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# (In)Human Anatomies: Constructions of Whiteness and Otherness in the Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft

Katherine Avery

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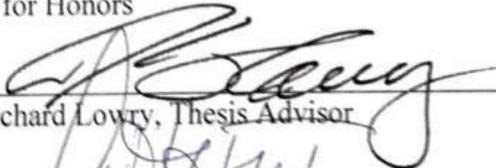
(In)Human Anatomies  
Constructions of Whiteness and Otherness in the Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft

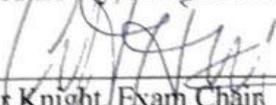
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by

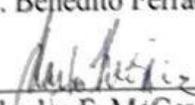
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## Introduction

“The White, Aeon-Dead World”

H.P. Lovecraft and Geographies of Whiteness

“We are Aryans... Let us preserve and glory in our own inherited Western life  
...If a certain number of outlanders desire to dwell separately  
among us, it may be politic to let them – at least, for a time. But let us swear by the living God,  
as we respect ourselves as free Northern white men, that they shall lay not a hand on our institutions,  
and inject not an ideal of theirs into the massed inheritance which is ours”

- H.P. Lovecraft, 67-68, *Selected Letters II*

“It was quite evident that they had never before seen anyone  
from the white race – from whose complexion, indeed, they seemed to recoil”

- Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*

In April and May of 1929, Howard Phillips Lovecraft (Gent.) embarked upon a tour extending “from Jamestown, in Virginia, to the Southerly Part of His Majesty’s New Hampshire Grants, Latterly call’d Vermont” (“Observations,” 32). Though he was, for the duration of his adult life, a man of (at times extremely) limited means, H.P. Lovecraft’s love of travel brought him not only on lengthy, rambling walks through his beloved city of Providence, Rhode Island, but also on a surprising number of trips across the eastern seaboard. Indeed, Lovecraft’s travels brought him from places as far south as the Florida Keys, to as far north as Quebec, Canada.<sup>1</sup> His 1929 trip, one of a few that he would make south, brought him through Washington, D.C., Richmond, and ultimately to the city of Williamsburg, Virginia. Williamsburg, of course, was not the principal aim of Lovecraft’s trip; he would go on to visit the cities of Jamestown, Yorktown, and Fredericksburg before making his way back north. Yet his impression of the city – which was even then undergoing restoration for its living-colonial-history tourism – is nonetheless of significant interest.

Well aware of Williamsburg’s endowment by the Rockefeller foundation, Lovecraft acknowledged it as “one of the best-preserv’d colonial towns in the country,” and described to his readers its history as both an early American settlement and as the one-time Capitol of the “Colony of Virginia” (“Observations,” 42). Mentioned within this history was the city’s status as the “seat of William & Mary College, founded in 1693,” whose Wren building he admired on a tour led by a “very bright young

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, his piece “A Description of the Town of Quebeck” (1930-31) is, according to S.T. Joshi, “the single longest work Lovecraft ever wrote – and among the best” (*I Am Providence*, 715).

student” (“Observations,” 42). Of particular fascination is Lovecraft’s description of Williamsburg’s Bruton Parish Church, whose chapel and crypt he “amply” explored, and whose churchyard he deemed, “bar none, the most hauntingly picturesque I have ever seen” (“Observations,” 42). High praise from, in the words of Stephen King, “the twentieth century’s greatest practitioner of the classic horror tale” (Wohleber). In concluding his description of his adventure, Lovecraft predicted that, upon its completion, Williamsburg would furnish “without doubt, one of the most impressive evocations of the colonial past that America can display,” and vowed that he “must revisit Williamsburg when the restorations are compleat [sic], perhaps two to five years hence” (*Travels*, 43). He never did.

One of several visits chronicled within his unpublished travelogue-essay, “Travels in the Provinces of America,” Lovecraft’s Williamsburg trip was transcribed in, as one biographer puts it, “flawless eighteenth century idiom” (“Observations,” 61). The language of the piece is marked by eighteenth-century spellings and syntax, and it concludes with a rather shocking byline: “GOD SAVE THE KING!” (*Travels*, 61). Though peculiar in itself – and certainly appropriate, given Williamsburg’s colonial past – this tendency towards an eighteenth-century aesthetic was actually quite characteristic of Lovecraft, and had been from an early age. Since his childhood, Lovecraft had been possessed of a pronounced Anglophilia, and his identification with the country and culture of colonial Britain was such that, as Lovecraft recalled in 1916, “when my grandfather told me of the American Revolution, I shocked everyone by adopting a dissenting view... Grover Cleveland was grandpa’s ruler, but Her Majesty, Victoria, Queen of Great Britain & Ireland & Empress of India commanded my allegiance. ‘God Save the Queen!’ was a stock phrase of mine” (*SL I*, 34).

Indeed, Lovecraft professed himself to be “at heart an Englishman despite my American birth,” and took pride in an ancestry comprised of “unmixed English gentry” – a phrase that would, appropriately, be used as the title of the first chapter in S.T. Joshi’s *I Am Providence*, the most comprehensive biography of Lovecraft to date (*SL I*, 10). This Anglocentrism was, moreover, dependent largely on a rhapsodic preoccupation with the (white) past, or in any case a particular vision thereof. Lovecraft’s early correspondence is marked not only by a fixation with the eighteenth century, but by a

*performance* of it. Letters are frequently dated two centuries earlier than their actual composition, 1718 substituted for 1918, or 1724 for 1924, a self-conscious reflection of Lovecraft's own sense of anachronism: "my spirit seems actually to be living in 1715 rather than 1915," he confessed in a letter to Reinhardt Kleiner, "The fact is, I was born 200 years too late" (*SL I*, 19). Lovecraft's penchant for travel – and his accompanying interest in old architecture – is not merely that of the itinerant antiquarian: it is the search of a man for a sense of identity, one predicated upon a fading (if not wholly imagined) sense of Anglo-Saxon supremacy, writ large and literally upon the American landscape. For all his centrality to the canon of American horror literature – and that of New England in particular – Lovecraft maintained an 'American' identity that was fundamentally qualified by his attachment to Anglo-Saxondom. His 1923 remark to James F. Morton is, in this sense, telling:

*Yes – I guess Ol' New-England can give the rest of America points on historic beauty. But OLD ENGLAND. Honestly, if once I saw its venerable oaks and abbeys, manor-houses and rose gardens, lanes and hedges, meadows and mediaeval villages, I could never return to America. The only reason that I don't save like hell to get in on Dench's tour is that I simply couldn't come back, once I saw the ancient glories and monuments of my race.*

*Selected Letters I, pp. 210*

Lovecraft's sense of dislocation must, then, be understood in terms of the specifically ethnic context that attends it: Anglo-Saxon whiteness. Lovecraft's epistolary exclamations of "GOD SAVE THE KING!" are not merely comedic references to an idealized past, a literary quirk of an author looking backward in time. They come also to signify, in Lovecraft's writings, a kind of nationalistic, even racialized fervor – an invocation of a whitewashed past that as fantastic (and as destructive) as any monster he aimed to create.

