cosmic terror of indifference is a welcome improvement.

Shaken by his father's death, Tommy thus decides that there may be something for him in Suydam's revolution after all, and he returns to Suydam's mansion for the party. As before, he is brought to the library, this time along with a large number of other guests (the vast majority of whom are also racial minorities). The windows fill with the ocean and, once again, Tommy

listens to Suydam's revolutionary exhortations: "The Sleeping King. The end of this current order, its civilization of subjugation. The end of man and all his follies. Extermination by indifference…. When the Sleeping King awakes, he will reward us with dominion of this world" (76). This world, however, will be Suydam's: "I will guide you in this new world!... And in me you will finally find a righteous ruler!" (76). Tommy watches Suydam speak, and realizes now with certainty that there is nothing in this revolution for him: "Maybe yesterday the promise of a reward in this new world could've tempted Tommy, but today such a thing seemed worthless. Destroy it all, then hand what was left over to Robert Suydam and these gathered goons? What would they do differently? Mankind didn't make messes; mankind was the mess" (76). With this realization, Tommy smashes his guitar and—as Suydam screams for him to stop—walks through the library doors towards whatever awaits on the other side.

As Tommy walks through the door, we get no narration of his interiority. As a result, there are a number of ways we might interpret this: Is Tommy's action simply a cosmic way of committing suicide? Or does he believe that something might be gained by waking the Sleeping King before Suydam does? Or is this simply a means of fleeing this hostile world for an indifferent Outside? Ultimately, his motivations are never explicitly given, but in a sense, we might answer *yes* to all three of the preceding questions. The Outside is, after all, an unknown place, likely full of horrific dangers. Tommy knows he might die and has accepted it. Perhaps he is willfully beckoning this possibility. On the other hand, Tommy is aware that he might, in one way or another, find power on the other side. After all, Suydam has been preaching this possibility incessantly, so why not beat Suydam to it? But there's also the chance that this is merely an escape, a withdrawal from this world into another one—a world that, at the very least, might be indifferent to Tommy: A world where, to put it somewhat bluntly, no lives matter.

What all three options have in common, though, is a nihilistic rejection of both the status quo and Suydam's revolutionary project (which, revolutionary as it might appear, promises to reinstitute certain elements of the status quo: the human, the nation, the state). And perhaps as a testament to the nihilism of Tommy's gesture, the distinction between these three logics doesn't ultimately matter: Whatever the reason, Tommy has actively and willfully chosen to reject the world entirely.

It is apparent that, as much as he tries, Suydam can't actually conceptualize cosmic indifference—precisely because even in an indifferently hostile cosmos, Suydam believes he can strategically keep himself at the center—and that Tommy, on the other hand, understands both indifference and hostility, knowing full well that you don't get to choose your place in an indifferent cosmos. Suydam does not understand, as Tommy later puts it, that "the Sleeping King doesn't honor small requests" (129). Tommy is *actually* ready to bring about the end of the world. Suydam only *thinks* he is. It's precisely for this reason that Tommy can see the *value* in Suydam's proposition, but it's a value that Suydam himself cannot recognize because he is unable or unwilling to go the full distance. In a corresponding way, I would like to suggest that LaValle sees a value in Lovecraft's work, but that, likewise, it is a value that Lovecraft himself cannot recognize.

With this step into the unknown, Tommy begins his embrace of monstrosity and his transformation into Black Tom. As I will suggest momentarily, Tommy's embrace of the weird—and, in it, his rejection of the realistic—represents just one vantage through which LaValle helps us to read a response to the metaphysics inscribed by racial capitalism. Specifically, I'd like to suggest that LaValle's text helps to furnish an image of what we might call "weird subjectivity" or "becoming-monstrous." In a world where realism itself is

fundamental to structures of exploitation, domination, and dehumanization, LaValle's narrative helps us to think what it might mean to get weird and to embrace the monstrous.

**Part 2: Embracing the Weird: Against (Racial) Capitalist Realism**

As I argued in the previous chapter, it seems to be no accident that, in the work of Lovecraft, it is often racialized others who prefigure the arrival of cosmic monstrosity because, after all, the dehumanizing function of racialization constructs racialized others as impossible figures—human-but-not—whose existence as such contradicts the very logics by which we parse the world. *The Ballad of Black Tom* is largely structured on this recognition: Tommy Tester, made a monster by society, embraces this monstrous nature, becoming Black Tom. Like Lovecraft's monsters, Black Tom becomes an image of cosmic alterity—that which confounds the categories through which we parse (and produce) reality. Not unlike ecological catastrophe or Cthulhu (or COVID-19?)[8], Black Tom becomes a horror that is larger than life and that rips through the invisible barrier of (racial) capitalist realism. And yet, to read this becoming-monster properly, it's important to understand it within its generic context. After all, the monster of weird fiction is a unique type of monster.

The work of Mark Fisher is useful for thinking through the relation between the weird and the realistic, a relation that is fundamental to the genre of cosmic horror. In his posthumously published book *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), Fisher describes the weird as a "particular kind of aesthetic experience" (61) marked, perhaps most centrally, by "a preoccupation with the strange" (8). Distinguishing the weird from common understandings of the horrific, Fisher writes, "The allure that the weird… possess[es] is not captured by the idea that we 'enjoy what

[8] See the footnote 9.

scares us'. It has, rather, to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies *beyond perception, cognition and experience*" (8-9, emphasis mine). As Fisher describes it, drawing on Lovecraft's influential work on the concept, the weird represents an intrusion into our reality by "that *which does not belong*" (13).

Crucially, it is not merely our space that is intruded upon and disrupted, but also the very categories by which we've come to understand what constitutes "reality" (categories like capital, race, and the human). The weird *does not belong* and yet nevertheless *is*: It arrives to us as an apparent contradiction and a conundrum. And yet, Fisher reminds us that the weird thing is not the contradictory thing. Rather, the weird appears as a contradiction because it *exposes* the flaws in our categorical frameworks. As Fisher writes, "The weird here is a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete…. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate" (13, 15). In a world where reality itself has been circumscribed by racial capitalist logic—a logic which has proven time and again to bring about ecological and human catastrophe—we are in desperate need of such an intrusion.

Here I find Fisher's notion of "capitalist realism" to offer another useful optic. In his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher argues that our present moment is marked by an overwhelming and "widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). Fisher calls this prevailing sense "capitalist realism" and argues that capitalism has itself become congruent with what we call the realistic, that, in other words, "[c]apitalist realism is not a particular type of realism; it is more like realism in itself" (4). This sense of capitalist realism is

perhaps best figured in the fact that Margaret Thatcher's famous slogan—"there is no alternative"—today seems more or less taken for granted.[9]

I am interested in taking up Fisher's conception of capitalist realism, but inflecting it with an attention to the deeply racialist structure of capitalism. While I do not read Fisher as committed to an overly reductive class analysis—i.e., that racial disparities are merely reflections of more fundamentally economic ones—it is nevertheless true that his account of capitalist realism does not give specific attention to the racial dynamics of capitalism. It is important, however, that these dynamics are not overlooked. After all, if capitalist realism involves the interpellation of capitalist subjects into a capitalist conception of reality and their position in it, it behooves us to recognize that capitalist subjects are also *racialized* subjects and that capitalist reality is deeply structured by (and reproductive of) race. For this reason, I wish to invoke a notion of *racial capitalist realism*, not as something distinct from capitalist realism, per se, but as a way of centering capitalism's racialized and racializing aspects: To take *capitalism* as congruent with realism, then, is also to take *racism* as congruent with realism.

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[9] Fisher argues that even among critics of capitalism—those who might wish to challenge Thatcher's slogan—a sense of capitalist realism largely prevails: Anti-capitalist activism resigns itself primarily to "resistance" efforts—limited attempts to ward off capitalism's most destructive excesses while nevertheless accepting the unfortunate truth that capitalism isn't going anywhere. In our own moment, rhetorics of "socialism" often seem to occupy a similar territory, invoking not an alternative to capitalism, just a slightly less oppressive version of it. It would thus seem that even opposition to capitalism has largely relegated itself to a reactionary and essentially conservative position, interested primarily in *reigning in* neoliberal excesses and perhaps *returning* to some lost welfare state model rather than *moving beyond* capitalism. While the end of capitalism may be a worthy goal (and while registering resistance to it still *feels* important), the capitalist realist is forced to admit that such a thing is naively idealistic. Fisher goes on to describe capitalist realism as something like "a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (16). The difficult question, then, is what it might take to break down this "invisible barrier" or, at the very least, to reveal that it is, in fact, a *barrier*—that it blocks off something *else*—while illuminating some of the cracks in it.

I might even suggest that COVID-19 has certainly—if only partially—contributed to the breaking down of this barrier. As governments scramble to prevent economic collapse, it becomes very apparent that capitalism is inept to maintain itself in the face of the present crisis—that, in our present moment (as, for example, oil prices plummet into the negative numbers), capitalism's solutions are hardly "realistic" or even logical at all. In moments such as these it becomes radically apparent that capitalism, deprived of government safety nets and left to its own devices, can only collapse upon itself.

Just as we are largely incapable of thinking a world beyond capitalism, so too we are largely incapable of thinking a world beyond race. With respect to both categories, it seems, we've accepted that "there is no alternative," that both capitalism and racism are simply matters of fact.[10] Racial capitalist realism, then, denotes not simply a *belief* about what is possible, but also the interpellation of capitalist and racialized *subjects*, whether outwardly begrudging or openly acquiescent ones.

While Fisher does not appear to make the connection himself, at least not explicitly, it seems that *the weird* might, accordingly, offer a helpful vantage vis-à-vis (racial) capitalist realism. After all, if capitalist realism circumscribes and conditions "perception, cognition and experience," then perhaps the weird can furnish tools to think beyond this circumscription. I would like to suggest that, in general, the genre of weird fiction provides a privileged site for thinking about capitalist realism—and specifically racial capitalist realism—precisely because the weird is fundamentally about producing ruptures in (if not fully undermining) our notions of what is realistic. If our sense of the real and of ourselves is fundamentally structured by racial capitalism, then perhaps weird fiction can offer a means of thinking beyond the realistic and of producing ruptures in the logic of capitalist realism that reveal, to use Lacan's term, a *Real*

[10] I wish to briefly point out that my slippage between the terms "race" and "racism" is quite purposeful here. After all, the existence of race implies racism—specifically in the sense of a *structure* (i.e., "systemic racism") if not also in the sense of a prejudicial *attitude*—and, as I understand these terms, they cannot be separated. If, as Alexander Weheliye argues, race is *fundamentally* about the unequal distribution of "humanness" and its privileges, then it is impossible to imagine race without racism. Many would of course argue that antiracism is fundamentally about racial *acceptance*—that, in other words, we can abolish prejudices without abolishing race itself. (Such a logic often underpins liberal appeals to "diversity" and what have you.) However, such arguments fail to acknowledge that race is not fundamentally a *biological* property (even while it attaches itself to certain biological properties) but, rather, a *social* one, and that race expresses at its core a hierarchy of privilege and status. Race does not, in other words, indicate simply a *type* of difference—whether construed in terms of skin tone or any other property—but, rather, a *stratification* of difference. This is why, as Noel Ignatiev writes, "[Whiteness] is nothing but a reflection of privilege, and exists for not reason other than to defend it. Without the privileges attached to it, the white race would not exist, and white skin would have no more social significance than big feet" (99-100). This is also why race changes over time, for instance, if we look to the changing nature of "whiteness" (or lack thereof) attributed to Irish people. In the same way that, as I stress throughout this dissertation, humanness is not the same as sapience, similarly race is not the same as biology—both terms, ultimately, invoke a hierarchy.

beyond the symbolic order of reality. We might, in other words, choose not to *fear* the weird but, rather, to *beckon* it.

Within the genre of weird fiction, this *desire* for the weird pushes somewhat against the grain. And certainly, while the intrusion of the weird upon the normal represents the possibility of something new and compelling, it would be a mistake to view this irruption through overly rose-colored lenses. While protagonists of the genre often seek out the weird, pulled forward by a mixture of fear and fascination, the actual encounter with the weird is always figured as utterly devastating. The outside is full of violence, destruction, monsters, and unknowns. To beckon the weird is to invite the possibility of something new, yes, but with it the possibility of terrors. As Fisher puts it, "I am not here claiming that the outside is always beneficient. There are more than enough terrors to be found there; but such terrors are not all there is to the outside" (9). This is precisely where *The Ballad of Black Tom* offers a privileged vantage. In a world like Tommy Tester's, where mundane reality is itself an absolute terror, the Outside—the weird—presents itself as a possibility, all risks included. As Tommy puts it, "I'll take Cthulhu over you devils any day" (143).

As I've already shown in Chapter 1, race—and, more broadly, corporeal semiotics—is central to Lovecraft's brand of weird fiction. However, this obsession with the semiotics of bodies is not unique to Lovecraft and finds expression in both the writings of his contemporaries as and the visual aesthetics associated with the genre. As Brooks Hefner points out, "[T]he magazine *Weird Tales*, the most famous venue for weird writers like H. P. Lovecraft, regularly featured covers depicting imperiled white women, often cowering in the face of some supernatural—and frequently ethnicized or racialized—monster" (652). Despite the ubiquity of

such representations, however, contemporary critics and fiction writers have, I think, often misunderstood the role that race plays in weird fiction, and this is reflected in the two critical-literary tendencies I explored in the last chapter: on the one hand, the urge to humanize racialized/monsterized others and, on the other hand, the attempt simply to purge the weird tale of its discourse on race. In the former approach, race is taken to be *not* authentically weird—the racialized other is not *weird* in the sense that it does not disrupt our categories of reality and, therefore, we must understand the presence of racist tropes within weird fiction as not a function of the logic of the genre but, rather, an unfortunate product of authorial prejudices. This humanist approach, then, involves *maintaining* the categories by which we've understood reality—most fundamentally, the human—and *incorporating* the weird object into these categories: The racialized monster is human after all. This is precisely why such humanist projects rarely come across as actually "weird": The basic motive is usually to "un-weird" and domesticate monstrosity. The cosmicist approach to the question of race in weird fiction is, however, simply to remove race from the equation altogether, ultimately drawing on a similar assumption that the racialized monster is not a necessary component of the tale's weirdness. In both instances, the critical perspective seems to be that, while Lovecraft and others may have framed their cosmic horror in terms of racialized otherness, this is a contingent—rather than necessary—detail: There is no real connection between the racialized other and the cosmically horrific thing; rather, Lovecraft and his ilk were just racists.

*The Ballad of Black Tom* offers a strong challenge to these assumptions, suggesting that there *is* something cosmically horrific—something weird—about the racialized other; that, in fact, the racialized other already 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. The racialized other is *weird* in that it upends our fundamental categories—specifically, the category of the human. In relation to this category—arguably *the* fundamental category upon which reality is constructed (after all, where does every chain of signification end if not at the human?)—there is no place for the racialized other, for that which is human-but-not. In this sense, the racialized other is, indeed, cosmically horrific: It destabilizes the category of the human and, with it, the structure of reality itself. It is in this sense that Calvin Warren argues, "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" (239). Reality itself is structured upon a contradiction and in LaValle's version of cosmic horror, that contradiction is made flesh in the black body.

In my reading, this is what sets LaValle's work apart from much of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction. While an anxiety about racism is pervasive throughout such works, very few manage to account for role of race in structuring thought and reality itself. In doing so, these works displace the problem of race rather than attending to it. LaValle's work demonstrates that, when we think the weird in relation to racial capitalist realism—which is to say realism itself—the racialized other becomes visible as the weird thing that undermines our categories and frameworks. Rather than attempting to normalize the weird, as is part and parcel of the humanist attempt to rescue the racialized other, LaValle chooses to *accelerate* this weirdness, embracing the weird not as an *object* to be feared but, rather, as a revolutionary *subject*.

**Part 3: Becoming Inhuman, Becoming Impossible: Nihilism, Monstrosity, and the Cruel Optimism of the Human**

In his *Horror of Philosophy* trilogy, Eugene Thacker takes up the genre of cosmic horror as, broadly speaking, a somewhat paradoxical attempt to think the unthinkable world. It's not difficult to trace this motif throughout the works of Lovecraft, which tend to pivot on enigmatic encounters with phenomena that language and, indeed, thought itself are inept to explain or even describe. Thacker calls this ineffable world the "world-without-us," setting it in contrast to both the "world-for-us" and the "world-in-itself." In Thacker's schema, the *world-for-us* refers to "the world that we, as human beings, interpret and give meaning to, the world that we relate to or feel alienated from" (*Dust* 4). The world-for-us is constituted in the fact that, materially speaking, the world and its components are made to service human needs and desires and that, intellectually speaking, this world is been parsed and given meaning through human concepts and categories. We might think of the world-for-us, then, as simply a term to describe reality as we use it and know it: "our world." And yet, as Thacker points out, this world we inhabit sometimes "bites back," resisting our attempts to categorize, manipulate, or understand it (4). Thacker calls this confounding and often hostile world the *world-in-itself*. This latter concept, however, is something of a paradox for, as Thacker notes, "the moment we think and attempt to act on it, it ceases to become the world-in-itself and becomes the world-for-us" (5): When our categories are confounded, we develop new taxonomies; when natural disasters threaten human life, we learn to predict and avoid them. After all, even to describe the world-in-itself as "biting back" is to think this world in terms of its relation to "us." It seems evident, then, that any encounter we might have with the world-in-itself cannot last: The world quickly and inevitably becomes, whether materially or conceptually, the world-for-us.