H.P. Lovecraft located whiteness, as does much of Western culture, art, and literature, at the privileged center of humanity. Where a human character is extant in a state of any real agency, they are almost without exception written to be white men of a certain ethnic and social demographic. Frequently wealthy and almost inevitably of a scholarly bent, the 'privilege' that these characters enjoy is tangible not merely at the sociological level but at the level of narrative.

Between themselves, Lovecraft's (white) protagonists run the gauntlet of higher education, including at least two professors and many more students, nearly all of whom have matriculated at the

fictional Miskatonic University. The protagonist of “The Whisperer in Darkness” is, likewise, an instructor of literature there. “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward” sees its characters pursue degrees in medicine at Miskatonic (along with, of course, the secret of re-animation). The Rhode Island School of Design sees one of its own students immortalized in the pages of “The Call of Cthulhu,” where – as art students are like to do – he finds himself driven nearly to madness over the state of his art. Some characters rise to even higher, ivy-clad heights: “Cthulhu’s” Professor Angell is Professor Emeritus of Semitic Languages at Brown University. Even Tom Malone of “The Horror at Red Hook” is, apparently, a graduate of Dublin College. “Lovecraft’s Anglo-Saxon, New-England based protagonists,” as Leif Sorenson puts it, provide the lens through which their respective tales are viewed (Sorenson, 503). Such lenses are, however, inherently tinted with unacknowledged privilege. Existing as they do in narratives of cosmic existentialism, these characters are made to function as representatives for – and therefore, are emblematic of – humanity, cast in sharp relief against a backdrop of ruptured reality and eldritch monstrosity. Humanity, at least as Lovecraft defines it, is by no means an equal-opportunity qualifier, inaccessible to those who fall outside of Lovecraft’s specific (though unsurprising) parameters. Though we all, as the saying goes, might be of one race – the *human* race – it is clear that some of us are considered more human than others.

Yet, even though Lovecraft’s works do not deviate from this equation of whiteness with humanity, the very nature of the horror of which his – white – characters are the focus render *both* qualities somewhat unstable. Even as whiteness is cemented as a core quality of human identity, it cannot help but be undermined by the threat under which that humanity is placed. Though Lovecraft’s white male characters act (and, indeed, are the only humans that seem able to do so), the actions they take are frequently posited as impotent, even futile, in the face of a force immeasurably more powerful than themselves. Because so much of Lovecraftian fiction works to disrupt conventions of human significance, and because Lovecraft cannot help but construct his humans as white, both whiteness and humanity are revealed to be insubstantial. Besieged by the threat of cosmic insignificance, they are robbed of much of

their potency. What does Azathoth – that “blind idiot god” at the center of creation – care for the Anglo-Saxon? What interest could Cthulhu have in the Caucasian?

Even as Lovecraft espoused white supremacist ideology, anxiety about his own whiteness runs all through his correspondence and writings. In one 1923 letter, the phrase “GOD SAVE THE KING!” is preceded by Lovecraft’s demand that “Nothing must disturb by undiluted English ancestry,” and followed by a rather dramatic assertion of his claim to Aryan identity: “I am naturally a Nordic – a chalk-white, bulky Teuton... a conqueror of Celts and mongrels and founder of Empires... a blond beast of eternal snows and frozen oceans... for was I not born with yellow hair and blue eyes – the latter not turning dark till I was nearly two, and the former lasting till I was over five?” (*SL I*, 227-228). A similarly hysterical monologue accompanies a 1921 usage of the phrase: “I am essentially a Teuton and barbarian; a Xanthochroic Nordic... kin to the chalk-white conquerors of the cursed, effeminate Celts... Grrr... Give me a drink of hot blood with a Celtic foe’s skull as a beaker! Rule, Britannia... GOD SAVE THE KING” (*SL I*, 155-156).

In these rather elaborate professions of Teutonic identity, one may observe, further, the intense self-consciousness – even anxiety – that Lovecraft exhibits with regard to his own whiteness. Both display a kind of exaggerated theatricality, whatever irony they might possess is undercut by the specificity and violence (both literal and figurative) that attend them. Indeed, their references to “Nordic” and “Teutonic” lineage, compounded by the claim to “chalk-white” racial identification, works to underscore the desperation of this attempt to consolidate and assert white identity – in large part, perhaps, because its inherent fragility was so apparent. As Lovecraft wrote in 1930, “It is *because* the cosmos is meaningless that we must secure our individual illusions of values, direction, and interest by upholding the artificial streams which gave us such worlds of salutary illusion” (*SL III*, 208). Whiteness – and the necessity of its assertion, however artificial – thus may be seen a means by which Lovecraft, and white, Anglo-Saxon society more broadly, could orient itself in an otherwise meaningless cosmos.

Whiteness, then – or at least the disturbance thereof – thus becomes a mechanism for the inspiration of horror. The animus of racial anxiety lies at the core of Lovecraftian constructions of horror. Unlike other American horror writers, such as Edgar Allan Poe, it is not simply one of his themes, but fundamental productive force to his fiction. In nearly every single piece of horror fiction that Lovecraft wrote, whiteness is placed under siege. Frequently, the fragility of its boundaries – and its claims to superiority – are exposed and destroyed. This, more so than any monster that Lovecraft created, is the true horror of Lovecraft’s fiction: the premise that whiteness does not and cannot preserve the individual, his civilization, and even humanity itself.