However, as the genre of cosmic horror constantly reminds us, there is a world—a cosmos—beyond the human and, as Thacker notes, though we can never truly experience that world, we are "almost fatalistically drawn to it" (5). We develop predictive models to imagine what the world would be like if humans were extinct (and, for that matter, how long it will take for climate change to produce that inevitability), and through science fiction or horror narratives we aim to imagine how an unhuman world might function or what the unhuman corners of the universe already look like. This speculative world, a world that always exists beyond the horizon of human encounter, is what Thacker calls the *world-without-us*. This world is quite literally unthinkable because, as soon as it is thought, it has already been cast in human terms. It is this unthinkable and unspeakable world that, somewhat paradoxically, is the subject of cosmic horror—and, for both Lovecraft and Thacker, the subject of any horror truly deserving of the name.

Thacker sees the value of cosmic horror, then, in its capacity to think philosophically about precisely that which philosophy—or, more generally speaking, the *human*ities—cannot account, observing that "genre horror… takes aim at the presuppositions of philosophical inquiry—that the world is always for us—and makes of those blind spots its central concern" (*Dust* 9) and that "genres such as the horror genre… cause us to question some of our most basic assumptions about the knowledge-production process itself, or about the hubris of living in the human-centric world in which we currently live" (*Tentacles* 11). As countless commentators have already observed, the works of Lovecraft repeatedly stage otherworldly encounters aimed at exposing the hubris of anthropocentrism. As Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee, the narrator of "The Shadow Out of Time," declares as he prefaces his horrifying tale, "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 paralyzing" (335). For Lovecraft, the ultimate effect of any cosmic encounter—which Peaslee can identify only in such vague terms as "the thing"—is the absolute displacement of the human. Indeed, as Peaslee's tale demonstrates, these "notions of the cosmos" cannot actually be "accepted" by the human because, after all, their merest "mention" results in paralysis. The cosmic perspective contained in these notions effectively negates the human, and thus to accept these notions *as a human* is impossible, just as to encounter the world-without-us *as a human* is impossible: If somehow I think it, then therefore I am not.

However, while we may not be able to *think* the world-without-us, we can think our failure to do so, and in Thacker's account, cosmic horror makes this inevitable failure of thought—the limit of thought or rationality itself—its central concern. As Thacker puts it, "[W]hile we cannot fully comprehend this non-object, this nothing, we can, at the very least, comprehend this incomprehension—we can think the failure of thought" (*Tentacles* 117). It is precisely by thinking this failure that cosmic horror approaches the unthinkable world. This is why, in Lovecraft, we rarely encounter the cosmic directly—instead, we encounter the traumatic effects of its very incomprehensibility—and when we do encounter it, we can only ever do so partially and through flawed and limited mediation: a color, a shape, a strange geometry, a thing. In the face of such horrors, Thacker writes, "Language falters, as does thought" (*Tentacles* 5). The world-without-us cannot co-exist with the world-for-us and thus, when the two collide, either the world-without-us must disappear—whether through illusion, trickery, death, or madness—or we must.

While I find Thacker's tripartite schema useful for explaining the project of cosmic horror, I would like to suggest, first, that a critical reading of Lovecraft problematizes this

schema and, second, that LaValle's narrative pivots on precisely this problematic. Ultimately, while Lovecraft's work can be read productively in terms of the world-for-us and its shadowy other, it is also apparent that Lovecraft (and, to an extent, Thacker) takes the identity and coherence of this "us" for granted. Much like the overrepresentation of the "white, western Man" which Sylvia Wynter argues constitutes the human, the world-for-us is, ultimately, the world for the white, western, cis, straight, bourgeois, male human. It should be no surprise, then, that Lovecraft repeatedly invokes the world-without-us through images of racialized otherness. Human-but-not, these characters exist (temporarily) in a liminal space that enables them to mediate cosmic alterity to "us," but never, of course, to become one of "us."

Perhaps paradoxically, then, Lovecraft's supposedly profound decentering of the human functions through a re-centering of whiteness: After all, only the centered can be decentered, and those who occupy the periphery will always constitute a potential threat that very centeredness. A periphery that cannot be controlled or subjugated—forcibly made, that is, into a world-for-us—can only be described as the world-without-us. Such a fact is perhaps no more clearly demonstrated than in Lovecraft's posthumously published "Medusa's Coil," which takes place on a former plantation. At one point the narrator, remembering "as many as 200 negros in the cabins" laments those long lost days of "civilization and social order now sadly extinct." The narrative culminates in the horrific discovery that Marceline, the lover/muse-character who throughout the narrative has passed as white, is in fact, "though in deceitfully slight proportion… a negress." Though Marceline had appeared to be one of *us*, her true identity, once revealed, is unthinkable: Marceline, in all her cosmic monstrosity, thus represents this unthinkable world—the world-without-us. While Lovecraft's project, then, is to decenter the human through encounters with the radically unhuman, such encounters are only made legible through a

reproduction of the category of the (white, western, male) human.[11] After all, to experience the *horror* of realizing that the world is not for "us," one must first be in the position to assume that the world was ever for "us" in the first place.

It is precisely this tension that LaValle's narrative exploits. While LaValle's version of cosmic horror, like Lovecraft's, aims to challenge the presupposition that the world is *for humanity*, it does so from the perspective of a character who has been systematically deprived of his humanity—and, furthermore, a character in opposition to whom the category of the human is given its coherence. Tommy Tester never imagined that the world was *for him*, and this is precisely why he never imagines that Suydam's revolutionary apocalypse could be *for him*. Indeed, to be constituted as "black" is to be constituted not as someone for whom the world exists, but as simply a part of the world-for-"us": an object to be defined, appropriated, commodified, exploited, and used. The history of racial capitalism, and specifically the middle passage, is the history of this construction of blackness-as-object/commodity. In *The Ballad of Black Tom*, this positionality is cast in direct contrast to that of Suydam. Suydam, from his centered, white, human perspective, can only approach the world as the world-for-us. The world has always been *for* Suydam and those like him. While Suydam, then, cannot imagine a world that is not *for him*, Tommy Tester can hardly imagine one that is. In this, LaValle's narrative constitutes a serious challenge for the project of cosmic horror. If the central idea of cosmic horror is, as Thacker argues, "human characters confronted with the limit of the human"

[11] It's worth noting that the monster of "Medusa's Coil" is also one of the very few women featured in Lovecraft's work (I believe that his corpus features 3 in total). While the focus of this chapter is on racial politics—clearly a matter of fundamental concern to Lovecraft—the gender dynamics of Lovecraft's "us" are also important, precisely in that—in Lovecraft's fictional universe—women don't generally seem to exist.

(Tentacles 11), then what happens when the protagonist already exceeds this limit? What confrontation is there to stage?

Aria Dean sheds some light on this issue in her account of blacceleration. In Dean's account, the portmanteau "blacceleration" brings together "black" and "acceleration," not to name an acceleration for black people or something of that nature, but to highlight a certain strand of black radicalism that, in her argument, is capable of answering some of contemporary accelerationist theory's biggest quandaries.[12] The first and foremost of these has to do with the possibility of a "non-human intelligence" that might direct the acceleration of capital's deterritorializing tendencies towards the overcoming of capital itself. In Dean's view, both left-leaning and right-leaning forms of accelerationism fail due to their inability to respond adequately to the question of the human: The left seems incapable of moving beyond the human at all, and the right is interested in no agency other than capital itself. To maneuver beyond this binary, Dean offers blackness as a privileged perspective for thinking beyond the human. As Dean contends, "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—*

[12] It is beyond the scope of this project to provide a full account of accelerationism, particularly given the many (often contradictory) ways in which this general theoretical approach is taken up. However, to provide a very general (and admittedly reductive) summary: I understand accelerationism largely in terms of the broad claim that, to move beyond capitalism, we must accelerate all or some of its processes. While accelerationism did not really take off until the 1990s—with, for example, the unorthodox work of Warwick University's Cybernetic Culture Research Unit—early gestures towards this notion can be found, for instance, in Marx's claim that capitalism produces its own gravediggers and other attempts to think capitalism's production of its own demise. As Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian summarize, "Accelerationism is political heresy: the insistence not only that the radical political response to capitalism is not to protest, disrupt, or critique, nor to await its demise at the hands of its own contradictions, but to accelerate its uprooting, alienating, decoding, abstractive tendencies. The term was introduced into political theory to designate a certain nihilistic alignment of philosophical thought with the excesses of capitalist culture (or anticulture), embodied in writings that sought an immanence with this process of alienation. The uneasy status of this impulse, between subversion and acquiescence, between realist analysis and poetic exacerbation, has made accelerationism a fiercely-contested theoretical stance" (*#Accelerate*, 4). It is also notable, in this context, that Cedric Robinson conceives of racial capitalism as "a historical *agency*" (2, emphasis mine), as accelerationist theory tends to build from an assumption of capital's agentive nature—that capital, in a sense, has a mind of its own beyond the will or purposes of its functionaries and participants. See also: Land, Ccru, Srnicek and Williams, and Mackay and Avanessian.

*posture as universal*, and it is precisely these concepts which begin to disintegrate as they approach the black" (emphasis mine). We should note that, along with the human, concepts like the *world-for-us* and the *world-without-us* (and, well, *us*,) seem also to disintegrate as they approach the black. As Dean continues, "[B]eginning to think racial capitalism alongside accelerationism… insists on the non-allegorical existence of an inhuman subject, 'the black.'"

In Lovecraft's writing it is certainly true that blackness (and racialized otherness more generally) is cast as inhuman. While we might, as I've already suggested, chalk this up to Lovecraft's racial prejudices, offering a humanist corrective—no, "the black" *is* human—this isn't what LaValle does, nor is it, I think, an effective response to the problem. Resisting the tendency to humanize otherness, LaValle doubles down on Tommy Tester's inhumanity, first, through his dehumanizing encounter with Mr. Howard and, second, through his embrace of monstrosity. Human *being* is foreclosed for Tommy and, rather than pursuing some kind of assimilation or acceptance into this category, Tommy embraces his inhumanity and, in what Eve Dunbar calls a "monstrous turn," aligns himself with the world-without-us.

Drawing on McKenzie Wark's notion of black acceleration, Dean notes, "A specific tradition of black radical thought has long claimed the inhumanity—or we could say anti-humanism—of blackness as a fundamental and decisive feature, and philosophically part of blackness' gift to the world." I would like to suggest that, by undermining the genre's fundamental assumptions about the human, LaValle's novel offers us a gift as well: an entirely new schema for cosmic horror. Rather than a narrative that pivots on a distinction between the world-for-*us* and the world-without-*us*, *The Ballad of Black Tom* pivots on a distinction between the world-for-*you* and the world-without-*you*. The first-person subject of history is shifted into the second person. By divorcing itself from the notion of a coherent and singular "us," LaValle's

cosmic horror gestures towards something akin to Thacker's "world-without-us," but a version of it that does not reconstitute the "us" at the center. The world-without-*you*, in other words, is simply the world-without-*us* untethered from its human center, the "us" removed from the subject position and shifted to the margins, converted to a "you." The *subject* of LaValle's cosmic horror, in other words, is not "us." However, to have a "you" implies a subject (an "I") that speaks it. In the world-without-you, humanity is no longer that speaker or the agent of history to be decentered: Rather, humanity is *spoken* by that which is beyond it.

However, this shift from subject to object reveals something important about Thacker's schema. If, in the Lovecraftian cosmic horror narrative, the world-without-us is the most horrific thing, it can only be horrific insofar as the "us" remains coherent. From the perspective of the marginalized and dehumanized—those excluded from the "us"—the idea of a *world-without-us* is not the truly horrific thing: It is, rather, the *world-for-you* that terrifies. Suydam dreams of beckoning the world-without-us, but only to constitute a *new* world-for-us in its wake. But as Tommy recognizes, this new world-for-us is really only a world-for-Suydam: from Tommy's perspective, a world-for-*you*, not *us*. LaValle shows us that *humanity*'s truly unthinkable thought is, after all, not the world-without-*us*—which, after all, still relies on the concept of "us" to distinguish this "world"—but, rather, the world-*for-you* and the world-*without-you*. Such thoughts, after all, are literally unthinkable from the perspective of the human. Such thoughts can only be thought by a type of inhuman intelligence—an intelligence, at the very least, disarticulated from the human and its concerns and commitments. Black Tom, then, offers us something that Cthulhu and Azathoth and the fish people of Innsmouth cannot: Black Tom embodies not merely the world-without-us but the world-without-you. In this, Black Tom

becomes both a unique type of monster and a quintessentially *weird* one, disrupting even the categories by which we parse the genre of supernatural horror.

As I've already argued, one trend in contemporary revisionary Lovecraftian fiction is to humanize Lovecraft's monsters, assimilating them to normative categories of the human that make their value legible. Such a move is not, of course, unique to Lovecraftian or weird fiction. Horror fiction, after all, has long cast racialized, disabled, queer, indigenous, transgender, and otherwise non-normative persons as monsters, and many writers, as a corrective, have redeployed these tropes against the grain in order to expose and subvert this process of monsterization, either by humanizing the monsters or by offering the monsterizers their due comeuppance. Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks* is a particularly memorable example of both tactics. As we've seen in the previous chapter, contemporary Lovecraftian fiction has often attempted similar moves by taking up Lovecraft's racialized avatars—i.e., the "fish people" of Innsmouth—in an attempt to humanize them and expose the constructedness of their monstrosity. However, it is often true that this attempt to humanize—or, as Justin D. Edwards pointedly observes, to "domesticate" (72)—monsters often involves a stripping away not *only* of monstrosity, but also of the cosmic terror at the core of Lovecraft's work.[13]

Where writers of this ilk level a critique of Lovecraft by humanizing his monsters or punishing the monsterizers (i.e., Lovecraft himself), LaValle's narrative rejects this humanizing tendency, moving instead towards a *heightened* sense of monstrosity: In Part 1, we encounter in

[13] In this sense, we might read Black Tom's name as a nod to the most famous "Tom" of abolitionist literature: Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom. For Stowe, sentimental humanism is the response to racism: If we can read these narratives and collectively *feel* for the oppressed and marginalized, then we can redeem them. In this context, we might read Black Tom as a sort of *blackened* Uncle Tom: If Stowe's character emerges from a humanist attempt to generate sympathy for racialized others, LaValle's protagonist functions as quite the opposite, becoming *in*human and embracing monstrosity.

Tommy a protagonist with whom, presumably, readers will identify and who will be read as clearly human (seeing primarily the *human* in the human-but-not). In Part 2, however, LaValle shifts the point of view to that of Malone and proceeds to monsterize his protagonist right before our eyes (human, *but decidedly not*). Tommy Tester becomes Black Tom and, in doing so, he becomes mysterious, distant, powerful, and violent. In LaValle's narrative, I read Black Tom's monstrosity as, to borrow Eve Dunbar's phrase, "a radically different way of asserting black value." In light of humanism's assimilative and exclusionary tendencies, I'm interested in thinking monstrosity as a *positive* anti-humanist project, positive in the sense that it focuses not so much on that which is rejected—the human—but rather on the non-human forms of valuation the monster might offer. In my view, the monster of weird fiction occupies a privileged position in this respect, precisely because *weird* monstrosity is fundamentally about that which upends and renders inoperative the concepts and categories through which we have, up until this point, parsed reality. In all its weirdness, I read Tommy Tester's transformation as less about *negating* the human and more about *abandoning* the human (and all humanizing tendencies) for something radically different—becoming something (as yet) *unthinkable*, something (as we understand possibility) *impossible*.

However, as Part 2 progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify with the Black Tom—in part due to the narrative point of view (which switches to Malone) and in part due to his violent acts. In fact, while teaching this book, my students' responses reflected this difficulty: In Part 1, my students sympathized with Tommy greatly. But in Part 2, the vast majority of them shifted their perspective. While they certainly felt poorly about the oppression Tommy faces in the first part of the book, they read his rageful response as "insane" or "evil," as "going crazy" or "losing control." While some students felt that Tommy's revenge on Malone and Howard was

justified, even these students were hesitant to embrace the monster that Tommy had become. In their view, Tommy had battled with monsters and, regrettably, become himself a monster in the process. In his nihilistic shift towards the *destruction* of humanity, in other words, Tommy suddenly became, for my students, illegible. This is no surprise, of course. Humanist ideology runs very deep, even to the extent that we often do not know how to value anything unhuman: Unless an entity is itself human (or in some way serves human needs or desires) it is perceived as valueless. To be human is good, to be unhuman is irrelevant, and to be inhuman is decidedly bad.

Lovecraft's work is full of such assumptions. Throughout his corpus, we regularly encounter characters much like Black Tom—however flat and peripheral they may be—and always with an attitude of vehement condemnation. Central to Lovecraft's mythos, for example, is his "cult of Cthulhu," which, while going by different names in different stories, generally refers to a vast conspiracy among racialized minorities to call forth Cthulhu and other cosmic entities to bring about the end of human civilization: A vast cult, as Lovecraft describes it, "infinitely more diabolic than even the blackest of Avrican voodoo circles," a "nightmare cult [is] ready and eager to loose [unspeakable horrors] on the world" ("The Call of Cthulhu" 147, 164). In a passage that LaValle undoubtedly draws on in his own text, Lovecraft explains:

> That cult would never die till the stars came right again, and the secret priests would take great Cthulhu from His tomb to revive His subjects and resume His rule of earth. The time would be easy to know, for then mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shoulting and killing and reveling in joy. Then the liberated Old Ones would teach them new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom. (155)

A vast conspiracy of racialized others, pitted against humanity, human culture, and human morality. The end of white, God-fearing civilization. The ultimate nihilistic overthrow of the world-for-us.

However, I would like to suggest, following Calvin Warren, that this turn towards nihilism—embodied in Black Tom, as well as the Cult of Cthulhu—represents a necessary disposition vis-à-vis the human in a world that is structured on antiblackness. In his critique of Cornell West's attempts to "cure" blacks of what West sees as a pathological inclination towards nihilism, Warren acknowledges the difficulty of taking nihilism seriously, but also encourages us to push against the tendency to dismiss nihilism outright, noting,

> It is easy to disparage behavior that runs contrary to the dictates of a bio-political order. Black nihilism invites us to consider this behavior as a form of philosophical discourse that must be addressed. In separating form from its philosophical statement, we not only run the risk of pathologizing forms of blackness but also of foreclosing a particular critique of political hope that is absolutely necessary to understand black existential angst in the twenty-first century. ("Black Nihilism" 227)

Given the horrors that so-called human civilization has long brought upon people of color, it's difficult not to read the cult of Cthulhu's aims as, generally speaking, pretty reasonable: Demonized as it might be, in this cult we witness oppressed people of the world uniting to overthrow their oppressors once and for all.[14] We might read LaValle's narrative as, in a sense, accepting Lovecraft's challenge, as saying, "Alright, let's bring about the reign of Cthulhu and

[14] In the next chapter, I shift my focus to witch lore and, specifically, the forms of demonization that the witchcraft narratives from the Middle Ages produced and which have reverberated into our present moment. It is worth noting at present, though, that Lovecraft's Cult of Cthulhu was largely based on Margaret Murray's witchcult hypothesis which, itself, drew heavily on witch lore of the Middle Ages. In the same way that I wish to read the Cult of Cthulhu as, perhaps, a revolutionary social body, I will take up the figure of the witch-as-revolutionary in the next chapter.

find out who's reality is most disrupted by this." The gambit, of course, is that Lovecraft is right: that Cthulhu will bring about the end of human civilization. Tommy Tester clearly recognizes that it's those at the center—those the concept of the human is designed to privilege—who have the most to lose when Cthulhu rises. As British-Ghanian art theorist Kwodo Eshun once observed while listening to black American music: "You get the sense that most African-Americans owe nothing to the status of the human" (quoted in Dean). Tommy Tester certainly feels no such indebtedness.

Thacker's comments on demonology are helpful here, as we might read Black Tom as, in a sense, the *demon* of Red Hook. As Thacker writes, "The demon is as much a philosophical concept as it is a religious and political one. In fact, the 'demon' is often a placeholder for some sort of non-human, malefic agency that acts against the human (that is, against the world-for-us)" (*Dust* 11). As that which acts against the world-for-us, the demon is defined fundamentally by the lines we draw between us and them. Once again, we must ask, who exactly is this *us*? Thacker certainly gestures towards this reading, arguing that, beyond religious or theological conceptions of the demon, we should seek to understand the demon as performing a fundamental "cultural function": "as a way of thinking about the various relationships between human individuals. In short, the figure of the demon… can be understood… as a metaphor for the nature of the human, and the relation of human to human (even when this relation is couched in terms of the boundary between the human and the non-human)" (*Dust* 23). After all, drawing on Elaine Pagels, Thacker notes, "[T]he demon is inseparable from a process of demonization, and this process is as much political as it is religious" (*Dust* 25). LaValle's narrative is very much a self-conscious story of this process. As Tommy reflects in the final chapter: "Every time I was around them, they acted like I was a monster. So I said goddamnit, I'll be the worst monster you

ever saw" (147). To use Thacker's terminology, we might paraphrase: "They treated me as if I was a demon—as a malefic agency that acts against the human world-for-us. So I said goddamnit, I'll show you what a demon I can really be."

Notably, Sylvia Wynter takes up the demonic in a similar fashion, putting forth the notion of a "demonic ground" from which to unthink and unseat Man. As Alexander Weheliye summarizes, "*Demonic ground* is Sylvia Wynter's term for perspectives that reside in the liminal precincts of the current governing configurations of the human as Man in order to abolish this figure and create other forms of life" (21). To embrace the demonic, in this sense, is to embrace that which works against the human: that which undermines the "us" against which the "world" is understood. While the liberal, humanizing response to demonization would be to incorporate Tommy into this "us"—to say, "but no, the world *is* for you; it's for *all* of us"—LaValle rejects this impulse. Rather than incorporating Tommy into a normative sense of the human, LaValle accelerates Tommy's demonic monstrosity—positioning him firmly against the world-for-us. In doing so, LaValle avoids the easy comforts—what Calvin Warren calls "the humanist *affect* (the good feeling we get from hopeful solutions)" (*Ontological Terror* 3)—of a humanizing tradition, instead embracing a monstrous turn towards the weird.

In Warren's view, this question of humanization is perhaps the fundamental question with which black studies—and, really, black life—must contend. As Warren writes,

> [I]n the end, either we will continue this degrading quest for human rights and incorporation or we will take a leap of faith, as Kierkegaard might say, and reject the terms through which we organize our existence…. In other words, we have invested unbelievable value in the human—it constitutes the *highest* value in the world. And for this reason, we are terrified of letting go of it because we believe this value will protect us

> against antiblackness (it will not). As long as we continue to invest in the value structure that renders the human the highest, and most important, being within the world, we will continue to plead for recognition and acceptance. It is the *terror* of value, of not possessing this value, that keeps us wedded to the idea of the human and its accouterments (and I must say, constantly revisiting this human, reimagining it, expanding it, and refashioning it does nothing but keep us entangled in the circuit of misery)…. We must question the antiblack logics grounding the human, even if such thinking is rendered unintelligible by metaphysical knowledge formations and traditions. *Black* thinking, then, must think what is impossible to think within the constraints of metaphysics and ontology." (*Ontological Terror* 171)

Here it's worth recalling Fisher's definition of the weird as that which intrudes upon "our" reality and forces "us" to rethink the concepts and frameworks through which we've long understood the world. In LaValle's narrative, Tommy becomes precisely this weird thing, upending not only our sense that the world is "for us" but also our sense of a coherent "us" for whom the world might be for (or against, for that matter). The weird is that which, insofar as we understand reality, is unthinkable and impossible. As a weird monster, then, Black Tom is an impossible being. If one of the "rules" of Lovecraftian weird fiction (and, arguably, all weird fiction) is an encounter with the unhuman, with the world-without-us, we should read LaValle as following this rule, but depicting the encounter from the perspective of this unhuman world, revealing it not simply to be an *inaccessible* world beyond human thought but also an *excluded* world, a world *pushed* to the outside by the very structures of humanistic knowledge-production. To draw on Calvin Warren's analysis, this world-without-us (this world-without-you) is a world outside of western metaphysics and ontology—a quite literally *unthinkable* world. Lovecraft's

"weird" monsters are those monsters which human language is inept to describe: They transcend all human notions of geometry, shape, color, and anything else we might use to approximate their appearance. Like such monsters, Tommy's subjectivity and his existence destabilizes the category of the human. LaValle shows us that black being is "weird" in precisely this same sense: human-but-not, a contradiction in terms, beyond the capacities of human language—excluded, as it were, from the world-for-us, and thus a perspective from which to see that world as, more truly, a *world-for-you*.

LaValle writes this impossibility of Black Tom's being into the narrative quite self-consciously, and explicitly in terms of race. Following Black Tom's violent encounter with Suydam and Malone, LaValle writes,

> What finally made the newspapers was kind of a mishmash of truths. A man named Robert Suydam became acquainted with the rougher elements of Red Hook, Brooklyn. The former member of highborn society, drawn into a culture of crime and terror, found himself corrupted by it, lost in a ring of human smuggling and child abduction. Suydam made his last stand in a tenement on Parker Place, and the police were left with no choice but to storm the building. After a firefight, the poorly constructed buildings collapsed, killing Suydam, one private detective, and six brave members of the New York City Police Department. (138)

In the official narrative, Charles Thomas Tester is conspicuously absent. Further, readers of Lovecraft will notice that this newspaper summary is also a summary of Lovecraft's original tale. In a clever twist, LaValle subordinates Lovecraft's narrative to his own, writing the original "Horror of Red Hook" into his own story as an incomplete and heavily redacted version of the full narrative. If Lovecraft's fundamental interest in his stories is to approach the unthinkable,

LaValle rather slyly shows just how *thinkable* Lovecraft's version of the narrative is: It's the *more* believable (and the ultimately acceptable) version of the *truly* unthinkable story of Black Tom, precisely because it never truly or fully decenters "us." As bizarre and unbelievable as the objects encountered in Lovecraft's fiction might be, the fundamentally human "we" who encounters them remains stable and reliable.[15] To shift the perspective away from that of white, western Man is to tell the truly unthinkable story.

Further, it is not simply in the newspapers that the story is rewritten. After Malone's traumatic encounter, he begins seeing a psychologist whose questions quite intentionally lead Malone to doubt his memory of the events: "Hadn't it really been Robert Suydam all along who'd guided those awful forces? Who else but a man born into wealth and education could be naturally equipped to lead?" (138). It is necessary, after all, that Malone's memories be reshaped precisely because of the *type* of monster Black Tom is. As Lovecraft's stories constantly remind us, an encounter with a truly weird entity can lead to two—and only two—possible responses: Either one accepts that it really happened, which cannot but be paralyzing, or one convinces oneself that it did not happen, that it was a dream or an illusion, which enables one to go on living.[16] To instill this necessary illusion is precisely the purpose of Malone's therapy. As LaValle writes, "There was a story the specialist wanted, the same one told by the newspapers, and by every official with whom Malone had been in contact. Imagine a universe in which all the

[15] This is, of course, to reductively summarize a far more complex argument. In many ways, we can read Lovecraft's cosmicism as unsettling the human: Humanity is rendered insignificant, the lines between humanity and other species are blurred, and so on. However, cosmic horror is, for Lovecraft, always figured as an encounter with the world-without-us and this "us" is always taken for granted. It is Lovecraft's inability to think beyond this "us"—as reflected, for instance, in his persistent depictions of racialized otherness as cosmically dreadful—that consistently re-stabilizes the (white, western) human "we." I develop this line of thinking in more detail in both the first and second chapters of this dissertation.

[16] For more on these two possibilities, see footnote 8 in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, where I discuss Tzvetan Todorov's notion of "the fantastic."

powers of the NYPD could not defeat a single Negro with a razor blade. Impossible. Impossible" (139). As Thacker notes, this is the inevitable human response to any encounter with the non-human world: "[W]hen the non-human world manifests itself to us in these ambivalent ways, more often than not our response is to recuperate that non-human world into whatever the dominant, human-centric worldview is at the time. After all, being human, how else would we make sense of the world?" (*Dust* 4). Black Tom is an impossible being, and thus he must be recuperated to the realm of the possible: Just another violent black man, nothing more.

However, there is a sense in which, even prior to becoming Black Tom, Tommy Tester can be read as an impossible being. This is precisely how afro-pessimists and black nihilists like Calvin Warren explain blackness: as that which confounds metaphysics, that which confounds all notions of *human being*. For Warren, nihilism is the only possible response to a violent metaphysics that "pulverizes" black being and renders black humanity little more than an "imaginary number" ("Black Nihilism" 218, 216). Specifically, Warren advocates for what he calls "black nihilism." However, by this he does not mean something along the lines of "nihilism for blacks." Rather, black nihilism is a form of nihilism that seeks to take seriously the function that antiblackness plays in producing thought itself. As Warren writes, "In this sense, the modifier 'black' in the term 'black nihilism' indicates much more than an 'identity'; a *blackened* nihilism pushes hermeneutic nihilism beyond the limits of its metaphysical thinking by foregrounding the function of anti-blackness in structuring thought" ("Black Nihilism" 240).[17] It is in this sense that, I would like to suggest, Black Tom's nihilistic turn can be read as "cosmic" or "weird." This turn, pivoting on the impossibility of black being, embraces this impossibility as

[17] I read Warren's push for a "blackened" nihilism as similar to Christina Sharpe's call for a "blackened" consciousness: "At stake, then is to stay in this wake time toward inhabiting a blackened consciousness that would rupture the structural silences produced and facilitated by, and that produce and facilitate, Black social and physical death" (Sharpe 22).

that which has the capacity to undermine and uproot the racist and racializing structures that ground reality and the distribution of the sensible.

For Lovecraft, the most horrifying thing was the confrontation with cosmic indifference. Lovecraft viewed such a confrontation as the inevitable end of scientific rationality, and the belief in this inevitability is perhaps the best way to describe his "cosmic pessimism." With reference to the cosmos, there is nothing to be optimistic about, and pessimism is the only logically consistent attitude. LaValle's text challenges this assumption by showing that there are far worse things than indifference. Unlike writers who have bracketed the question of cosmic indifference to address Lovecraft's problematic racial politics, LaValle uses cosmic indifference, as it were, as the scale against which to level his racial critique: The cosmos might be indifferent, but racial capitalism is *actively* hostile. Compared to malice, indifference sounds pretty good. But more than this, if an encounter with this indifferent cosmos is—as Lovecraft seemed to think—capable of unseating the human once and for all, LaValle seems to say, "Okay, let's give this a try." Cosmic pessimism becomes a perspective from which to critique the world as we know it, and it turns out actually to be, if not precisely *optimistic*, certainly rife with possibilities. In a move consistent with this notion, Warren argues that we should treat black nihilism as "a necessary political posture" that "resists emancipatory rhetoric that assumes it is possible to purge the Political of anti-black violence and advances *political apostasy* as the only 'ethical' response to black suffering" (228). Similarly, we might read LaValle's text as advancing a kind of humanist apostasy: A refusal of human terms of value in favor of the monstrous.[18]

[18] I find the religious rhetoric of "apostasy" helpful here, particularly as it invokes a type of rejection of salvific possibility. Just as the religious apostate rejects the salvation offered by the church, so the humanist apostate rejects the salvific gestures of humanism. I develop this notion of salvation a bit further in chapter 4.

As Tommy observes just before the shift to Part 2, "Mankind didn't make messes; mankind was the mess" (76). While, on the one hand, we might read this as simply a cliché observation that "people are flawed," in the context of the narrative, Tommy's observation goes further than this. What Tommy seems to realize is that, while you can spend all the time you want cleaning up humanity's messes, this will never address the root of the problem: humanity itself—which is to say, above all, "humanity" as a *metaphysical construct* that, as Tommy has just viscerally experienced, *does not include him*. The problem, to use Sylvia Wynter's term, is Man itself—not, importantly, the sapient beings which "Man" is supposed to represent. In this context, Tommy's response is crucial: He opens the library door, abandoning humanity, embracing monstrosity, and ultimately becoming a monster. Rather than seeking acceptance into a newly reworked human community (that of Suydam's planned revolution)—an optimistic possibility, but an inevitably cruel one—Tommy, recognizing that the category of the human will always be hostile and exclusionary, embraces and pushes to the limit his own monstrosity. It is here that the genre conventions of weird fiction/cosmic horror become crucially important: Within the genre of cosmic horror, *monstrosity* is that which *undermines the categories by which we understand human being itself*. We should not read Tommy's becoming-monster, then, merely as Tommy's becoming unhinged, dangerous, violent, and oppositional. It is, rather, Tommy's complete embrace of that which will undermine the categories by which humanity has long understood itself. Tommy's embrace of monstrosity is, in other words, not merely physical but *metaphysical*.[19]

[19] When Tom says "I'll be the worst monster you ever saw" (147), he means not merely that he'd show them how scary he could be, but, rather, that he would undermine their entire metaphysics with his paradox of the flesh. In a sense, we might read this as a *metaphysical* acceleration: Rather than accelerating the social and economic contradictions of capitalism, Black Tom accelerates the metaphysical contradictions of white, western notions of being—which, importantly, are intimately bound up in capitalism. If, as Warren argues, the black body presents a problem for metaphysics, then Black Tom is an acceleration of this contradiction to the breaking point. In joining with the outside (the white man's "world-without-us") Tommy is transformed. In a very real sense, Black

It is this context that I read *The Ballad of Black Tom* as a crucial intervention within the genre of cosmic horror, pivoting specifically on capitalism's racial contradiction. I take Black Tom's monstrosity to represent an acceleration of capital's racial contradictions to a level of cosmic proportions. Were it my desire to add just one more neologism to oversaturated the lexicon of theory jargon, we might read *The Ballad of Black Tom* as reflecting a type of "afro-cosmic-pessimism," produced at the intersection of cosmic pessimism and afro-pessimism. Instead, taking up Warren's notion of black nihilism, I find it useful to think about LaValle's novel as reflecting a kind of *blackened cosmic pessimism*—which is, again, not so much to say "black" (i.e., racialized) cosmic pessimism, but rather, cosmic pessimism pushed beyond its (all too human) limits.

The embrace of the impossible is a move towards thinking beyond realism, which is always capitalist realism, and in LaValle's text, we are reminded that capitalist realism has always been *racial* capitalist realism. Such an embrace, because it refuses the realistic, will inevitably look like nihilism. However, as Calvin Warren notes, the embrace of nihilism is a difficult thing talk about. What, after all, is the purpose of forwarding nihilism—a perspective that, among other things, holds that there is no "purpose"? Reflecting on his own work, Warren writes,

> The question that remains is a question often put to the black nihilist: what is the point?... Thought outside of this mandatory point is illegible and useless…. Writing in this way is inherently subversive and refuses the geometry of thought. Nevertheless, the nihilist is forced to enunciate his refusal through a 'point,' a point that is contradictory and

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Tom and Cthulhu become one—both representative of the same ontological perversion that undermines western metaphysics.

> paradoxical all at once. To say that the point of this essay is that 'the point' is fraudulent—its promise of clarity and life are inadequate—will not satisfy the hunger of disciplining the nihilist and insisting that one undermine the very ground upon which one stands. Black nihilist hermeneutics resists 'the point' but is subjected to it to have one's voice heard in the marketplace of ideas. ("Black Nihilism" 243-244)

In my view, nihilistic fiction may furnish possibilities for developing black nihilism as, to use Warren's words, "a philosophical posture" without having to reduce it to a coherent point. Artistic, literary, or narrative modes are free to skirt the point, which enables them to explore a black nihilist position without the same constraints.