The goal of this thesis is to explore the ways in which H.P. Lovecraft, both consciously and unconsciously, constructed his horror tales around the act of “making whiteness strange” (Dyer, 4). In Looking closely at Lovecraft’s representations of the Other, and in following its movement through his configurations of terror, one may map out a landscape of racial terror and monstrosity that, as Timothy H. Evans so aptly put, offers “an intensity of experience beyond anything for sale at Colonial Williamsburg” (Evans, 114).

## Part I.

### Man Made Monster: Human Others, “The Horror at Red Hook,” and H.P. Lovecraft

They may have been people,  
or what once were, or might have been, people.  
Only the gods know who can inhabit this morbid maze.”  
- H.P. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters I*, 270.

Of New York’s Lower East Side in 1922, Howard Phillips Lovecraft once wrote: “I find it hard to conceive of anything more utterly and ultimately loathesome... 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 moulded from some stinking viscous slime of earth’s corruption” (*Selected Letters I*, 333). As has often been observed by scholars, writing about race seemed in some way to galvanize Lovecraft. His prose, already more than verbose, becomes gripped with a strange fervency, cluttered with adjectives wrought in a frenzy of fascinated abjection. The “Italo-Semitico-Mongoloid” immigrants he speaks of are soundly ejected from the human, rendered in shades of the grotesque (*SL I*, 333). Descriptions of their persons and actions are attended by a sense of abhorrent ambiguity – “nebulous” and “viscous” corruptions that are, in their way, far more substantial than his human (and far less elaborately described) whites (*SL I*, 333). To say that Lovecraft harbored a disgusted fascination with – and hatred of – non-white and ethnic others is an understatement of cyclopean (indeed, monstrous) proportions.

These epistolary sentiments translate easily, if perhaps more guardedly, to Lovecraft’s fiction. In his earliest works, such as “The Street” and “The Horror at Red Hook,” racial and ethnic minorities are depicted in categorically negative (and similarly florid) terms. “The Street,” for example, is essentially a tale of urban blight, wherein an unnamed colonial street built by “good, valiant men of our blood” sinks into squalor and – horror of horrors – racial diversity (*TCF*, 65). By and by, “New kinds of faces appeared in The Street; swarthy, sinister faces with furtive eyes and odd features, whose owners spoke unfamiliar words” (*TCF*, 67). Inexplicably gripped by a desire “to launch an orgy of slaughter for the extermination

of America and of all the fine old tradition which The Street had loved,” The Street’s foreign residents are framed as actively and violently antagonistic to the implicitly Anglo-Saxon America that Lovecraft so cherished (*TCF*, 68). They are, of course, punished accordingly. In a strange, brutal wish-fulfillment, The Street implodes on itself, leaving nothing intact but “two ancient chimneys and part of a stout brick wall” (*TCF*, 69). Lovecraft goes so far as to specify that nothing “that had been alive [came] alive from the ruins” (*TCF*, 69). A *deus ex machina* with a (white) nationalistic agenda, this apocalyptic ‘happy ending’ posits near-genocidal extermination as a necessary, even laudable resolution. A clear reflection of the racialized “cesspool” Lovecraft perceived in the increasingly diverse world around him, “The Street” constitutes a kind of eugenic fantasy – one anticipating the racist vitriol of yet another 1922 letter. Recalling a trip to Chinatown from an even earlier New York visit, Lovecraft penned this simple lament: “would to heaven a kindly gust of cyanogen could asphyxiate the whole gigantic abortion, end the misery, and clean out the place” (*SL I*, 181).

In stories like “The Street” and – as we shall see this chapter – “The Horror at Red Hook,” Lovecraft discharges streams of racially-charged vitriol that expose a conscious anxiety regarding the fragility of whiteness and white civilization. “The Street,” one must consider, is *not* a horror narrative, or even a ‘weird tale’ in the truest sense. Instead, as Jay McRoy observes in his study of Lovecraft’s early fiction, the reader is enmeshed “within the narrator’s racist and overly didactic discourse” (McRoy, 337). Far more racist parable than tale of terror (at least from a white perspective), “The Street” reveals a hysterical whiteness that shows itself to be incapable of embracing or even accepting any kind of alterity; its only means of preserving its “soul” is to destroy all that differs from itself (*TCF*, 65). So concerned is Lovecraft – notoriously critical of didacticism – with maintaining the boundaries of “The Street’s” whiteness, that he appears wholly unconscious of his own hypocrisy. More than this, he implicitly affirms the notion that the boundaries and hegemonies of whiteness are *in need of* protecting – by force, if necessary – and in so doing, makes visible its unsustainability.

Though Lovecraft eventually “included [‘The Street’] among his disavowed tales,” the intolerance that it propagated – and the fractures that it revealed – would continue to live on in his

writing, reaching a high-water-mark for sheer bigotry in “The Horror at Red Hook” (*I Am Providence*, 341). While the vigor of Lovecraft’s racism would decrease with age, it would never completely die away. Later stories, such as “The Dreams in the Witch House” and “The Haunter of the Dark,” see somewhat less emphatic, but similarly Othered representations, such as the former’s “superstitious loomfixer,” Joe Mazurewicz, whose “whining prayers” and fearful ramblings recall *Dracula*’s hysterical, if well-meaning, peasantry, down to his Eastern European heritage and picturesque barbarianism (*Tales*, 663).<sup>2</sup> “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward” even boasts a relatively “normal” and harmless black couple, who of course occupy a position of suitable servility. Yet this deceptive benignity on Lovecraft’s part does nothing to mitigate the dangerous Otherness into which his ethnic minority characters and characters of color are cast. Occupying the dangerous, uneven middle ground that stretches between white humanity and literal monstrosity, the racialized Others of Lovecraft’s fiction threaten to collapse the boundaries of both. Existing as they do in this position of eternal Otherness, neither fully human nor fully monstrous, the Human Others of Lovecraftian fiction make visible the volatility of racial categories, particularly that of whiteness. The citizenry of an undiscovered (yet ever-colonized) country, Lovecraft’s Human Others are as necessary as they are marginalized, made to bear the whips and scorns of their creator’s bigotry even as they betray the ruptures at its core.