There's a sense in which we might read LaValle as acknowledging and exploring precisely this. In the final chapter of the novel, after everything has happened, Tommy eating a meal with his friend Buckeye, reflecting on all he has done. It's clear that Tommy feels some regret, telling Buckeye that what he has done will be the end of humanity and ultimately reflecting, "I wish I'd been more like my father…. He didn't have much, but he never lost his soul…. I wonder if I could ever get mine back" (148). Tommy's regret, however, is complicated and, as readers, I don't know that we're meant to trust it. As he confesses what he has done to Buckeye, Tommy also reflects that "Malone said I put my daddy at risk, and he was right. It's my fault, too. I used him without a second thought" (147). While Tommy has reached a point of willingness to destroy the entire world and himself with it—the ultimate nihilistic gesture, we might say—he still cannot fully escape the rationality of antiblackness. Despite the fact that Mr. Howard is fully to blame for Otis's death, Tommy cannot help but to accept—however partially—the racist logics that ascribe blame to the victim. If Tommy's regret regarding his father is so patently—at least from the reader's point of view—a capitulation to the

dehumanizing and racist logics of the police, then how should we read Tommy's other regrets? It seems that, here at the end of it all, Tommy is desperately attempting to affix a "point" to all he has done—and yet, the only logics through which to articulate that point are the "metaphysical infrastructures"[20] that sustain antiblackness. I wish to read the final moment of the novel in precisely this context. Unable to affix a point to his own story, what does Black Tom do? He simply vanishes: "Before anyone inside the Victoria society knew what was happening, Black Tom went out the window. Buckeye turned in time to see him leap, but Tommy Tester's body was never found. Zig zag zig" (149). The end.

Cosmic horror is in many ways a privileged site for attempting to think this type of political, revolutionary, and speculative nihilism, precisely due to its focus on the unthinkable world. In the same way that the world-without-us is unthinkable, nihilism might also be unthinkable: And yet, on both counts, it behooves us to try to think it or, at the very least, if we can't think it, to develop a new disposition towards it. In my reading, this is in part what *The Ballad of Black Tom* enables us to do. As Ray Brassier observes, "Nihilism is not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity" (*Nihil Unbound*, xi). Perhaps this speculative opportunity arises largely due to nihilism's irreducibility to a "point."

To offer a final point, then: The weird, with all its horrors, becomes for LaValle a potential source of liberation, even amid the dangers. Furthermore, this type of political pessimism—or, more accurately, political nihilism—resonates deeply in our present moment, a moment in which the status quo has clearly failed, and in which a desire for something *weird* to happen seems to be all around us. While the popular impulse is often to "cure" nihilists and pessimists through narratives of hope, futurity, responsibility, and humanity, I would like to

[20] Warren borrows this term from Nahum Chandler to describe that which "conditions our world and our thinking about the world" (*Ontological Terror* 1).

suggest that a nihilistic disposition is not a pathology to be cured but, rather, a starting point on a path towards the much-needed end of the human and the "world-for-us."

Drawing on Lauren Berlant's notion of cruel optimism, we might read LaValle's text as suggesting that the only optimism that is not cruel—that doesn't, in other words, redirect our investments towards precisely those things that harm us—is, paradoxically, pessimism. What if the opposite of cruel optimism isn't benevolent optimism but, rather, *liberatory pessimism*: a nihilistic refusal of all cruel optimisms? Such a pessimism would need to be a pessimism in the extreme. After all, cruel optimism is a hell of a drug. So often, it seems, when we recognize an optimism to be cruel, our response is to replace it with another optimism: One addiction is replaced with another, one relationship with another, all in the hopes that this new attachment will not be so cruel. To break free of cruel optimism—and specifically those forms of humanistic optimism that, time and again, reinstate the figure of the human as the source of all value—perhaps what we need is a speculative and open-ended nihilism. As Nolen Gertz—who is largely critical of nihilism—puts it, "[T]o put forth a vision of the future is to engage in what Nietzsche calls 'active nihilism.' Rather than sit back and let the present moment destroy the future ('passive nihilism'), to engage in active nihilism is to destroy the present to create the future, to destroy the destructive ideals of the present in order to create new ideals and bring about the future that we want" (162).

Ultimately, it strikes me that any anti-capitalism that does not simply reproduce racial capitalist realism or rely on the figure of the human will inevitably look like nihilism, precisely because it refuses to see value in the supposedly "realistic." This is where, in my view, LaValle helps us to glimpse or simply imagine and "Outside" to capitalist realism. While it is not alone among the myriad nihilistic cultural productions that circulate in our present moment, LaValle's

novel offers a compelling provocation in the figure of Black Tom: To what degree, it seems to ask, can political apostasy be an option? And what might a weird, inhuman political subjectivity look like?

# CHAPTER 4

## AGAINST SALVATION, AGAINST ASSIMILATION:

## WITCHES, SATANISTS, FEMINISTS

"What if our centuries of pretending that there's a real god have somehow—I don't know how—awakened a real devil? What then?"
(Fritz Leiber, *Gather Darkness*)

Thomasin: "Are you witches?"
Jonas: "Starting to think I am."
(Robert Eggers, *The Witch*)

In 1950, Fritz Leiber, a friend and acolyte of Lovecraft, published *Gather, Darkness!*, a science fiction novel about a post-nuclear theocratic dystopia and an underground conspiracy of witches who rebel against the established priestly order. In the world of the novel, the priests possess scientific knowledge lost to the rest of humanity and, through their exclusive technological capacities, produce illusions of the supernatural to pacify and control the populace. The witches' rebellion, through its own occult technologies, seeks to undermine the priesthood's illusion of control. While Leiber's novel is not itself my present focus, it fosters an interesting link between Lovecraft's legacy and the legacy on which this chapter focuses: that of the European witch trials. In the same way that Lovecraft's legacy represents a type of hermeneutical battleground, the mythology of the witch represents a long-contested symbolic imaginary. This chapter offers an (admittedly cursory) overview of this struggle over meaning, looking specifically to traditions of "hermeneutical revolt" which have sought to recast not only the witch as revolutionary but also her ally, Satan, as liberator.

As Sylvia Federici has argued, the genocide against women inflicted by the witch hunt of the middle ages—and extending even into the present—was and is an essential component of the primitive accumulation of capital. Federici argues that the witch trials were fundamental to

capitalist development for a number of reasons: They helped to destroy "magical" conceptions of time and space, making way for new capitalist temporalities and spatial imaginaries. They reconstructed normative femininity in order to naturalize so-called women's work. And perhaps most importantly, they relegated women to a fundamental yet disavowed (and thus unpaid) role in the reproduction of capitalist social relations. In Federici's view, the witch trials were accompanied by the broader production of "new cultural canons" that "[maximized] the differences between women and men and creating more feminine and more masculine prototypes," ultimately serving to strip women of their autonomy, knowledge, and social power (*Caliban* 101). Federici's argument thus highlights the fundamental role that witch *lore* (and cultural production more broadly) has played and continues to play in formation and reproduction gendered capitalist social relations. The misogyny of the witch hunt—imbedded in everything from Shakespeare's "shrews" to hyper-misogynist witch-hunting manuals like the *Malleus Malificarum*—persists today in a multitude of cultural, political, and social forms.[1]

However, while allegations of witchcraft and devil-worship have long been used to discipline and ostracise social dissidents, it is also true that social dissidents have at times attempted to flip the script by embracing as a source of power precisely these demonized positions. In that vein, my interest in this chapter—and in many ways throughout the dissertation—is in the value of what Per Faxneld calls "protest exegesis," "inverse exegesis," or "the hermeneutical principle of revolt" (11): those forms of hermeneutical dissidence, in other words, that take up oppressive symbols or narratives and reinterpret/reclaim them on the behalf of the oppressed (embodied, for instance, in *The Ballad of Black Tom* and other revisions of

[1] Kristen Sollée notes, for instance, that "the 'slut' is in many ways the 'witch' of the 21st century" (9). Struggles over reproductive freedom, similarly, reflect the witch trials essential function of depriving women of sexual and reproductive autonomy.

Lovecraft). To the extent that cultural and literary productions reflect, justify, and even produce social relations, hermeneutical dissent should be understood as a fundamental aspect of a any broadly revolutionary project. In its focus on Lovecraft and his cultural legacy, this dissertation has largely pivoted on the fundamental role played by cultural representations of race in legitimating and (re)producing capitalist social relations, and, in the last chapter, I considered how "ontological perversion" might be taken up not simply as justification for racial denigration but, rather, as an "impossible" position from which to critique and undermine racial capitalist realism. This chapter pivots away from Lovecraft and the weird to focus on two adjacent genres, broadly speaking: the witch tale and the satanic cult exposé. In the same way that Lovecraft's supernatural horror tales serve in many ways to legitimate and reproduce a white supremacist, western chauvinistic social order, stories of witches and satanic cults have long used the fear of the other to legitimate and reproduce social relations—as Federici's account of the witch trials demonstrates. It is also true, however, that in these genres, we can also track a broad contemporary impulse to flip the script, so to speak, embracing the adversarial and the monstrous and, in the process, undermining the forms of cultural politics that such genres have traditionally expressed and reproduced.

This chapter, however, can offer little more than a general overview of these forms of protest exegesis. In the original sketch of this dissertation, I had planned to spend significantly more time with both witchcraft and the satanic. Specifically, I had hoped to tease out some of the minutiae regarding the rich, dynamic, and complex histories of these discourses, as well as contemporary moves towards the inversion of them. As I began to work through the contemporary discourse on Lovecraft, however, I found that my work on Lovecraftian horror demanded far more attention and space than I had initially anticipated. As the work developed,

sections I had initially envisioned as brief overviews demanded more nuanced and detailed arguments, and what was initially proposed as one chapter became three. In this final coda, however, I wish to return, however briefly, to a set of material that animated a number of my initial questions. Ultimately, what I wish to suggest is that the forms of revision I've tracked in contemporary Lovecraftian fiction are not unique to that genre. Such forms of protest exegesis, I would like to suggest, are far more ubiquitous than just the Lovecraftian and emerge in a range of idioms. This coda, then, primarily represents a short overview of a couple discourses that I hope to expand upon at a later date.

To develop this brief account, I look first to the history of the satanic witch as a demonized figure, focusing first on the European witch trials of the Middle Ages and second on their odd resonances in the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and 1990s. In the second section, I turn to the embrace of the satanic witch as a type of revolutionary, feminist figure. Here, similarly, I aim to track a broad historical trajectory, beginning with Jules Michelet's 1862 book *La Sorcière* and its influence within the women's suffrage movement in the United States and moving forward to more contemporary expressions of witch feminism and satanic feminism. As I work through these parallel histories, I offer close readings of Robert Eggers' 2016 film *The Witch*, suggesting that the film offers a productive imaginary for thinking about the parallels and relays between the Satanist rejection of salvation and the anti-humanist rejection of assimilation.

**Part 1: From Witch Trials to Satanic Panics**

"The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians."
(Pat Robertson, 1992 fundraising letter)

"Any woman, anywhere, might be a witch. The old lady mall-walking in her cushioned sneakers. The girl scout selling cookies. Your secretary. She goes about her life, not knowing what in hell she is, until the moment she makes the audacious choice… to commune with the devil."
(Ben Blacker, Mirka Andolfo, and Marissa Louise, *Hex Wives*)

Evangelical media mogul Pat Robertson's memorable denunciation of feminists as anti-capitalist, anti-family, lesbian witches is perhaps an ideal reflection of the witch's two-sided significance. On the one hand, by calling feminists witches Robertson clearly aims to demonize them: to suggest that these feminists are not only anti-Christian, but directly in league with the devil himself. These wicked women wish to bring about the end of (patriarchal, capitalist) civilization and, as such, they should be feared. As absurd as this characterization sounds, particularly in an era of hyper-capitalist, neoliberal "lean-in" feminism, outlandish statements such as these have often carried a good deal of weight. Evangelicals like Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and James Dobson have fought tirelessly to undermine progressive causes like women's liberation and LGBTQ rights, and often with a good deal of success. Even today, their influence on the evangelical right has played an important role in the ascendance of the far right and election of Donald Trump (and, perhaps more significantly, his evangelical counterpart, Mike Pence).

On the other hand, however, it's difficult not to read Robertson's ostentatious claims as an unintentional advertisement for women's liberation: Socialist witches who strike fear in the hearts of conservatives! What's not to like about that? It's not difficult to see how the witch could become a symbol of power and liberation: It's a symbol, after all, that bigots and misogynists fear—particularly evangelicals for whom the witch's collusion with the devil is no mere metaphor, but a reality. In fact, there is a degree to which Robertson's characterization actually reflects—aside from the child-killing (which has always been a central component of

witch lore)[2]—certain prominent impulses within the feminist movement for at least the past hundred years. Prominent American Suffragettes like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Joslyn Gage, alongside anarchist feminists like Emma Goldman, were direct and unambiguous in their critical opposition to Christianity. Gage went one step further, openly advocating for a type of Satanism. While the radicalism of these feminists distanced them, to a certain degree, from the mainstream feminist movement, their embrace of witchy, antagonistic, anti-Christian, and even satanic positions has left a mark on the feminist movement. Since that time, the witch—satanic, pagan, or otherwise—has been taken up as a symbol of feminist resistance to patriarchal power, specifically as that power functions through capital, the church, and the state.

In their 2016 study of religious Satanism, *The Invention of Satanism*, Asbjørn Dyrendal, James R. Lewis, and Jesper Aa. Petersen point out that "when we ask how witch beliefs and related practices work, we should always ask *for whom* they work and in which way" (15, emphasis mine). Such a line of questioning is fundamental not only with respect to witch beliefs, but also regarding any broadly-held beliefs, cultural norms, or ritual practices. The question of "for whom," after all, is not only of fundamental importance, but also subject to perpetual

[2] While stories of witches stealing and eating babies pervade witch lore, Federici notes that cannibalism was also taken up by peasants in the 15th century as a subversive symbol: "The threat of cannibalism, a central theme in the morphology of the Sabbat, also recalls, according to Henry Kamen, the morphology of revolts, as rebel workers at times showed their contempt for those who sold their blood by threatening to eat them. Kamen notes that this happened in the town of Romans (Dauphiné, France), in the winter of 1580, when the peasants in revolt against the tithes, proclaimed that 'before three days Christian flesh will be sold' and, then, during the Carnival, 'the rebels' leader, dressed in a bear skin, ate delicacies which passed for Christian flesh'" (177). Federici also notes that, in a more literal sense, "in Naples, in 1585, during a riot against the high cost of bread, the rebels mutilated the body of the magistrate responsible for the price rise and offered pieces of his flesh for sale" (177). While the imagery of cannibalism in such circumstances may not derive directly from witch lore, Federici notes that, generally speaking, "the nocturnal [Witches] Sabbat appears as a demonization of the utopia embodied in the rebellion against the masters and the break-down of sexual roles" (177). The utopian aspirations embodied in peasant revolts, in other words, are deeply intertwined with witch lore, often explicitly taken up, inverted, or exaggerated, for instance, in depictions of the Witches' Sabbath. As Federici notes, "Food became an object of such intense desire that it was believed that the poor sold their souls to the devil to get their hands on it" (80) and, she adds, "Exemplary is the recurrence of the theme of the 'diabolical banquet' in the witch-trials, suggesting that feasting on roasted mutton, white bread, and wine was now considered a diabolical act in the case of the 'common people'" (81).

contestation. The status of the witch, what she symbolizes, and the functions that this symbol performs are constantly in flux and contingent upon the context in which it is invoked.

However, when it comes to beliefs about witchcraft, it has generally *not* been on the behalf of presumed witches that such mythologies have functioned. The history of the witch, after all, is primarily a history of women's suffering and demonization. As Kristen Sollée reminds us, "Many now embrace the witch identity for political or spiritual reasons, but thousands of women have suffered and died because of their perceived association with witchcraft" (13). Indeed, allegations of Satanism, witchcraft, and collusion with the devil—while almost humorously absurd in the idiom of Pat Robertson and other evangelicals—have long been used to demonize and repress women, racial and ethnic minorities, indigenous persons, foreigners, gender non-conforming persons, and others. To be a witch, so the story goes, is not simply to do wrong or cause harm—as, say, a murderer or thief might do—but to align oneself with the metaphysical embodiment of absolute evil: the devil himself (or, as has often been the case in Christian representations of Satan, the devil *herself*[3]). Witchcraft thus becomes a form of treason and apostasy—not simply against a nation or a church, but against humanity itself—an embrace of evil as such.[4] That Lovecraft's descriptions of the Cult of Cthulhu draw self-

[3] As Faxneld observes, "Satan quite often exhibits female anatomical parts, typically breasts, which make him a sort of hermaphrodite monster. This can be seen simply as an aspect of the general ontological instability of demonic creatures, which often incorporate features from spheres that would usually be carefully guarded as separate categories that should not be mixed, such as human and animal. Gender-bending would then be another sign of the liminal and blasphemously category-defying nature of Lucifer and his demons" (46-47). In addition to depictions of Satan that confound normative conceptions of gender, "a more straightforwardly female Satan can be seen in the actually very common depictions of the snake in the Garden of Eden with a woman's head on its serpentine body and sometimes also the breasts of a woman…. this motif was widespread in both visual art and theatre for hundreds of years" (47). Ultimately, as Faxneld shows, drawing on numerous examples of visual and narrative religious art from the Middle Ages, "From a historical perspective, Satan as female is a centre-stage concept in Christian culture" (50).

[4] While the witch is always implicitly against humanity, certain witch beliefs foreground more explicitly the anti-human nature of the witch. Asbjørn, Dyrendal, and Petersen write, for instance, of the mythology of the "night witch" that "[i]n this verison of the witchcraft belief, the witch is a wholly anti-human force in human form, and it (most often 'she') belongs to a society of similar beings. The world they inhabit may be presented as wholly

consciously on witch lore—particularly through direct references to Margaret Murray's witch-cult hypothesis and to practices such as the witch's sabbat and the celebration of Walpurgisnacht—is perhaps no surprise. Through such reference, Lovecraft suggests that, compared to the most evil, anti-human thing we're aware of (basically, witches), the Cult of Cthulhu is incomprehensibly more diabolical.

Witch lore has a long history of provoking terror, and from this terror a great deal of pain, suffering, and death. While it's difficult to estimate the precise number of executions that took place during the European witch trials, Sylvia Federici and other historians have placed estimates in the hundreds of thousands, at least 80% inflicted upon women, leading Federici to describe the witch trials as "a genocidal attack against women" (14). Broadly speaking, these attacks took aim at expressions of femininity that did not adhere to a new normative standard, thus redefining womanhood and producing new gender norms in the service of a newly-emerging patriarchal capitalism. As Federici puts it, "The witch-hunt destroyed a whole world of female practices, collective relations, and systems of knowledge that had been the foundation of women's power in pre-capitalist Europe…. Out of this defeat a new model of femininity emerged: the ideal woman and wife—passive, obedient, thrifty, of few words, always busy at work, and chaste"

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(and literally) upside-down. The values and goals of this anti-human society are the opposite of decent human beings; they invert everything sacred and try to destroy or corrupt everything of value" (14). While, of course, this is meant to describe the worst thing possible—the absolute repudiation and inversion of all that is human—I'm interested in the possible ways that mythologies such as these can be (and have been) reclaimed by those they aim to demonize. After all, might this supposed "corruption of everything of value" be read, alternatively, as not simply *corruption* but, rather, a liberatory transvaluation of oppressive values?

It is also notable that "die Nachthexen" ("the Night Witches") became the German nickname for a women's regiment in the Soviet air force during World War II. These so-called witches became famous for their silent, nocturnal raids on German targets. To avoid detection, the Night Witches would idle their engines and glide over their targets, making only a slight "wooshing" sound that German soldiers described as akin to a witch's broom. The Night Witches were so feared by the Nazis that Iron Crosses were allegedly awarded to any gunman who managed to take one down. For more on this see Garber.

(103).[5] This war on women was fought on a range of cultural, political, and religious fronts, each of which had the effect of associating women in general—and certain "types" of women in particular—with the devil, demonizing non-normative expressions of gender, and cementing patriarchal power.

As numerous writers have noted, the notion of women as evil, as in league with the devil, and as, in short, witches, has very early origins: In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the story begins with the biblical narrative of the "Fall of Man." As religious historian Per Faxneld writes, "The notion of women as especially receptive to Satan's guiles…. has often derived its authority from Genesis 3, which shows Eve to be the first one to succumb to the serpent's temptation" (2). The Genesis 3 myth, perhaps one of the most widely-disseminated stories of Judeo-Christian culture, tells the story of Satan's arrival, in the form of a serpent, in the Garden of Eden.[6] Satan approaches Eve and asks her if God has forbidden her to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve tells Satan that, yes, God has forbidden it and, furthermore, if she eats from the tree, she will die. Satan responds that God has lied to her: Not only will she not die, but if she eats from the tree, she will receive great knowledge, making her like God. So Eve eats the fruit, then gives some to Adam, both of their eyes are opened, and thus humanity is forever condemned to suffer.

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[5] It's important to note, however, that the production of this new normative femininity was largely white and European. While, over time, these norms were undoubtedly exported and imposed upon the world to varying degrees, it would be a mistake to assume that this European gender normativity was in any way universal. As Hortense Spillers and others have argued, the production of gender takes on radically different forms within, for example, American slavery.

[6] While contemporary readings of the serpent understand this character to be the devil, religious scholars have noted that, not only does the book of Genesis *not* identify the serpent as Satan but, further, the Christian concept of Satan did not emerge until long after the writing of the book of Genesis. To read the serpent as Satan, then, is largely anachronistic. Despite the anachronism, however, this interpretation has been predominant throughout most of Christianity's history. While a theologian, then, might wish to critique this reading (and rightly so) on the basis of its clear anachronism, my interest is less in the *original* meaning of the text than in the dominant hermeneutical traditions surrounding it—traditions that (albeit anachronistically) have cemented the status of the serpent as Satan within Christian discourse and tradition. For more on this see Faxneld 36.

The importance of this element of Christian mythology should not be understated, and particularly when it comes to Judeo-Christian (as well as more broadly secular) gender politics. Summarizing a common interpretation within Christian theology, Faxneld writes, "Genesis 3 sets out a social charter, which affects all women due to the fact that Eve, the woman, is the first in the tale to transgress" (35). Far from being simply a story about "original sin," the story of the Fall is fundamental to the organization and justification of gender subordination in the Christian tradition. Misogynous interpretations of the myth accordingly range from a general notion that women are by nature weak and more easily given over to temptation to the more specific interpretation that Eve maliciously colluded with the devil and that together they tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. The former interpretation is often given as justification for claims that women ought not make decisions, hold leadership positions, or speak in church, as St. Paul puts it, "[W]omen should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate… If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church" (1 Corinthians 14:33-35, NRSV). Elsewhere, Paul makes explicit that such admonitions derive from (or, more accurately, find their justification in) the Genesis 3 the narrative of the fall: "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (1 Timothy 2:14, NRSV).[7] The latter interpretation, on the other hand, fits neatly into the genealogy of the "woman as temptress" trope, but is also taken by some to suggest a fundamental link between women's "nature" and the satanic.

[7] Faxneld notes, however, that "Luther as well as Calvin rejected the idea of Eve's greater culpability, since her inferiority to some degree excused her transgression. To Calvin, the real blame lay with Adam who should have known better than to follow his wife's example. According to the Protestant exegetes, Eve's actual crime was straying from the protection and supervision of her husband, and his was allowing her to do so" (41). Thus the benevolent misogyny of the Protestants seeks to sidestep any *direct* forms of demonization by depriving Eve of agency altogether: Eve, bless her heart, simply couldn't have known any better.

While it's easy to read the notion of women as the original sinners as nothing more than religious superstition, it's important to recognize that the cultural and political resonances of this narrative extend beyond Christian theology, church politics, religious practice, or even narrative tropes in general. For example, in the Genesis story, God chooses to punish Eve by significantly increasing the pain she must suffer during childbirth: "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16, NRSV). Faxneld notes that this has led many readers to conclude that "it would hence be sinful to in any way mitigate labour pains, as they represent a penance meted out by God himself" (38). Even into the nineteenth century, Faxneld observes, American doctors argued "that their colleagues should refuse to administer anaesthetics to women during childbirth, since they believed the intense pain the women experienced was a divinely ordained punishment" (139). Faxneld further points out that the Genesis 3 story was routinely invoked in nineteenth-century political debates about the status of women, including by a member of the House of Commons, who garnered an enthusiastic response when using the passage to justify the continued political subordination of women (138).

The mythology of Eve's transgression and punishment plays an important role not only in the historical subordination and demonization of women, but also in the mythology of the witch. Due to their shared demonization on the basis of gender and their alleged collusion with the devil, Kristen Sollée suggests that "the witch's earliest ancestor is Eve" (21). Certainly, insofar as the mythology of the witch derives from a Judeo-Christian religious tradition, this genealogy appears fundamental.[8] The witch lore that took hold of Europe in the Middle Ages, then, can be

[8] The degree to which the mythology of the witch should be understood strictly in Judeo-Christian terms is, of course, highly contingent upon context. However, given the context of the European witch trials, the Judeo-Christian notion of the witch, of her collusion with Satan, and of her relation (as woman) to Eve is absolutely central. As Federici notes, "The Roman Catholic Church provided the metaphysical and ideological scaffold of the

read in many ways as an extension of the myth of Eve and its misogynous reverberations throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition.

While the misogynist myths that paved the way for witch scares, then, had been around for centuries, the specific folklore driving the European witch hunt didn't develop until the mid 14th century. Faxneld and Federici both note that it was at this time that rumors of a secret society of Satan-worshipping witches began to circulate. As these rumors evolved, developed, and spread, fueling both the Inquisition and broader obsessions with witch-hunting, the mythology of the witch was eventually formalized in popular witch-hunting manuals, the most famous of which is undoubtedly Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), a text which Faxneld has described as "the early modern misogynist text par excellence" (68). The book is rife with anecdotes inspiring both fear and titillation, including perhaps Kramer and Sprenger's most infamous claim that witches would steal men's penises and keep "as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird's nest, or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members, and eat oats and corn, as has been seen by many and is a matter of common report" (121).[9] As Faxneld notes, Kramer and Sprenger "strongly stress Eve's instrumental role in the Fall of Man…. Their ultimate conclusion is that womankind is wicked, carnal, and weak, and this is why women are more likely to be witches

witch-hunt and instigated the persecution of witches as it had previously instigated the persecution of the heretics" (168). It is this metaphysical and ideological framework from which the witch lore and the witch-hunting manuals of the time emerge. It is also true that such mythologies and frameworks would be exported across the globe, propping up not only the witch trials but colonialism as well. Nevertheless, contemporary mythologies of the witch draw from a much broader range of sources and combine them in uneven and complicated ways, blending, for instance, Christian mythology with African spiritual traditions and pre-Christian forms of paganism.

[9] Kramer and Sprenger go on to tell the story of a man who "when he had lost his member… approached a known witch to ask her to restore it to him. She told the afflicted man to climb a certain tree, and that he might take which he liked out of a nest in which there were several members. And when he tried to take a big one, the witch said: You must not take that one; adding, because it belonged to a parish priest" (121). The endowments of the priesthood, evidently, were not to be trifled with.

than men are" (68). In many ways, this misogynist logic—taking Eve's collusion with Satan as evidence that women are "likely to be witches"—is the fundamental logic that reverberates throughout the witch trials.

As the witch trials gained momentum and as this mythology spread, the range of crimes for which a person could be tried as a witch grew. First among the crimes of alleged witches were reproductive crimes: contraception, abortion, or the killing of children and babies. It was during the witch trials that midwifery, too, was criminalized, transferring the control over reproduction from female midwives to male doctors. In addition to this, begging, theft, and petty crimes could also be taken as evidence of witchcraft, particularly if performed by a woman. Indeed, the crimes associated with witchcraft became so vaguely defined that, soon, a woman could be charged with witchcraft on virtually any basis whatsoever. As Federici notes,

> The witch was also the rebel woman who talked back, argued, swore, and did not cry under torture. 'Rebel' here refers not to any specific subversive activity in which women might be involved. Rather, it describes the *female personality* that had developed, especially among the peasantry, in the course of the struggle against feudal power, when women had been in the forefront of the heretical movements, often organizing in female associations, posing a growing challenge to male authority and the Church. (184, emphasis in original)

Any act or posture of insubordination, in other words, could be evidence of one's collusion with Satan. Even friendships among women became objects of suspicion, "denounced from the pulpit as subversive of the alliance between husband and wife, just as women-to-women relations were demonized by the prosecutors of witches who forced them to denounce each other as accomplices in crime" (Federici 198).

Federici argues that this broad and multifaceted demonization of women should be understood as "a central aspect of the accumulation and formation of the modern proletariat," noting that "in capitalist society sexual identity became the carrier of specific work-functions" and that, therefore, "gender should not be considered a purely cultural reality, but it should be treated as a specification of class relations" (14). However, while the production of gender and the policing of gender relations were fundamental to the consolidation of class relations, so too was the demonization of knowledge practices that could not be easily assimilated to emergent capitalist temporalities, spatial imaginaries, and other means of inhabiting the world. As Federici argues, "The witch-hunt deepened the divisions between women and men, teaching men to fear the power of women, and destroyed a universe of practices, beliefs, and social subjects whose existence was incompatible with the capitalist work discipline, thus redefining the main elements of social reproduction" (165). Through the witch trials, women were relegated to the domestic sphere and charged with the (unpaid) reproduction of labor power and, at the same time, the demonization and suppression of pre-modern "magical" views of the world paved the way for capitalist temporalities and spatial configurations. The magical view, for example, that certain times, days, or places could be lucky or unlucky was incompatible with the capitalist need to implement regimented and homogenous notions of time and space. To acclimate workers to the wage, the workday, and the workplace, magical worldviews had to be eliminated.

The use of superstition and demonization to subjugate populations to capitalist social relations was soon exported from Europe to the so-called New World. As Federici writes,

> Witch-hunting and charges of devil-worshiping were brought to the Americas to break the resistance of local populations, justifying colonization and the slave trade in the eyes of the world…. The common fate of Europe's witches and Europe's colonial subjects is

> further demonstrated by the growing exchange, in the course of the 17th century, between the ideology of witchcraft and the racist ideology that developed on the soil of the Conquest and the slave trade. (198)

Indigenous spiritual and cultural practices were cast as satanic, just as the devil was increasingly portrayed as a black man. These relays between the mythologies used to subjugate women and those deployed against colonized and enslaved peoples highlight the important continuities between the racialized and gendered aspects of capitalism. Just as capitalism must be understood as *racial* capitalism, it must also be understood as *gendered*. The production of gender, alongside and very much entangled with the production of race, is fundamental to the establishment, justification, and perpetuation of capitalism's uneven forms of exploitation. While we might say a good deal about this relationship, my interest at the moment is in the centrality of *satanic imaginaries* in the development of racial and gendered capitalism. As Sollée observes, "The witch-as-wicked-woman trope may have gotten its start in the church, but the state ran with it, and witchcraft morphed from heresy to treason" (25). However, we should note exactly *how far* the state (and capital) ran with this ideology: quite literally to the ends of the earth.

Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen use the concept of "moral entrepreneurship" to describe the means by which discourses on evil—and the forms of demonization that these entail—take hold and become institutionalized. As they argue,

> Although there is most often some underlying social tension enabling a discourse on evil to find support, the support must be mobilized by 'moral entrepreneurs.' These are generally the ones who formulate and promote theories of evil and mobilize activities to root out perceived evil…. When really successful, the role the 'experts in evil' play may

> become institutionalized and the system they construct may influence society for a long time. (18)

Certainly, we can read priests, magistrates, and inquisitors as some of the most visible and prominent moral entrepreneurs of the European witch hunt. By preaching against witchcraft, leading witch hunts, conducting trials, doling out punishments, and so forth, these moral entrepreneurs did not simply enforce a dominant morality but, rather, exploited *existing social tensions* to produce new discourses on evil. This is perhaps most apparent in the fact that witch lore often drew on the utopian imaginaries of the peasantry—as often expressed through forms of popular resistance and revolt—but perverted these and re-cast them as evil and demonic. As Federici points out, "[T]he witch was the living symbol of 'the world turned upside down,' a recurrent image in the literature of the Middle Ages, tied to millenarian aspirations of subversion of the social order…. The nocturnal Sabbat appears as a demonization of the *utopia* embodied in the rebellion against the masters and the break-down of sexual roles" (177, emphasis mine).

In many ways, we might read figures like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Franklin Graham, and James Dobson as performing similar forms of moral entrepreneurship in the late 20th century, recasting feminist utopian imaginaries as fundamentally evil. While in a certain sense relegated to the evangelical right, these men and others like them developed a vivid and lurid discourse on evil—one drawing heavily on long-standing tropes and traditions—that quickly found its way into mainstream culture. Like the priests and magistrates of the Middle Ages, the evangelical leadership of the 20th century acted as moral entrepreneurs for what would become, in a sense, their own modern witch hunt.

This brings us back to Pat Robertson's infamous claim, an accusation that, notably, associates feminists with both witchcraft *and* resistance to capitalism. The declaration comes from a 1992 fund-raising letter written by the televangelist and media moghul, placing its distribution near the end of the Satanic Panic, a moral panic of the 1980s and 1990s centering on allegations of crimes related to Satanism. Not unlike the witch trials of the Middle Ages, the Satanic Panic involved a relatively widespread belief—particularly among Christian fundamentalists—in a secret conspiracy of devil-worshippers engaged in widespread and revolting acts of "satanic ritual abuse." Evangelical writers and anti-cult activists Bob and Gretchen Passantino, also writing in 1992, describe these alleged rituals in particularly lurid terms:

> A young teenage girl, impregnated during a satanic ritual, is forcibly delivered of her nearly term baby, forced to ritually kill the child and then to cannibalize its heart as cult members watch. Another girl, a small child, is sealed inside the cavity of a disemboweled animal and 'rebirthed' by her cultic captors during a ceremony. A pre-school class is systematically sexually, emotionally, and physically abused as part of a nationwide, nearly invincible network of satanic pedophiles and pornographers. A young girl is thrown into an electrified cage with wolves and ritually tortured to deliberately produce a "wolf personality," part of her multiple personality disorder. (quoted in Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen 106-107)

Such stories were widespread enough to be featured on cable news programs—including a widely-viewed 2-hour Geraldo Rivera special—and were the subject of a number of "non-fiction" best-sellers. Particularly prominent were memoirs, like Lawrence Pazder and Michelle Smith's best-selling *Michelle Remembers* (1980), which recounted the formerly repressed

memories of both former Satanists and victims of satanic cults. Like the cultural canons that drove the European witch hunt, the memoirs, documentaries, and television news specials of the Satanic Panic perpetuated a culture of fear in the midst of which, as Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen note, "people were arrested, charged, and found guilty on what hindsight reveals, and contemporary critical thinking revealed, as the flimsiest of evidence" (107).