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<sup>2</sup> Mazurewicz even offers the protagonist a “cheap crucifix,” in clear homage to the crucifix that Jonathan Harker is given in *Dracula* (*Tales*, 684).

## I. Huddled Masses, Wretched Refuse, and Immigration Anxieties in “The Horror at Red Hook”

For all the vitriol that he would later reserve for it, H.P. Lovecraft’s first impression of New York City, as he described it in 1922, was of a thing of wonder and beauty. “Out of the waters it rose at twilight,” he wrote, “cold, proud, and beautiful; an Eastern city of wonder whose brothers the mountains are. It was not like any city of earth, for above the purple mists rose towers, spires, and pyramids which one may only dream of in opiate lands... that no man could fashion, but that bloomed flower-like and delicate... Only Dunsany could fashion its equal, and he in dreams only” (*SL I*, 179). This dreamlike first impression would soon change, however, as Lovecraft’s impression of beatific strangeness eroded into one of grotesque alienage. The Dunsanian dream-world he first encountered was revealed to be, as he described it in his letters, little more than “a bastard mess of stewing mongrel flesh without intellect, repellent to eye, nose, and imagination” (*SL I*, 181). When on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1924, Howard Phillips Lovecraft married Sonia Haft Greene, and moved with her to an apartment in Brooklyn, he might have dreaded the racial “nightmare” ahead of him – yet, for the next few years, in Brooklyn he would stay (*SL II*, 46). Cast into the midst of the very ‘Italo-Semitico-Mongoloid’ denizens he had for years despised, Lovecraft discovered in New York new horrors with which to populate his tales of terror – ones who entered the world not through extradimensional vortices, antediluvian magic, or arcane ritual, but by way of Ellis Island.

The stories that Lovecraft wrote during his New York residency evoke, in the words of J.M. Tyree, “a central feature of urban life, the sense of the unspeakably terrible thing going on just down the block or in the adjacent apartment” (Tyree, 143). This sense of the “unspeakably terrible” was of course heavily racialized, and highlights not only the alterity of its subjects, but also the brittle constitution of the white perspective that produces it. Of Lovecraft’s New York Tales, “The Horror of Red Hook” is perhaps the best-known and most widely anthologized. It is also largely considered to be the most openly and virulently bigoted of Lovecraft’s fiction, “a shriek of rage and loathing at the ‘foreigners’ who have taken New York away from the white people to whom it presumably belongs” (*I Am Providence*, 589).

“Red Hook” opens not in the sordid streets of New York City, but in the small town of Pascoag, Rhode Island, a “quaint hamlet of wooden colonial houses,” (*Tales*, 126). The local gossip, the reader is told, has of late fixed upon a “wholesome-looking pedestrian,” whose strange, very public bout of hysteria has made him an object of some curiosity (*Tales*, 125). The pedestrian himself, the narrator hastens to assure us, is not to be the focus of the tale’s Otherness; for indeed it “was a strange incident to befall so large, robust, normal-featured and capable-looking a man” (*Tales*, 125). Mired in terms of “wholesome,” healthy white masculinity, this character – whose name, we learn, is Tom Malone – is to be “Red Hook’s” protagonist, the standard of normalcy (and whiteness) against which aberrance may be measured. A police detective on a leave of absence, Malone is further equipped with a background of institutionally-sanctioned authority. His hysteria, we learn, stems from an incident that occurred when he was on active duty investigating “a gruesome local case” in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Red Hook (*Tales*, 125). Malone had come to idyllic Pascoag in an effort to *escape* the reminder of Red Hook’s sordid urbanity – but a misplaced “touch of the urban” in Pascoag’s business section had been enough to trigger his apparent PTSD (*Tales*, 125).

In opening his tale within a geographic emblem of White America – small-town New England – Lovecraft positions the very existence of the titular Red Hook, a racially diverse neighborhood of Brooklyn, as a space of Otherness, degeneration, and instability. Maintaining “a horror of houses and blocks and cities leprous and cancerous with evil dragged from elder worlds,” the character of Tom Malone echoes in spirit and tone (if not quite in terminology) the same disgusted antipathy that Lovecraft displays in his epistolary rantings. The “evil dragged from elder worlds” could as easily (if somewhat hyperbolically) refer to the “Old World” immigrants of Europe, now peopling the houses and blocks and cities of America’s urban centers. Turning the Melting-Pot metaphor on its head, Lovecraft creates an alternative metaphor, one of the “poison cauldron where all the varied dregs of unwholesome ages mix the venom and perpetuate their obscene terrors” (*Tales*, 127).

Though ostensibly touched by the intimation of a more literally otherworldly terror, Lovecraft’s florid descriptions function also as particularly inspired vitriol against a more mundane one. The horrors

that his pen describes exist at the (inter)national level as well as the cosmic – and this was something with which his contemporaries would have been familiar. As Matthew Frye Jacobson writes in *Barbarian Virtues*, “portraits of the immigrant districts from the period’s middle-class or patrician presses often came across as a peculiar hybrid of Stanley’s Africa and Dante’s hell” (Jacobson, 123). Indeed, the “maze of hybrid squalor” that constitutes Red Hook is often described in such lavishly infernal terms, a “tangle of material and spiritual putrescence [from which] the blasphemies of an hundred dialects assail the sky. Hordes of prowlers reel shouting and singing along the lanes and thoroughfares, occasional furtive hands suddenly extinguish lights and pull down curtains, and swarthy, sin-pitted faces disappear from windows when visitors pick their way through” (*Tales*, 128-129).

A place of blasphemy and cryptic happenings, populated by profane and strange-looking pseudo-devils, Red Hook is transformed into a kind of cultural netherworld, not merely racially Other (though certainly inhabited by an equally appalling tangle of “Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements impinging upon one another”) but spiritually and – most significantly – *cosmically* Other (*Tales*, 128). Constructing the residents of Red Hook’s as infernally, culturally, and ethnically deviant, Lovecraft renders them unassimilable. The multiplicity of their abjection does not allow for assimilation – and to attempt reconciliation would be pointless. This is, apparently, as true institutionally as it is culturally. “Policemen,” the audience is told, “despair of order or reform, and seek rather to erect barriers protecting the outside world from the contagion” (*Tales*, 129). Whatever is wrong with the residents of Red Hook makes them not only incapable of assimilation, but also (and perhaps consequently) unworthy of institutional protection, or even association. These immigrants are simply a “contagion” to be suppressed, a blight on the “outside world” of White America that must be contained, lest they spread and contaminate the world more than they clearly already have.

At the heart of this contagion – as at the heart of most narratives – is found a white man, one Robert Suydam. The reclusive scion of “an ancient Dutch family,” Suydam comes to the attention of the local authorities when his relatives seek to have him deemed legally insane (*Tales*, 130). As justification for these efforts, Suydam’s increasing shabbiness and strange mutterings are cited alongside his habit of

“convers[ing] with groups of swarthy, evil-looking strangers” and the “maintenance of a squalid basement flat in the Red Hook district where he... receiv[ed] odd delegations of mixed rowdies and foreigners” (*Tales*, 131). Though not the only reason given for the perception of insanity, Suydam’s interactions with immigrants and ethnic minorities are granted both the largest amount of page-space and seem to carry the greatest amount of narrative weight. His shabbiness and muttering might be excused as the onset of old age – but his conversation with, and entertainment of foreigners clearly signal some deeper threat. By the doctrines of white supremacy, something is clearly rotten in the state of Suydam. Though his relatives eventually drop their suit, Suydam remains an object of official scrutiny. “Suydam’s new associates,” Lovecraft informs the audience, “were among the blackest and most vicious criminals of Red Hook... offenders in the matter of thievery, disorder, and the importation of illegal immigrants. Indeed, it would not have been too much to say that the old scholar’s particular circle coincided almost perfectly with the worst of the organised cliques which smuggled ashore certain nameless and unclassified dregs wisely turned back by Ellis Island” (*Tales*, 132).

Published in *Weird Tales* in 1927, “The Horror at Red Hook” was produced in an America shaped by more than forty years of controversial immigration policies, beginning with the infamous Chinese Exclusion Act (1882). Only six years prior to the publication of “Red Hook” and two years after Lovecraft began writing and publishing his horror fiction, the Emergency Immigration Act of 1921 introduced a deeply racialized quota system to American immigration policy. Lovecraft’s invocation of Ellis Island’s “wise” obstructions in “Red Hook” explicitly situates the tale within this larger American discourse of national identity, modernization, and the demographic shifts that attended both. Even more significantly, Lovecraft’s narrative rests within a framework of an institutionally-determined politics of nationality and belonging: in his approving nod to Ellis Island’s restrictive powers, Lovecraft reveals his work’s relationship with a continually shifting process of state-determined identity-formation. By making monsters of his immigrants, Lovecraft generates an understanding of immigrant identity that aligns with his analogy of contagion and containment. In the containment of the “swarthy, sin-pitted” denizens of Red Hook, he urges the containment of a larger, more dangerous threat (*Tales*, 129).

As J.M. Tyree observes, “‘The Horror at Red Hook’ is in fact Red Hook itself, or, more precisely, a neurotic race fantasy tuned into a supernatural monstrosity” (Tyree, 144). Even the motivations that Lovecraft’s Others give for immigrating are given a dark – but wholly ironic – cast, as “when [detained immigrants were] asked the reason for their presence.... The most that could be gathered was that some god or great priesthood had promised them unheard-of powers and supernatural glories and rulerships in a strange land” (*Tales*, 134). Even as Lovecraft attempts to paint this impetus in shades of terror and darkness, it comes off as a more elaborately-phrased iteration of more traditional incentives for Westward movement: religious promise, economic glory, and social ascendancy. What distinguishes them from the progenitors of Western Exploration, the later “Pilgrims” and Puritan sects of the early colonial period, or even proponents of “Manifest Destiny” seems less a difference in ideology or intention than in ethnicity. Lovecraft shares in the cognitive dissonance that continues to ensnare most proponents of immigration restriction, the fact that in this nation of immigrants, some – generally those with white, Anglo-Saxon (or at least western European) backgrounds – are more equal, more acceptable, more *assimilable* than others. Within this ideology, the very act of immigration by these “unauthorized newcomers” becomes an object of horror that fairly reeks of white hysteria. Suydam’s strange parishioners have “come in steamships... unloaded by stealth on moonless nights in rowboats which stole under a certain wharf and followed a hidden canal to a secret subterranean pool beneath a house” (*Tales*, 133-134). Gothicizing the act of illegal immigration, Lovecraft brings the conventions of a genre rooted in the old world into one that is decidedly urban, industrial, and – worst of all – racially heterogenous. The decrepitude of the ancient castle is exchanged for the decay of the tenement house; the distressed, virtuous heroine is recast as the (far more American) hardboiled detective; the curse of the past is displaced by a more urgent fear of what (or who) is brought by the present. Lovecraft’s is an urban Gothic, and one in which the genre’s traditional conflicts are translated into newer fears – ones that betray the hypocrisy of (white) American ideology.

As the narrative progresses, Red Hook’s dark secret is gradually revealed: Suydam is hierophant to an unholy congregation of “Mongoloid stock, originating somewhere in or near Kurdistan” which

Lovecraft takes care in establishing in literally demonic (and predictably suspect) socio-geographic terms – “Malone could not help recalling that Kurdistan is the land of Yezidis, last survivors of the Persian devil-worshippers” (*Tales*, 133). As much as Lovecraft dwells on the obvious evil of his racialized Others, however, it is in the figure of Suydam that he invokes one of the more enduring tropes of American fiction: the necessity of white authority in *any* exercise of power, whether for good or for ill.

Attempting to justify his actions and acquaintance to his fellow whites, Suydam maintains that he desires only “to study undisturbed the folklore of the immigrants of the district” (*Tales*, 134). The anthropological authority that Suydam assumes with this pretense is echoed in that of his actual role: the leader of a hellish cult made up largely of immigrants (and, consequently, racial and ethnic minorities) and whose purposes, apparently, are derived from the lore of their murky roots. As Bennett Lovett-Graff writes, “Lovecraft’s immigrants remember the ‘old ways’” that have been “abandoned by their Anglo-Saxon betters” (“Shadows Over Lovecraft,” 176). Yet even as Lovecraft’s immigrants are responsible for remembering and preserving this knowledge, they never seem capable of utilizing it for themselves. It is only under the leadership of Suydam that this knowledge seems employed to any real effect – the “glories” they have been promised, after all, are hardly evident in the squalor of Red Hook. Whatever arcane magic and knowledge they may wield cannot stand against the weight of All-American white supremacy – unless, of course, it is a white American calling the shots.