One of the best known cases involved Paul Ingram, a police officer from Olympia, WA, who was accused in 1988 of sexual abuse and the ritual murder of at least 25 babies, allegations which originated in the supposedly recovered memories of his daughter. As Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen explain, these memories "surfaced after participation at a church retreat where one of the prominent speakers, thought to have such 'gifts of the spirit,' got a vision that Ingram's eldest daughter had been molested by her father" (126). As the investigation proceeded, Ingram confessed to every allegation, including allegations invented on the spot by a psychological investigative consultant. These confessions involved detailed descriptions of the murders and the burial of the bodies. Mark Papworth, the forensic archaeologist assigned to the case, however, found no evidence that the supposed burials had actually happened. But when Papworth's results were reported, the police investigator's alleged response was, "If you were the devil would you leave any evidence?" (Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen 127). Perhaps one of the most nefarious elements of supernatural crimes, after all, is that you can never *really* trust the evidence (or lack thereof). So much of it, quite simply, is a matter of faith. Not unlike the witch trials, as Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen put it, "lack of evidence for the conspiracy was turned into evidence for an especially devious conspiracy" (125). And, as in the case of Ingram, any convictions—rightful or not, related or not—quickly become evidence that the satanic conspiracy at large must be real.[10]

[10] For more on the Ingram case, see Wright, Kakutani, Spitzer, and Associated Press, "Thurston County: Abuse Case Has Some Crying Foul."

That the Satanic Panic in many ways reflected and resembled the witch trials is perhaps unsurprising, given that both draw on a shared mythology of the satanic.[11] However, as Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen observe, the correspondences are far more direct than simply shared mythologies. The "witch-hunters" of the Satanic Panic actually drew directly on the manuals of the Middle Ages, like the *Malleus Malificarum*, reissuing a number of them in direct translation and adapting others in more modern books on the "dark arts." Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen write that "[t]he use of witch-hunting lore was copious. Somewhat incredibly, witch-hunters' manuals and cases against accused witches were used to bolster claims to the historicity of the satanic conspiracy" (110). As panic grew, anachronism and tautology became the fundamental forms of evidentiary reasoning. Nevertheless, sensationalism both in the newsroom and in the pulpit produced a critical mass of true believers. For these believers, the Satanists of the 20th century were simply the surviving offspring of the 16th century witches. For Pat Robertson to describe feminists as witches, anti-capitalists, socialists, and child-killers, then, is to draw directly on a long-standing mythology of the satanic, a mythology that was used to

[11] While I, like many others, draw a parallel between the witch trials and the Satanic Panic, I hope to further develop this analysis. After all, my account of the witch trials, drawing largely on Federici, places them within a context of capitalist primitive accumulation. I've not (yet) given the same type of attention to the Satanic Panic. However, I imagine that there are some important parallels to tease out here—specifically due to the fact that Evangelical Christianity experienced a huge cultural insurgence (i.e., through the homeschool movement, the Christian music and entertainment industry, and the political consolidation of the Christian right) at precisely the same moment that neoliberal capitalism begins to find its fullest expression. It's also notable that this comes on the heels of the 1960s & 1970s, during which we witness both a popularization of New Age spiritualties and a proliferation of anarchist, communalist, and other left-leaning experiments within Protestant Christianity. My hunch here is that moral entrepreneurs like Robertson, Falwell, and Dobson played a crucial role in the reorientation of Christian praxis away from communal and utopian projects and towards things like personal responsibility, anti-abortion advocacy, and the formation of a unified voting bloc (a bloc often unified by its fundamental opposition to abortion). It is no surprise, in such a context, that Satanism would be associated with cults and communes—an association that, in effect, demonizes even Christian communal experiments. And, of course, witch lore's fundamental preoccupation with reproductive control makes it the perfect mythology for producing a moral discourse in opposition to abortion.

demonize women and other marginalized persons not only in the Middle Ages but also, quite literally, into the present.[12]

**Part 2: Living Deliciously**

"Liberty, symbolized by the story of the temptation, is your Antichrist; liberty, for you, is the Devil. Come, Satan, the one slandered by priests and kings, so that I may embrace you, so that I may hold you to my chest! Long have I known you, and you know me too. Your works, oh beloved of my heart, are not always beautiful nor good; but only they bestow meaning upon the universe and prevent it from being absurd."
(Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, "Concerning Justice in the Revolution and in the Church")

"Satan, Satan, Satan, get beside me! Satan, Satan, Satan, fortify me!"
(Lingua Ignota, *Caligula*)

"We is them ghetto witches / Speaking in tongue bitches"
(Princess Nokia, "Brujas")

Robert Eggers' 2016 horror film *The Witch* seeks to imagine what the witch panics of the past might have been like for those wrapped up in them. Set in 17th-century colonial America, the film tells the story of a family who has been exiled from a presumably Puritan settler community due to a theological dispute between the father, William, and the leaders of the settlement. Too proud to submit to the community, William is forced to lead his family of seven—wife, Katherine, and children, Thomasin, Caleb, Jonas, Mercy, and Samuel—into the wilderness where they must find a way to survive on their own. While the task of homesteading is certainly hard enough, the family soon encounters a spate of uncommonly bad luck including crop failure and, more tragically, the disappearance of their infant child Samuel. The narrative

[12] It's important to note that, in addition to its largely American revitalization during the Satanic Panic, the witch-hunt never really ended. As Federici notes, "Witch hunting did not disappear from the repertoire of the bourgeoisie with the abolition of slavery. On the contrary, the global expansion of capitalism through colonization and Christianization ensured that this persecution would be planted in the body of colonized societies and, in time, would be carried out by the subjugated communities in their own names and against their own members" (237). As examples of this, Federici points to the spate of witch-burnings that occurred in Western India in the 1840s, as well as witch-hunts of the 1980s and 1990s occurring in Nigeria, Kenya, and Cameroon.

suggests that, while the eldest daughter Thomasin was watching him, Sam was snatched by a witch who may live deep in the woods. Before long we witness this witch killing the baby and bathing in his blood.

While many viewers interpret these scenes as a rather straight-forward depiction of what is *actually* happening—that there is truly a witch who lives in the woods and that the family's suffering is fully a result of her malevolence—I'm hesitant to accept such readings at face value. Instead, I'm inclined to read these explicit representations of the witch as an attempt to make vivid for viewers the mythologies through which the family interprets their existence. Such a reading would suggest that there is no *actual* witch but, instead, that these representations of the witch make vivid the dominant mythologies through which Thomasin's family interprets the world and their place in it. We see the world, in other words, as they see it. Ultimately, however, my primary concern is not the nature of the witch's existence as such. Rather, I'd like to suggest that reading the witch as a visual embodiment of the family's fears and superstitions is important because it redirects our focus from the supernatural (or "evil") to the very real social dynamics that shape the family's relations with one another. As bad luck, paranoia, and suspicion slowly take over the family, we can see how, in a certain sense, they *produce* the witch. Whether we interpret the witch as actually existing or not, the alleged witch becomes a symbol for the tension and fear that plague the family.

From this perspective, the film is less a story about a family *cursed and terrorized* by a witch but, rather, the story of a family that, seeking some explanation for their misfortune, *produces* a witch. As Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen write, "Ideas about witchcraft are in one sense all theodicies, explanations for unwarranted suffering…. In such cases, the idea of evil forces acting purely out of malice may hold greater attraction than some cause implicating the

sufferer" (16). This is, after all, is precisely what the witch trials often amounted to: vicious cycles of fear and suspicion, paranoia and blame that created witches and disposed of them in hopes that it would heal the community. As satanic activist, artist, and writer Jex Blackmore puts it, "The fictional dichotomy of 'good' and 'evil' removes the realities of social responsibility and creates space for institutional powers to invent 'others' they perceive as a danger. This supernatural scapegoat for humanity's misfortunes serves to direct anger and anxiety away from the state, especially when the prescription for salvation is to humbly follow the rule of law and support religious institutions" ("Raising Hell"). I would like to suggest that we read *The Witch*—which quite literally features a "supernatural scape*goat*" named Black Phillip—as reflecting precisely Blackmore's point. Rather than dealing with the *actual* social realities that plague the family—i.e., the father's selfishness, the perpetual demonization of the children, and so forth—the figure of the witch offers a displacement for the family's fear and anger and, furthermore, re-establishes the father as the moral and spiritual guide who will protect his family from the powers of evil.

There is one particular scene that provides a useful segue into part two of this chapter. At this point in the film, Sam has already disappeared and the family is haunted by this disappearance, implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) placing the blame for the disappearance on Thomasin. As Thomasin sits by the creek washing laundry with her brother Caleb, her younger sister Mercy sneaks up, declaring, "I be the witch of the woods, and I have come to steal thee!" Mercy runs about as if flying on a broom until Thomasin tells her to stop, complaining, "I be washing father's clothes like a slave, and thou art playing idle." Mercy responds, "It's because mother hates you." As a clear and purposeful reminder that Thomasin is held responsible for Sam's disappearance, Mercy's comment stings. An argument quickly develops during which

Mercy accuses Thomasin of letting the witch take Sam. Caleb interjects that it wasn't a witch, but a wolf—that William had in fact shown him the tracks—but Mercy insists repeatedly that it was a witch. Finally, Thomasin narrows her eyes and stares at her sister. "It was a witch, Mercy" she says, slowly moving towards Mercy:

> You speak aright… Twas I that stole him. I be the witch of the wood…. When I sleep, my spirit slips away from my body and dances naked with the devil. That's how I signed his book. He bade me bring him an unbaptized babe. So I stole Sam, and I gave him to my master. And I'll make any man or thing else vanish alike…. And I'll vanish thee too if thee displeaseth me…. Perchance I'll boil and bake thee, since we're in lack of food…. How I crave to sink my teeth into thy pink flesh! If ever thou tellest thy mother of this, I'll witch thee and thy mother, and Jonas, too!

Mercy shrieks in terror as Thomasin commands her to "stop thy tears and swear thy silence." Mercy, terrified, swears it.

There are a number of ways we might read this scene. On the one hand, we can chalk it up to children's antics or Thomasin simply bullying her sister out of frustration. And, indeed, this is part of it. However, what intrigues me about this moment is that Thomasin inverts the means by which she has been demonized and turns this into a source of power. Accused of, in a sense, colluding with the mythical witch of the woods, Thomasin has tried to proclaim her innocence, but to no avail. Unable to convince her family of her innocence, then, Thomasin finally gives in, embracing demonized status and using it to scare her sister into submission. The figure of the witch is thus converted from a tool of oppression to a tool of resistance to that oppression. While this encounter between sisters obviously does not reflect the scale of the witch hunts, nor is it fully representative of how the figure of the witch has been taken up as a symbol of power, it

reflects in a small way the dynamic I wish to explore in this chapter—and, in many ways, the central dynamic upon which this dissertation hinges: The embrace of one's demonized position as a position of power and resistance.

As I've shown in the first part of this chapter, satanic and demonic imagery has, since at least the Middle Ages, been used to demonize and police social dissidence, and through the figure of the witch, such characterizations have been disproportionately directed towards women. While I've given only a rough and partial sketch of this history, it provides an important backdrop for my primary interest in this chapter: namely, the reclamation of these characterizations as positions of power.[13] There are many sites at which I might track this move, but here I intend to track, in relatively general terms, the history of this inversion in the service of women's liberation, broadly conceived. Following Per Faxneld, I track this inversion beginning with the Romantic poets and Jules Michelet's influential 1862 monograph *La Sorcière*. Then I look at Michelet's influence on the American Suffragettes who embraced both the position of the witch and the figure of Satan in their fight against patriarchal power. I conclude with a brief discussion of the 1960s Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (W.I.T.C.H) and its contemporary revival alongside other forms of witch feminism and satanic activism.

[13] I should clarify here that there are many ways in which the "witch" might be said to represent a source of power, in large part due to the somewhat contested nature of the term. While many practicing occultists, pagans, and Wiccans claim the term "witch," it's also true that such witches often disavow any satanic connotations that the term might carry. After all, these spiritual practices often have little if anything to do with the Christian religious tradition or the Christian figure of the devil. In such instances, an empowering identification with the figure of the witch may have nothing to do with the inversion of Christian mythology. While the church has historically cast all non-Christian spiritual practices—and, in particular, pagan practices—as satanic, these witches are right to refuse this designation, which casts their religious practices in the idiom and mythology of another. However, it's also true that this misrepresentation is precisely how demonization works. And while one response is to refuse this demonized status—to claim, in other words, that the demonizer has (willfully or not) misunderstood—another response is to embrace the demonized position in order to wield it for other purposes. For my present purposes I wish to focus on the latter response. For this reason, I have chosen to focus largely on the figure of the satanic witch.

While writers from John Milton to William Godwin and Percy Shelley have attempted to complicate and even praise the figure of Satan[14], Per Faxneld argues that we find "the most influential celebration ever of the witch *as a Satanist*" in Jules Michelet's 1862 *La Sorcière* (199, emphasis mine).[15] Michelet was a close friend of the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and *La Sorcière*, nominally a scholarly history of witchcraft, casts the witch not as a misunderstood and oppressed pagan—as other defenses of witchcraft had done—but as unequivocally a Satanist and a revolutionary. Taking up dominant mythologies of the witch, particularly those of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, Michelet turns them on their head, lauding precisely those traits for which the witch-hunters demonized women. For instance, where clerics and doctors demonized medical science—and, in particular, advances intended to ease the pain of childbirth—as a refusal to accept God's just punishments, Michelet praises these advances, not simply as life-saving or pain-reducing breakthroughs, but as rebellion against an oppressive God, writing, "Medicine, especially, was the true Satanism, a revolt against disease, the merited scourge of God" (quoted in Faxneld 203). Michelet praises the witch as a practitioner of medicine, as a midwife, as a source of knowledge about contraception, and as an abortion doctor to whom "the weeping girl" can turn for help (quoted in Faxneld 204). Michelet even takes up the mythology of the Witches' Sabbat and the Black Mass, recasting it as a ritual rebellion against God, against social injustices,

[14] Numerous authors trace the positive embrace of Satan as a figure of liberation to John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). However, as Faxneld notes, this perhaps involves a bit of misreading. Faxneld argues that, in Milton, Lucifer is an ambiguous and complex character, but hardly the hero he would become in the hands of later writers. Here he highlights writers like the anarchist William Godwin who, in *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), observes that Milton's Satan is "a being of considerable virtue" (quoted in Faxneld 76). In Godwin, Satan's rebellion against God becomes a model for all resistance to illegitimate and oppressive authority. It is in the work of Godwin's son-in-law, Percy Bysshe Shelley, that, Faxneld suggests, we first encounter an explicitly feminist embrace of Lucifer. Faxneld argues that Shelley's long poem *The Revolt of Islam* (1817) is "perhaps Shelley's most straightforward idealization of Satan as an icon of righteous revolt" (81) and that "Shelley's revolutionary Satanism is combined with what can, without much hesitation, be described as a feminist ideal" (84). While my present purpose is not to dwell at length on these early articulations of what Faxneld calls "satanic feminism," they provide an important backdrop for later feminist reclamations of the figure of the witch.

[15] Faxneld notes that "eulogies to the witch as benevolent *Pagan* are easier to find" (199, emphasis mine).

and even as a form of proto-socialism (Faxneld 205). Further, Michelet conceives of the Witches' Sabbat in distinctly gendered terms, suggesting that the Black Mass "would seem to be [a] redemption of Eve, cursed by Christianity. Woman, at the sabbath, fills every function. She is priest, and altar, and consecrated host, whereof all the people take communion. At the bottom of things, is she not God himself?" (206). Michelet's text, though far afield from the academic history it purports to be, became widely popular. As Faxneld shows, Michelet's revolutionary image of the witch quickly became widespread, influencing a great many writers and thinkers such as American abolitionist Moncure Conway who, in *Demonology and Devil-lore* (1878) compares the witch trials to the slaughter of the revolutionaries who participated in the Paris Commune (206). Due to the specifically *political* forms of dissidence Michelet's influential text attributes to the witch, Faxneld sees Michelet's text as in many ways the origin point for what he calls "satanic feminism."

Perhaps most significant for my present purposes is Michelet's influence on the American abolitionist and suffragette Matilda Joslyn Gage, whose *Woman, Church and State* (1893)—a text that would become popular in the American anarchist movement—includes a lengthy chapter on witchcraft which draws heavily on Michelet's text. While Gage is not the only feminist to invoke the witch as an image of the empowered woman, she is perhaps unique in her emphasis on explicitly satanic elements of witchcraft, ultimately offering, as Faxneld describes it, "an apologetic for Satanism as a form of feminist resistance" (248). In a particularly representative passage from *Woman, Church and State*, Gage builds on Michelet's conception of the Black Mass as an actual historical phenomenon, while emphasizing its feminist elements:

> [A] peculiar and silent rebellion against both church and state took place among the peasantry of Europe, who assembled in the seclusion of night and the forest, their only

> place of safety in which to speak of their wrongs…. Here with wives and daughters, they met to talk over the gross outrages perpetrated upon them. Out of their foul wrongs grew the sacrifice of the 'Black Mass' with women as officiating priestess, in which the rites of the church were travestied in solemn mockery, and defiance cast at that heaven which permitted the priest and the lord alike to trample upon all the sacred rights of womanhood, in the name of religion and law.

While there is no real evidence for the Black Mass as an actual historical occurrence—that is, prior to the emergence of various Satanisms in the 20th century—the myth has nevertheless been invoked and replicated in various forms by social and political dissidents, from the suffragettes to contemporary activists associated with The Satanic Temple.