This is a significant trend in Lovecraftian fiction, although never again is it quite so explicit as it is in “Red Hook.” It is always Lovecraft’s human Others that are possessed of Eldritch knowledge; the majority of his narratives seem, in fact, to revolve around the white protagonist investigating, coming into possession of, and often being driven mad by this same knowledge – yet even when driven mad, white characters seem at least to be allowed to *use* it. Only through the intermediary of whiteness is this knowledge made real – only through their acknowledgment does it accrue any real power. “The Call of Cthulhu,” for example, finds hints of its titular monstrosity in the actions of people around the world: “items from India speak guardedly of serious native unrest... Voodoo orgies multiply in Hayti, and African outposts report ominous mutterings. American officers in the Philippines find certain tribes

bothersome about this time” while in the depths of Louisiana’s swamps, an awful Voodoo ritual is interrupted by Inspector LeGrasse (*Tales*, 174). This activity is not limited to racial Others, however: a California “theosophist colony [dons] white robes en masse for some ‘glorious fulfillment,’” while a dreamer in London “leaped from a window after a shocking cry” (*Tales*, 174). And, of course, one of the principle instigators of the investigation at the heart of “Call of Cthulhu” is nothing less than that most bohemian of outsiders – the dreaded (white) *art student*. Human Others of various sorts are allowed to bear this knowledge, to recognize its presence and even to act on it in minor ways – Voodoo orgy, renewed cult activity, etc. What they are not able to do, however, is to effectively wield it. Just as Red Hook’s immigrants fall in line behind the leadership of Suydam – who, while perhaps a human Other himself, seems to occupy a social and intellectual niche above the more predictable cadre of bohemians, immigrants, and poor white trash – Cthulhu’s cultists are not quite actors in their narrative. It is only through the white, upper-class, intellectual investigation that their stories are even told, that their connection to Cthulhu – if not to his waking – is even established.

The pantheon of eldritch terror that Suydam and his acolytes venerate is a dizzying hodgepodge of Hebraic and Hellenistic deities as well ones that Lovecraft most likely invented himself. “Gorgo” and “Mormo” – both creatures or characters in ancient Greek mythology – are invoked by name in the first of the story’s strange incantations, while a later “motto” is constituted by a strange list of names:

HEL \* HELOYM \* SOTHER \* EMMANVEL \* SABAOTH \*  
 AGLA \* TETRAGRAMMATON \* AGYROS \* OTHEOS \*  
 ISCHYROS \* ATHANTOS \* IEHOVA \* VA \* ADONAI \*  
 SADAY \* HOMOVSION \* MESSIAS \* ESCHEREHEYE \*  
 (*Tales*, 136-137).

Alongside recognizably Hebrew terms (all of which, curiously, are names for God) – Tetragrammaton, Iehova, Adonai – are words with no discernable source, such as “Sother” and “Heloym,” probably created by Lovecraft himself. Later in the story, it is discovered that a creature called “Lillith” – also from Jewish mythology – is one of beings that the cult actually summons. Implicit within this laundry-list of

apparently demonic characters is a syntactical representation of the chaos of origin that Lovecraft saw as endemic to early twentieth-century immigration.

Even the church-building is, tellingly, “nominally Catholic,” though “priests throughout Brooklyn denied the place all standing” (*Tales*, 132). Lovecraft places Catholicism, in tandem with his bizarre admixture of Hebraic iconography, into a strange, somewhat liminal role, split between the apparently legitimate authority of priests and a perception of Otherness that would not have been altogether inaccurate. Catholicism, it must be remembered, was one of the acknowledged “foes” (i.e., objects of hatred) of the second-wave Ku Klux Klan that rose to prominence in the early twentieth century. Though it may be argued that Lovecraft, in his infamous commitment to atheism, is denigrating all religion, it must also be observed that Protestantism remains strangely absent from his demonic delegation – the only groups he Others are groups that would have *already* been understood as Other by White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture.

Lovecraft also makes a monolith of his human Others. Deliberately neglecting to distinguish between religious and ethnic ties (“Mongoloid” immigrants adopting Hebraic and Hellenic iconography?), Lovecraft simultaneously displays his indifference to the particularities of various cultures and posits them all as acting in opposition to wholesome, white society. *All* are made other, the individual characteristics of their cultures subsumed under a sweeping assignation of overtly malicious difference. Within this, however, Lovecraft invokes specifically Anti-Semitic tropes: the conflation of Judaism – and its images of God – with invasive, destructive, and paganistic incursion. This specific antipathy can be felt throughout the story, evoking towards the end “some of the most pernicious Anti-Semitic myths: child kidnapping and human sacrifice” (Tyree, 144). Three children, “blue-eyed Norwegians,” are discovered to have been kidnapped and, the audience is told, this causes “rumours of a mob forming among the sturdy Vikings” of the neighborhood (*Tales*, 140). In his mention of the children’s rather Aryan ethnicities, as well as in the approving nod he gives the “Viking” ancestry of their ethnic background, Lovecraft perpetuates an extant ethnic hierarchy that privileges Northern and Western European immigrants above their Jewish, Eastern European, Asiatic, and Black brethren. Moving

between the real – the heavy presence of Jewish people and other ethnic minorities in 1920’s Brooklyn – and the clearly fictional, Lovecraft constructs a narrative that, for all its fantastic elements, is dangerously congruous with existing understandings and prejudices. As W. Scott Poole writes in *Monsters in America*, “Lovecraft’s fiction described horrors that many white Americans believed in firmly” (Poole, 98).

The racialized horror that Lovecraft presented not only reiterates aspects of the racist status quo, but justifies (Anglo-American) whites in divesting themselves of responsibility for the social and economic conditions of these ethnic and racial Others. As Matthew Frye Jacobson observes in *Barbarian Virtues*, “these pockets of poverty in the modern industrial city are explained, not by the ravages of capitalism, but by the innate racial character of their inhabitants... Wretchedness, evidently, was never homegrown, but only came ashore with the immigrants themselves” (Jacobson, 127). Lovecraft draws his human others in terms of an innate, nearly inhuman abjection that he seems to think accounts for the state of their communities, morally as well as physically. Indeed, their presence is represented in almost pestilential terms. “Here long ago a brighter picture dwelt,” the narrative reminisces, “with clear-eyed mariners on the lower streets and homes of taste and substance... One can trace the relics of this former happiness in the trim shapes of the buildings” (*Tales*, 128).

In the tradition established by “The Street,” Lovecraft again conjures up a “brighter picture” of his setting’s history: a mythical America whose purely Anglo-Saxon contours have become caked with the grime of ages and Otherness. By imagining, in a familiar patina of ahistorical rhetoric – and a thin coat of whitewash – an America prior to the presence of immigrants, Lovecraft betrays a deeply flawed, if common, nostalgia for an America that never was. Its whiteness is literally blinding, obscuring not only the realities of early American demographics, but the humanity of the country’s newest citizens. The apparent impossibility of “homegrown wretchedness,” as Jacobson puts it, becomes a function of white supremacy – a need to blame the state of affairs on those most visibly different against the normative, “natural,” background of Anglo-Saxon whiteness. Positing Red Hook and its inhabitants as a blight on what was once a “brighter,” presumably *whiter* America, Lovecraft affirms Zora Neale Hurston’s reflection that color – such as it exists here – is at its most tangible against a sharp white background. The

racialized Other is innately, inescapably visible against the background of Lovecraft's overpowering whiteness; as such, they appear – and may be taken as – a stain.

When one takes into account the unreality of “The Horror at Red Hook,” with its immigrants, its strange rites, and its otherworldly entities, it is clear that even this Fortean strain of Affirmative Action has proven ill-equipped in the elevation of Lovecraft's ethnic minorities. The “glories” and “rulerships” apparently promised them are clearly nonexistent; they remain in positions of abjection, trapped in the slums of Brooklyn and at the margins of white American society. Only Robert Suydam – the white man inexplicably at the helm of their nefarious operations – shows any real signs of material or metaphysical gain, undergoing “some obscure improvement” that sees him attaining a “crispness of speech, and... little by little [shedding] the corpulence which had so long deformed him” (*Tales*, 135). Now, the reader is told, Suydam is “frequently taken for less than his age” and begins to reacquaint himself with members of his “proper” set: “Less and less was he seen at Red Hook, and more and more did he move in the society to which he was born,” even becoming engaged to “a young woman of excellent position” (*Tales*, 135). In what may, perhaps, be read as a bizarre act of metaphysical cultural appropriation, Suydam not only takes the knowledge and magic of his racial and ethnic “inferiors” for himself, but proves to be the only one capable of competently wielding it. In this most American act of self-elevation, Suydam capitalizes on a source of wealth not his own, and seems to have no intention of sharing his returns. The wretchedness of his former acolytes is thereby doubled: not only are they incapable of improving themselves materially and economically – they cannot even do so with the aid of their own magic. Whatever dubious wealth the racial Other may have, Lovecraft seems to hint, even if only in terms of knowledge, is there for the taking of enterprising white men. In this sense, Lovecraft's “Red Hook” is a familiar story, one that serves as the very foundation of American history.

The true horror of Red Hook, however, lies not with its strange gods, nameless rites, or even with its population of racially and ethnically suspect characters. What makes Red Hook truly terrifying – and what renders it a horror tale in a truly Lovecraftian sense – is the terrible fact that, regardless of the precautionary measure that whiteness may take, or what violent victories it may win over the abject racial

Other, this Other cannot ultimately be destroyed. “The Horror at Red Hook” ends with the destruction of Suydam, the apparent exorcism of the “naked, tittering, phosphorescent thing” he and his multiracial associates has called up, and – recalling the conclusion of “The Street” – the “collapse of several old brick buildings” which have housed the unholy congregation (*Tales*, 143, 125). The threat that they pose, however, does not end with them. “As for Red Hook,” Lovecraft writes, “it is always the same. Suydam came and went; a terror gathered and faded; but the evil spirit of darkness and squalor broods on amongst the mongrels in the old brick houses... Age-old horror is a hydra with a thousand heads... The soul of the beast is still omnipresent and triumphant” (*Tales*, 146). One monster may have been slain, but there are always more than can be called up – and Red Hook, in all its ‘hybrid squalor’ lives on.

Even Tom Malone, the lynchpin of white normalcy through whom the story is related, is not untouched by the horrors he has experienced: indeed, from the moment of his introduction, the audience knows him as a man changed, traumatized by his passage through the annals of Red Hook. Tom Malone – and through him, whiteness more broadly – has not survived his engagement with the monstrous and racial Other unscathed. Thus does “Red Hook” turn the concept put forth by “The Street” on its head. The destruction of one street, one villain, and one monster does not free the great white world from the threat of alien incursion. Instead, the struggle to maintain and assert white hegemony is revealed to be perpetual and unceasing: from the moment that the story opens, from the moment that Ellis Island accepted the first “outlander” onto America’s shores, the (already mythical) possibility of white totality has been destroyed. Resistance, then, is both necessary and – inevitably – futile.

This sense of white impotence and foreboding was something that Lovecraft knew well. As early as May of 1925 – scarcely a year after having moved to New York, and only a few months prior to writing “The Horror at Red Hook” – Lovecraft fantasized about returning to his beloved Providence. “My first act on achieving any really regular stipend,” he wrote to F.C. Clark, “would be to return to New England... and finally... the sacred soil of *Providence*... never-more to be quitted by a sedate old gentleman who sampled the world and found that its dearest jewel was the hearthstone he left behind!” (*SL II*, 13-14). Lovecraft’s stay in New York was marked not only by a lengthy exposure to “Italo-

Semitico-Mongoloid” races and ethnicities not his own, but by considerable financial and professional failure (*SL II*, 333).