Gage was not the only suffragette to critique Christianity through a re-evaluation of its archenemy. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the most prominent American suffragettes, also depicts Satan as a hero and comrade. In 1895, Stanton published the first volume of *The Women's Bible*, a best-selling yet controversial work of feminist biblical criticism. In the introduction, Stanton levels a harsh and unambiguous critique of Christianity. Addressing her readers, she describes "the church and clergy" as "the very powers that make [women's] emancipation impossible" and argues that "your political and social degradation are but an outgrowth of your status in the Bible." In her exegesis of Genesis 3, Stanton argues that, while the allegory of the fall has been taken to mean that "woman [is] the author of all our woes," we should instead read Eve as the story's heroine.[16] Stanton argues that "the unprejudiced reader

[16] Such counter-readings provide the perfect example of Faxneld's "hermeneutical principle of revolt" (11). To a large extent, this entire dissertation pivots on a notion of hermeneutical revolt: How, I wish to ask, might a rigorous attempt to subvert accepted readings open up new revolutionary potentials? I read this as in many ways consonant with Calvin Warren's emphasis on nihilist hermeneutics, which, similarly, constitute a liberatory rejection of dominant, normative hermeneutical practices and traditions.

must be impressed with the courage, the dignity, and the lofty ambition of the woman," pointing out that the serpent does not tempt her with riches, luxuries, or other frivolities, but with knowledge. While God has sought to keep humanity ignorant, Satan offers liberation from God through enlightenment.[17] Accordingly, Stanton compares the so-called tempter to "Socrates or Plato" who has "roused in the woman that intense thirst for knowledge, that the simple pleasures of picking flowers and talking with Adam did not satisfy." Reading Eve as, through her collusion with Satan, the originator of all critical inquiry, Stanton argues that "the mother of the race has been the greatest factor in civilization." Far from being the originator of humankind's downfall, Eve is the supreme liberator of humankind, freeing humanity from the ignorance imposed on it by an oppressive god.

Due to its harsh critique of Christianity and its blatantly oppositional readings of scripture, *The Women's Bible* caused immediate controversy, both with the general public and within the women's suffrage movement. Feeling that its attacks on Christianity were both offensive and unwarranted, the National American Womens' Suffrage Association formally and publicly denounced the text—all while Stanton was the association's honorary president. As Faxneld's describes it, the conflict not only unified liberal feminists against more radical elements of the movement, but also pushed Stanton's concerns regarding the role of Christianity in the subjugation of women to the bottom of the agenda. In the end, the conflict over *The Women's Bible* dissolved much of Stanton's influence within the mainstream feminist movement.

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[17] T. J. Cowgill (aka King Dude) tells a similar story in his 2011 folk song "Lucifer's the Light of the World": "Eve walked down to the garden / Serpent said shall we begin? / If God up above wants you so dumb / What kinda devil does that make him? // Adam's scorn was upon Eve / He said woman you made me sin / Eve said the true God came down from above / Took a snake just to let the light in // Tell me what's that light? / Lucifer's the light! / Tell me what's that light? / Lucifer's the light! / Tell me what's that light? / Lucifer's the light! / Lucifer's the light of the world."

While Faxneld notes that "Stanton was uncommonly radical and blunt in her antagonism towards Christianity, both in an international and an America feminist context" (139), it would be a mistake to read her as alone in such criticisms. Perhaps the most famous anarchist feminist of the era, Emma Goldman, was also adamant in her opposition to patriarchal Christianity. In her essay "Woman Suffrage," itself largely a critique of the suffrage movement, Goldman points out that women, in their tireless service to Christianity, have often played a fundamental role in propping up the very institution that has legitimated and maintained their inferior status:

> Religion, especially the Christian religion, has condemned woman to the life of an inferior, a slave. It has thwarted her nature and fettered her soul, yet the Christian religion has no greater supporter, none more devout, than woman. Indeed, it is safe to say that religion would have long ceased to be a factor in the lives of the people, if it were not for the support it receives from woman. The most ardent churchworkers, the most tireless missionaries the world over, are women, always sacrificing on the altar of the gods that have chained her spirit and enslaved her body. (*Red Emma Speaks* 191)

Goldman's critique of Christianity should be read within the context of her broader critique of morality, a critique that appears heavily influenced by Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Goldman is interested specifically in the role that morality plays in the subordination of women. As she writes, "It is Morality which condemns woman to the position of a celibate, a prostitute, or a reckless, incessant breeder of hapless children" (171). Goldman's heightened rhetoric highlights precisely the types of moral discourse that animated the European witch trials, which, as Goldman wishes to emphasize, relegated the moral, upstanding woman to either the home or the convent. However, Goldman sees a new model of femininity emerging, one that rejects morality wholesale in favor of liberty:

> Fortunately, the Dawn is emerging from the chaos and darkness. Woman is awakening, she is throwing off the nightmare of Morality; she will no longer be bound…. Morality has no terrors for her who has risen beyond good and evil. And though Morality may continue to devour its victims, it is utterly powerless in the face of the modern spirit, that shines in all its glory upon the brow of man and woman, liberated and unafraid. (174)

While Goldman does not invoke Satan[18] in the way that Stanton and Gage do, we can read in these three writers a unified hostility towards Christian morality and their desire to mobilize a counter-discourse centered on a hermeneutics of revolt. In the same way that, as Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen argue, "moral entrepreneurs" mobilize discourses on evil that often function to demonize various forms of social dissidence, we might read the work of Stanton, Gage, and Goldman as mobilizing counter-discourses that "transvalue" dominant values.

While Gage is often attributed with bringing the witch into the feminist movement, a later embrace of the witch as a figure of resistance and revolt took shape in 1968 via a loose network of feminist activist groups known as Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, or W.I.T.C.H. Initially founded in New York City, W.I.T.C.H. quickly spread to a number of cities including Washington, D.C., Chicago, and San Francisco. W.I.T.C.H. emerged not only in confrontation with patriarchal domination in society at large, but also amid struggles within activist organizations. As W.I.T.C.H. participant and long-time feminist activist Laura X recalls,

> Many of us had been in some kind of socialist organization earlier in the 60s. Some of us still were, some of us were driven out by—this the politest way I can put it—the

[18] While not a Satanist, Goldman was reportedly accused of possessing occult powers. As she observes in "The Psychology of Political Violence," "Evidently the American police credit me with occult powers…. But, then, the police are not concerned with logic or justice."

> contradictions between the ideals of radical males and their behavior, which was unconscionable [and] in some cases as horrible as Trump. I remember at one anti-war meeting, a woman got up to speak and some guy who was a major leader shouted, 'Take her off the stage and fuck her.' W.I.T.C.H. organizations were very much speaking to that kind of male entitlement. (quoted in McGill)

W.I.T.C.H. took a radical stance in opposition to both marriage and capitalism which they expressed through protests equally playful and aggressive. Wearing full witch costumes and brandishing broomsticks, W.I.T.C.H. activists hexed New York's financial district, released mice at a Valentine's Day bridal fair in Madison Square Garden, and distributed leaflets that warned, "Always a bride; never a person" (McGill). Heather Booth, a Chicago W.I.T.C.H. activist, describes their appropriation of witch imagery thusly: "One way to reclaim to your identity in the face of oppression and to take the sting out of attacks that may be made on you is to take the word of opprobrium, of criticism, and say, 'OK, I'll own that'" (quoted in McGill).

However, for all their audacity and creativity, W.I.T.C.H. has drawn criticisms regarding its lack of ideological clarity and its propensity towards gender essentialism. As co-founder Robin Morgan has reflected, it seemed that W.I.T.C.H.es had not always "raised our consciousness very far out of our combat boots" (quoted in Sollée 53). Despite these flaws, W.I.T.C.H. provides an interesting case study and an influential example of the embrace of adversarial aesthetics. By embracing the figure of the witch and turning this demonized position into a position of power, then, feminist W.I.T.C.H.es sought not only to invert a symbol of oppression, but also to carve out a space for themselves. It's worth recognizing that oppositional aesthetics—precisely *because* they are for so many off-putting—can enable those who adopt them to engage in a sort of exodus, producing spaces free from the clutches of the mainstream.

While W.I.T.C.H. was ultimately short-lived, I am intrigued by it largely due to its re-emergence nearly 50 years later. Following the election of Donald Trump, W.I.T.C.H. "covens" appeared almost overnight in numerous cities across the United States. These 21st-century W.I.T.C.H.es adopted the aesthetic of their 1960s counterparts and often pushed it even further, dawning head to toe witch costumes that obscured their faces and taking to the streets as a type of witchy black bloc. These activists stridently rejected the cis-normativity and gender essentialism of not only their 1960s precursors, but also within broader discourses on witchcraft. As members of W.I.T.C.H. PDX explain, "As anyone who's ever read a mainstream book on witchcraft knows, there's a lot of heteronormativity and gender essentialism that can be uncomfortable to witches who aren't straight and cisgender. We want to encourage people to think about these concepts in a different and more inclusive way" (Haute Macabre). The re-emergence of W.I.T.C.H. reflects a much broader contemporary trend towards what Kristen Sollée calls "witch feminism," a term Sollée uses to denote the broad embrace the witch as a symbol of resistance to sexism and sexist exploitation in all its forms (9). As Sollée uses the term, witch feminism includes both practitioners of the occult for whom the practice of witchcraft becomes a form of empowerment as well as those who view the witch is simply a symbol of resistance.

In Sollée's account, contemporary witch feminism often involves the use of satanic imagery and, within the broader milieu of satanic activism, there is perhaps no organization more widely publicized than The Satanic Temple. The organization formed in 2013 and first gained notoriety in 2014 for its very public argument (and subsequent lawsuit) alleging that, because the Oklahoma State Capitol had installed a Ten Commandments monument on its grounds, it must

also install a Baphomet statue as a nod to religious pluralism. The subsequent case, *Prescott v. Oklahoma Capitol Preservation Commission*, resulted in the landmark ruling that the placement of the Ten Commandments at the state capitol was unconstitutional.[19] The Satanic Temple's activism surrounding the Oklahoma Ten Commandments Monument—alongside other actions relating to prayer in schools, the homophobia of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church, abortion and Planned Parenthood, "After School Satan" programs, and prayer at city council meetings—is explored in the 2019 documentary *Hail Satan?* by Penny Lane.

Echoing the rhetoric of satanic suffragettes like Matilda Josyln Gage, Lucien Greaves, the co-founder and spokesperson for The Satanic Temple, explains, "We view Satan as a symbolic embodiment of the ultimate rebel against tyranny" (Lane). The Temple's activism largely involves political stunts intended to reveal the hypocrisy of Christian morality and its embeddedness in American political life. Some of these actions amount largely to political pranks, such as their 2013 Pink Mass, a "satanic ritual" that involved homosexual couples kissing over the grave of Fred Phelps' mother and declaring her a lesbian in the afterlife, playing on the Mormon belief that you can baptize the dead and perform a post-mortem conversion. In a video from a press conference following the Pink Mass, an unnamed police officer awkwardly expresses the difficulty of figuring out what, exactly, these activists could be charged with: "It is an unusual crime that we haven't come across, to my knowledge, in a while" (Lane). Reporting on the situation, *Vice* ran a remarkable headline that would, on all accounts, seem better placed a publication like *The Onion*: "Mississippi Police Want to Arrest Satanists Who Turn Dead People Gay."

[19] Amusingly enough, monuments such as this one were erected all over the country in the 1950s—not as the result of church efforts but as part of a Paramount Pictures publicity stunt intended to promote Chartlon Heston's 1956 *Ten Commandments* film. For more see Stange.

Despite what might be dismissed as juvenile political pranksterism, however, The Satanic Temple's activism has often prompted serious outrage, backlash, and even death threats,[20] revealing the power of religious belief even in a supposed era of secular humanism. In 2014, for instance, The Satanic Temple received permission to host a Black Mass at Harvard University on behalf of the Cultural Studies Club. However, in response to mass protests led by the Archdiocese of Boston, Harvard cancelled the event.[21] Another action prompting public revilement was the founding "After School Satan" clubs—complete with satanic coloring books—in a number of cities, as an alternative to after school Christian clubs such as the "Good News Club," the subject of a 2001 Supreme Court decision, *Good News Club v. Milford Central School*, which granted the evangelical club the right to meet on public school grounds. In another case that is still under dispute, The Satanic Temple submitted an application to lead a prayer at a Scottsdale, AZ city council meeting. This application was submitted in response to a 60-year-long Scottsdale City Council tradition of holding public prayers, generally led by Christians but occasionally by other religious adherents, before its meetings. The Temple's appeal was quickly picked up by local news, prompting public outrage, including comparisons to ISIS, death threats, and local citizens bringing holy water to council meetings. As one woman passionately plead to the city council, "There are too many curses on our land and we don't need another curse!" (Lane). Under pressure to make a decision, the city council chose to end the 60-year tradition, replacing it with a "moment of silence," rather than grant Satanists the right to speak.[22]

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[20] Lucian Greaves actually wore a bulletproof vest to the Arkansas unveiling of The Satanic Temple's Baphomet statue due to such threats.

[21] For comparison, just a few years later, the University of Washington refused despite great pressure to withdraw support for the College Republicans' Milo Yiannopolis event, resulting in a shooting by one of Yiannopolis's supporters. See Cauce and Gilbert.

[22] For more on this continued legal battle, see Hutchinson and Longhi.

As the above examples demonstrate, much of The Satanic Temple's activism aims to expose the hypocrisy of public institutions that, while espousing things like religious pluralism and separation of church and state, tend to be anything but plural or separated from religious influence. While such actions show a capacity to elicit passionate outrage, the politics of The Satanic Temple are rarely as revolutionary as such responses might suggest. On the contrary, the Temple's appeals generally involve declarations of liberal humanism, individual liberty, and so forth. Rather than forwarding a more radical critique of liberal values as such, The Satanic Temple aims to expose the hypocrisies of liberal commitments to diversity and inclusion by demonstrating just how easy it is to provoke people to abandon those commitments. In other words, it's about holding liberal democracy to its espoused values, rather than questioning its underlying assumptions. Greaves puts this fairly explicitly: "If Christianity abandons liberal democracy, it will have forfeited the future to Satan. To which I say, 'Hail Satan'" (Lane).

I do not, however, wish to suggest that exposing such hypocrisies is fruitless or that The Satanic Temple is a monolithic entity. Indeed, one of the key elements that *Hail Satan?* explores is conflict within The Satanic Temple. Like most activist organizations, The Satanic Temple's membership has long included both liberal and radical elements—although it would appear that the liberal element has largely seized control of the organization. A few years after their founding, a fundamental split between more radical and more liberal elements occurred, largely due to a controversial performance by Jex Blackmore, at the time the head of the Detroit chapter. Following widespread news coverage of the Temple's activism regarding the Ten Commandments monument, the organization had seen a dramatic increase in membership, with new chapters starting up all over the country (and some chapters abroad as well). This rapid expansion brought about concerns among the Temple's founders regarding the maintenance of

the Temple's image and ways to ensure that affiliated actions reflected the Temple's values. Somewhat ironically, the founders of The Satanic Temple—named for, in their own words, "the Eternal Rebel in opposition to arbitrary authority… the heretic who questions sacred laws and rejects all tyrannical impositions"—agreed that it was time to impose a bit of hierarchy and establish some control over the organization, although not without a degree of hesitancy (The Satanic Temple). Greaves, who had initially envisioned the organization as radically horizontalist and opposed to all forms of hierarchy, puts it somewhat regretfully: "[A]s we cohere to this organizational structure, we have to have a kind of uniform set of rules. We lose some things and we gain some things from that, I guess" (Lane). The result was the institution of a "National Council," which, among other things, had the power to grant charters to new chapters and to regulate membership. This, unsurprisingly, led to a heightened attempt to control the Temple's more anarchic elements.

Blackmore's controversial performance, titled "Subversive Autonomous," was held at an undisclosed location in Detroit in 2018, sometime after the formation of the National Council. While not officially associated with The Satanic Temple, Blackmore's piece was steeped in satanic imagery. During the piece, which she describes as a "ritual," Blackmore speaks from the stage, mimicking the militant and violent rhetoric of much political speech. To the side of her stand two naked men, bound in chains. As she speaks, vertically hanging fluorescent bulbs begin to light up around the men, symbolizing prison bars enclosing everyone attending the ritual. Pig heads—symbolizing, in Blackmore's words, "rapacious institutional and political autocrats"—are brought out and impaled on spikes at the front of the stage ("Subversive Autonomous"). As Blackmore's speech reaches its apex, the bars are smashed, symbolizing liberation and

concluding the ritual. As off-putting as some of the imagery might have been, it is the text of Blackmore's speech that provoked the most controversy. It's worth quoting it here at length:

> After centuries of biblical patriarchal violence, the annihilation of native and diverse cultures, the propagation of racism and homophobia, we owe our oppressors! We owe them hostility, inextinguishable justice, and uncompromising destruction. We outnumber them. We possess the fortitude to bring down powerful men and dismantle racist systems. Their existence is only made possible by our own inaction. They have given us just enough to have something to lose. They have built a system that grinds us down, and they tell us to swallow our grief and our rage in the name of respectability, that obedience is patriotism. There is no model for moving forward. We are the model. Who taught you how to protest? Who taught you how to get mad? Who taught you how to speak up? Cause we are going to disrupt, distort, destroy, and reclaim, resist, and rebuilt! We are going to storm press conferences! Kidnap an executive! Release snakes in the governor's mansion! Execute the president! Hail Satan! (Lane)

The rhetoric of Blackmore's speech in many ways reflects Matilda Joslyn Gage's satanic feminism of a century before. However, the final exhortation to "execute the president," proved too much, even for The Satanic Temple. The National Council quickly disavowed Blackmore and revoked her membership in the organization. As one member of the council put it, "She called for Donald Trump to be killed. That's obviously problematic because we are a nonviolent organization and that is against our ethics…. So Jex Blackmore is no longer a part of the temple at this point" (Lane).

In an interview with *Jezebel*, Blackmore has reflected on her expulsion from the organization, as well as its consolidation of power through the National Council:

> There's been a tendency with Satanism throughout history to be coopted into the realm of men…. To me, that's demonstrative of white men, especially historically rich aristocratic white men, fetishizing this exotic culture of Satanism. The people who have been impacted by the yoke of Satanism as a pejorative have been women and queer people and outsiders who've challenged established systems. I thought the Satanic Temple was a wonderful opportunity to correct that. But we've again seen an organization consolidate power into the hands of a group of men or people who support and act as a mouthpiece for those men. In terms of the power of Satanism as an activist movement, I'm a little bit disillusioned at this point.

Blackmore's comments highlight a very important aspect of Satanism—whether in its carnivalesque LaVeyan forms, its esoteric occult forms, or its political activist forms—namely, its domination by white men. While the Satanist epithet has long been used to *demonize* women, gender nonconforming people, queer and disabled people, and racialized others, its *reclamation*—from Aleister Crowley, to Anton LaVey and Michael Aquino, to Lucien Greaves[23]—has often been dominated by white men. In fact, it's important to recognize that the embrace of oppositional or demonized positions does not in itself constitute a politics. Just as the figure of the witch can be embraced in a range of ways and thus deployed in the service of a

[23]While Crowley was not a Satanist, he invoked the figure of Satan in his occult practices and greatly influenced later Satanisms. Anton LaVey founded the rationalist Church of Satan and Michael Aquino broke away from the Church of Satan to form the more esoterically-oriented Temple of Set. These figures have not been discussed here largely due to the limited scope of this chapter. While these figures have been central to satanic discourse, I do not take them up largely due to their distance from the more politically oriented tradition of satanic feminism. LaVey's Church of Satan, far from an activist organization, focused primarily on carnivalesque antics, blasphemous inversions of Christian rituals, and commitments to individual power and liberty. In fact, LaVey has described his own version of Satanism as "Ayn Rand with trappings" (4). While there are many distinctions to draw between LaVey's Satanism and that of The Satanic Temple, Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen sum it up thusly: "The Church of Satan, formed by its history and its context, made their Satanism a primarily individualist, aesthetic practice; the Temple, shaped by its context, post-Satanism scare and in the midst of 'new Atheism,' is taking a more collectivist, politically activist stand" (220). While both organizations are committedly non-theistic, their politics and their conceptions of the satanic differ greatly. In practice, however, their largely patriarchal structure does not.

range of political positions, so too can the figure of Satan. This seems an important reminder regarding political aesthetics in general: While the aesthetic can play an important role within a political formation, it cannot in itself constitute a politics.

However, just because oppositional aesthetics can be coopted to largely non-oppositional politics does *not* mean that the aesthetic is without political value. As Blackmore explains, taking hold of oppressive symbols and inverting them can be a significant form of empowerment:

> In much of our ritual practice, we are taking traditional symbols of what we see as an oppressive religious institution and destroying those symbols as a form of empowerment. We often use nudity because there is a sense of shame surrounding nudity that still exists and is pervasive today. If I can, I like to use bodies of men. I'm very interested in staying away from the fetishization of the beautiful female body. We have used wine in the past, the idea of kind of, like, choking on wine, because the church uses wine as a metaphor for the blood of Christ, but we see it as a form of oppression and control. (Lane)

Given the power that such symbols exercise over people's lives, this practice of inversion and even desecration can be socially empowering and politically liberating. Blackmore's art and activism, like that of others, draws inspiration from predecessors like W.I.T.C.H. to forward critiques of the state, capitalism, and patriarchy—both within dominant culture and within Satanism.

Activist organizations like The Satanic Temple and W.I.T.C.H. have gained momentum and weight within a broader culture of what Kristen Sollée calls "witch feminism" and what Per Faxneld has called "satanic feminism." While these phenomena are not precisely congruent—largely due to the fact that many "witch feminists" disavow the satanic, drawing their inspiration

from occult, pagan, esoteric, or spiritualist mythologies—there is, as we've seen, a great deal of overlap. Whether invoking the figure of the witch or Satan, contemporary activists and thinkers are finding a source of empowerment in the very symbols and tropes that have historically been used to denigrate and disempower women and other marginalized groups and persons. This has been particularly prevalent in contemporary music cultures, ranging from some of the most popular to some of the most avant garde and experimental. In 2016, rapper Princess Nokia released the song "Brujas," a celebration of her Afro-Latina heritage, linking her own practices of "witchcraft, bitchcraft" to the fact that "my grandmas was brujas." In 2017, pop star Lana Del Rey claimed to have hexed Donald Trump, encouraging her fans to do the same. And in 2019, experimental noise musician Kristen Hayter (aka Lingua Ignota) released *Caligula*, her second album which, much like her previous work, levels a devastating indictment of misogynist violence in a deeply religious idiom, crying out at one point, "Satan, Satan, Satan, get beside me! Satan, Satan, Satan, fortify me!" Film and television, too, have taken up the figure of the witch—often the explicitly satanic witch—as a symbol of womens' liberation: From 2019's *Sabrina* reboot to Anna Biller's 2016 *The Love Witch*. And this is not to mention the countless thought pieces, graphic novels, essays, comic books, and other cultural productions that have, in the past few years, taken up the witch not as an image of oppression but as an image of empowerment.

However, as numerous commentators have pointed out, the current popularity of the witch cannot be divorced from the marketplace, which has in many ways managed to capitalize on and recuperate many of these tendencies. As Sollée puts it, "hex sells," and brands like Urban Outfitters and Sephora have quickly found ways to cash in on this fact, selling tarot cards, sage, healing crystals, and all other sorts of witchy commodities (131). However, in an interesting turn of events, Sephora's "Starter Witch Kit" was taken off the shelves due to massive social media

backlash against the company, in part for its attempt to commodify spiritual practice, but specifically due to its inclusion of white sage in the kit, taken as a blatant form of cultural appropriation due to the plant's use in Lakota smudging ceremonies.

While it is important to recognize this tendency towards commodification and the problems that it causes, I nevertheless read the symbolic inversions of witch feminism and satanic feminism as important reclamations, both in terms of personal empowerment and due to their ability to deprive oppressive symbols and mythologies of their power. But even beyond *personal* empowerment or *symbolic* reclamation, such inversions can also facilitate connection and community, where the *collective* identification with the demonized figure becomes a rallying point. Beyond simply depriving oppressive symbols of their power, these collective inversions inject such symbols with *new* powers that can serve the community. At its most radical, I read in these inversions a politics that aims to refuse assimilation or, to put it in a religious idiom, to refuse salvation. Here I briefly return to two scenes in *The Witch*, a film that, while not originally conceived as a feminist statement, foregrounds precisely this refusal of salvation/assimilation.

While many commentators have read *The Witch* as a narrative about empowerment, it's important to recognize that, even to the extent that this reading is valid, the bulk of the film focuses on the protagonist's demonization and radical *dis*empowerment. In fact, while Thomasin is perhaps subject to the most direct forms of demonization, from the beginning of the film *all* of the children—including the infant, Sam—are demonized and this demonization is deeply internalized. In *The Witch*, we see an image of Christianity through which *all* people—although certainly to uneven degrees—are demonized. Early in the film, we separately witness both

Thomasin and Caleb acknowledging their "evil" natures—Thomasin through a prayer and Caleb while walking in the woods with his father, who prompts him to reflect on this "corrupt nature."

In the latter scene, Caleb and William have left the farm to check some animal traps they've laid in the forest. As they walk through the woods, William forces Caleb to recite a religious litany of sorts about his "corrupt nature." Throughout the litany, Caleb acknowledges that he is "evil" and that for salvation he is dependent on God's mercy. After reciting the litany, Caleb asks his father about his infant brother Sam, who at this point is presumed dead. Specifically, he asks his father if Sam, unable to repent for his sins before his death, is in hell. William attempts to avoid the question, but ultimately admits that Sam *may* have been condemned to hell. It seems clear that William wishes to shield his son from the truth of what the family's religion would actually dictate. (In a later scene, Katherine cries out with a bit more certainty, "Our son *is in hell*!") That Sam, an infant, could be condemned to hell for his sin reveals that, for this family, sin is embedded in one's nature: To be born is to be sinful, and there is no escaping that—not even through death as an infant. The children clearly believe this—after all, what else could they believe?

This gives us important context for the demonization of Thomasin. While everyone is treated as fundamentally "corrupt," Thomasin is the subject of the most suspicion and, as the film reveals, this is often due to her father's refusal to take responsibility for his own faults. For example, we learn that William has sold Katherine's heirloom silver cup to help provide for the family. When Katherine discovers that the cup is missing, she immediately blames Thomasin, while William stands by and allows her to take the blame. (Caleb, similarly, is forced to lie to Katherine on his father's behalf at another point in the film.) However, Thomasin's true demonization occurs when the twins accuse her of being a witch, largely due to her hostile

encounter with Mercy and the subsequent horrors that befall the family. Under this culture of suspicion, William attempts to elicit a confession from Thomasin. Thomasin, once again, declares that she is not a witch. However, as William presses her for a confession, she snaps and finally confesses what she *truly* knows: that William and Katherine were planning to rid the farm of her due to monetary concerns, that William had forced Caleb to take the blame after wandering in the woods, that William had sold the cup and forced her to take the blame, that, in short, William is a hypocrite. It is *William*, not Thomasin or her siblings, who is the villain; *he* is responsible for the family's suffering. At this accusation, William snaps and Thomasin, clearly fearful of her father, quickly deflects, blaming the twins: Jonas and Mercy are the witches.

Now suspecting everyone, William locks Thomasin and the twins in the goats' shed. After some time passes, we witness Thomasin and the twins sitting on the floor, contemplating their situation. Mutually trapped, they seem to have calmed down, no longer blaming each other, though perhaps still suspicious. Thomasin asks the twins, "Are you witches?," to which Jonas sadly and fearfully replies, "Starting to think I am." Just as the children have been forced to internalize a sense of their own "corruption," Jonas now begins to wonder, amid all the suspicion and hostility, if he actually is a witch. How, after all, is one to know? Eggers film reminds us, again and again, that one does not *choose* to be demonized. Apropos Thomasin's already demonized status, there would be nothing to gain from the status of the witch. In the same way that Tommy Tester declares, "Every time I was around them, they acted like I was a monster. So I said goddamnit, I'll be the worst monster you ever saw" (147), we should read Thomasin's ultimate turn towards Satan as following precisely the same logic: They treated her like a witch, and so a witch she became.

It is not until the very final moments of the film that Thomasin finds anything like empowerment and, even then, there is much critical disagreement about how her turn towards the devil should be read. In brief, after a number of violent and often inexplicable events, Thomasin finds herself the only surviving member of the family. Alone on the farm, and with nowhere to go, she is approached by Satan in the form of the family goat, Black Phillip. Like the serpent of Genesis 3, Satan offers Thomasin the opportunity to "live deliciously" and, accepting the offer, Thomasin signs his book. In the final scene of the film, we watch Thomasin follow the goat into the woods, where she finds a group of women dancing naked around a fire. They soon begin to float into the air, laughing. Reflected on Thomasin's face is a look of both ecstasy and pain, as if we are witnessing an encounter with the sublime: the absolutely *other*.

This scene has been read in a number of ways, hinging largely on the degree to which we ought to understand it as "feminist." On the one hand, the scene in which Thomasin signs the devil's book is difficult and ambivalent. Standing behind her, the devil tells Thomasin to remove her shift and we see his gloved hands grasp her shoulders as she signs the book. The sad reality is that Thomasin's "decision" to join with the devil is in many ways a coerced one—she has no other options, after all. And yet, if we read this in the tradition of satanic feminism, we can draw out another thread: One that sees, despite Thomasin's lack of options, a turn towards that which promises a certain type of liberation. As Jex Blackmore puts it in an interview with *Wired*, "While the patriarchy makes witches of only the most socially vulnerable members of society, Eggers' film refuses to construct a victim narrative. Instead it features a declaration of feminine independence." Here the parallel between Thomasin's embrace of the demonic and Tommy Tester's embrace of the monstrous is important: This *embrace*, crucially, is distinct from a

passive *acceptance* of one's demonized status. It is, rather, an active *reclamation* of this status as something that, when taken up, can offer a sort of leverage or power.

We should note that, in terms of the spiritual dualism that has long defined her life, Thomasin has two options. On the one hand, she could repent and seek salvation from God. This is, after all, what she has grown up believing. However, she has also seen that the "godly" life is defined by patriarchal domination—something that feminists like Stanton and Gage were very clear to point out. It's worth recognizing, then, a parallel between this logic of *salvation* that God can offer Thomasin and the logic of *humanization* or *assimilation* that I've discussed throughout this dissertation: In both instances, acceptance and recognition are the reward one might earn by adapting to certain normative standards—standards which, we should remember, must always be exclusionary for *someone*. In many ways, humanization can be read as simply the secular humanist form of salvation. Like God's salvation, redemption and acceptance are offered only to those who willingly submit to the norms, expectations, and rules of society. Thus, while we can read Thomasin's decision to sign the devil's book as coerced, we can also read as a bold and brave refusal of salvation, of assimilation. As Sollée puts it, "Whatever your view, *The Witch* does offer one ecstatic vision of an alternate universe for women to inhabit. A space to find sanctuary with other women unencumbered by God and patriarchy" (116). The film offers, in other words, an alternative to both salvation and assimilation.

However, we should be hesitant to uncritically conflate salvation and assimilation (as well as the rejection of one or the other). Instead, we should consider salvation as having been bound to assimilation: Salvation is only achievable in assimilationist terms—assimilate, and thou shalt be saved. To reject assimilation is to reject the possibility of salvation. Thomasin's refusal of salvation, then, should be understood as both a refusal to assimilate and a rejection of the

assumption that salvation is the greatest good or the ultimate purpose in life. Salvation, in other words, is deemed *not worth the requirement* of assimilation. This is, however, not without risk. To refuse assimilation and reject salvation is inevitably, to lose *something* (even if this something ends up being largely a certain *idea* of hope or futurity)—and it is often something that, at the time one takes the risk, one can't fully know. This is, after all, what makes the leap towards the *weird* both a scary prospect and a path towards new possibilities.[24] Thomasin's decision reflects a recognition that salvation, because it is inextricably bound to assimilation, can never deliver on its promises—and, perhaps, for this reason it's worth taking a risk in the hope of something radically different.

I read this recognition as, to a certain degree, similar to Calvin Warren's understanding of political hope. In Warren's view, hope has been inextricably bound to the political: To reject the "logic of the Political" (defined as "linear temporality, bio-political futurity, perfection, betterment, and redress") is thus to reject hope ("Black Nihilism" 218). Warren, however—arguing that political hope will never deliver on its promises—wants to find ways "to wrest hope from the clutches of the Political" (244). While I am somewhat ambivalent about Warren's argument here—largely due to a lack of clarity regarding what *precisely* constitutes the "political"—his more general point that we have been conditioned to understand hope in cruelly optimistic ways resonates here. I would suggest, then, that like political hope, salvation

[24] This ambiguity is similarly reflected in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's proclamation, directed at Satan, that "[y]our works, oh beloved of my heart, are not always beautiful nor good; but only they bestow meaning upon the universe and prevent it from being absurd" (quoted in Faxneld 93). There is a recognition here that, contra appeals to "beauty" or "goodness" (often associated with the divine), we might reach towards other terms of value: meaning, understanding. Unsurprisingly, this is precisely what Satan offers to humankind in the garden: understanding, knowledge, freedom from ignorance. By eating the forbidden fruit, Eve gains an understanding of the world and, if we follow Elizabeth Cady Stanton's reading, thus initiates the tradition of critical thought. But as anyone who has engaged in critical thought knows, it's not always butterflies and rainbows. In fact, it can be rather devastating. This is particularly true when one encounters something—much like the weird—that radically undermines one's frameworks for understanding the world. For a person of faith, like Thomasin, the failure of the divine order and its promise of salvation is certainly one such thing.

constitutes a cruel optimism of sorts—and, perhaps, we can read *The Witch* as thus expressing a desire to wrench salvation from the clutches of assimilation, even if this requires one to fully reject salvation in the process.

**Conclusion: Nihilism, Negativity, and Anti-Assimilationist Politics**

Ultimately, in contemporary revisions of Lovecraft, in witch feminism, and in the embrace of the satanic, we can track an attempt to reclaim and invert a demonized position, turning it into a position of power and resistance. Unlike attempts to disavow one's demonized position, this embrace constitutes, in my view, a rejection of assimilationism. If capitalism relies on a graduated sense of the human in order to justify its uneven forms of exploitation—particularly along the lines of race and gender—then I'm interested in how these narratives and activisms, rather than claiming the privileges of a "full humanity," stake their claims in an anti-human embrace of the monstrous. In my view, this embrace of the monstrous may constitute just part of a "transvaluation of values" that is a necessary component of moving beyond racial and gendered capitalism. While humanism offers salvation, it is incapable of delivering on its promises—and, for this reason, we should reject any politics that assumes one can be saved without destroying the world as we know it.

I wish to suggest that these impulses towards the negative and the nihilistic resonate broadly throughout culture and offer generative spaces for thinking against the stale and the inept humanist, assimilationist politics that inform most liberal modes of reform and resistance. It is in part through such narratives and practices that, as Emma Goldman might put it, we refuse to be made victims of morality, and through these nihilistic gestures, dismantle the moral and metaphysical habits of thought that, to borrow Samuel Beckett's lovely image, "chain the dog to

its vomit." There is, after all, perhaps no better image of cruel optimism than the dog who, smelling something promising, laps up its vomit again and again, only to create more of the same vile sludge.

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