Though he had arrived in New York in relatively high hopes, newly married, increasingly involved with *Weird Tales*, and even tasked with completing a (rather hectic) ghostwriting job for Harry Houdini, his long-term stay there proved singularly difficult. This was especially true financially. Eventually driven “to investigate whatever commercial prospects of any kind might offer themselves,” Lovecraft found himself confronted by the same dismal realization arrived at by thousands of unfortunates each year: the fact that “Positions of every kind seem virtually unattainable to persons without experience,” (*SL II*, 338). Frustrated by a “quest which so far has failed to pay for the ink and shoe-leather consumed,” Lovecraft was reduced to answering newspaper want ads, and even posted a personal advertisement in the classifieds of the Aug. 10 issue of the *New York Times* (*SL II*, 338)(*I Am Providence*, 509). That these financial tribulations chafed at Lovecraft’s class pretensions was abidingly clear. Writing to Maurice W. Moe in June of 1925, Lovecraft admitted that he hoped “to get back to New England for the rest of my life – the Boston district at first, and later Providence, if I ever get the money to live there as befits a member of my family” (*SL II*, 17).<sup>3</sup>

It was in this state of mind that “The Horror at Red Hook” was produced, written in early August of 1925. In a letter to Frank Belknap Long, Lovecraft mentions his “new attempt at fiction... with Brooklyn as its setting. The title is *The Horror at Red Hook*, and it deals with hideous cult-practices behind the gangs of noisy young loafers whose essential mystery has impressed me so much... I don’t think it is very good; but it represents at least an attempt to extract horror from an atmosphere to which you deny any qualities save vulgar commonplaceness” (*SL II*, 19-20). This brief self-assessment is in many ways telling: first, it acknowledges Lovecraft’s inspiration from his Brooklyn setting and the implicitly racialized “loafers” therein (it seems interesting that Lovecraft, who himself was having trouble

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<sup>3</sup> To add insult to injury, Lovecraft found himself robbed in May of 1925. Though he was humorously-disposed enough to speak of it only a month later (when he referred to his failure to hang up one of his suits properly as a “noble argument for carelessness, since if I’d hung it up where it belonged, in the alcove, I’d be parading around in a barrel these days!”) it represented a fairly significant loss (*SL II*, 19).

locating gainful employment, would be so free with his criticisms). Second, it reveals the sense of otherness – the impression of “essential mystery” – with which Lovecraft regarded his erstwhile muses. These were men, not monsters, and even Long seems to have maintained a belief in melting-pot Brooklyn’s mere “vulgar commonplaceness”; yet both were apparently enough to unsettle Lovecraft into horrific inspiration. The Horror *of* Red Hook, then, becomes a kind of justification; Lovecraft imbues his bigotry with metaphysical horror, doubly Othering the object of his anxious gaze. Finally, it alerts the reader to the fact that Lovecraft’s time in New York was fraught not only with financial and racial unease, but with creative frustration as well. “When my stuff is done it always disappoints me,” he wrote to Clark Ahston Smith, “never quite presenting the fulness of the picture I have in mind – but since a crude fixation of the image is better than nothing, I plug along & do the feeble best I can” (*SL II*, 27).

Beset by disappointments both personal and professional, Lovecraft’s New York interval only exacerbated his adulation of the white colonial past. A little more than a week after completing “The Horror at Red Hook,” he described the increasing despair with which he viewed his urban prison: “...in order to avoid the madness which leads to violence & suicide I must cling to the few shreds of old days & old ways which are left to me... When they go, I shall go, for they are all that make it possible for me to open my eyes in the morning or look forward to another day of consciousness without screaming in sheer desperation & pounding on the walls in a frenzied clamour to be waked up out of the nightmare of ‘reality’ to my own room in Providence” (*SL II*, 21). Once again transmuting his racialized anxieties into highly Gothic language, Lovecraft casts the Brooklyn of the waking world in the “nightmarish” mold of its fictive counterpart. More, he positions the “old days & old ways” of (implicitly white, implicitly colonial) Providence as a kind of spiritual balm to his wounded, city-bruised soul. As he does in “The Horror at Red Hook,” Lovecraft makes explicit the opposition between urbanity and rurality, deviance and wholesomeness, racialized Otherness and whiteness.

In the spring of 1926, after more than two years of living in New York, Lovecraft returned to his beloved Providence. In a letter describing his return voyage to Frank Belknap Long, Lovecraft’s jubilation at his homecoming reaches almost the level of mania:

Well – the train sped on, and I experienced silent convulsions of joy in returning step by step to a waking and tri-dimensional life. New Haven – New London – and then quaint Mystic... Then at last a still subtler magick fill'd the air – nobler roofs and steeples, with the train rushing airily above them on its loft viaduct – *Westerly* – in His Majesty's Providence of RHODE ISLAND & PROVIDENCE-PLANTATIONS! GOD SAVE THE KING! Intoxication follow'd... I fumble with bags and wraps in a desperate effort to appear calm – THEN – a delirious marble dome outside the window – a hissing of air brakes – a slackening of speed – surges of ecstasy and dropping of clouds from my eyes and mind – HOME – UNION STATION – *PROVIDENCE!!!* (*Selected Letters II*, 47).

Lovecraft's euphoric progression reads almost as a WASP-y counterpart to the monstrous chants and daemon litanies of Red Hook's lower orders.<sup>4</sup> Moving through the rose-tinted landscape of his beloved New England, Lovecraft's prose lapses into the same energetic delirium usually reserved for his venomous racial tirades – though in this case, to opposite effect. Notably, Lovecraft also falls back into his habit of royalist Anglophilia (*GOD SAVE THE KING!*), affirming not simply the regional, but the racial and cultural prodigality of his voyage. Lovecraft's return to Providence, then was not simply a return to his birthplace, or even an escape from the sinister miscellany of Brooklyn, but a restoration of racial and cultural identity. Soon after his return, Lovecraft would immortalize this reclamation in ink.<sup>5</sup> “I am Providence,” he wrote to James F. Morton, “and Providence is myself – together, indissolubly as one, we stand thro' the ages” (*SL II*, 51).

For all the rapture of Lovecraft's homecoming, however, he could on no account call it a victory. “America has lost New York to the mongrels,” he wrote in the same letter, “but the sun shines just as brightly over Providence and Portsmouth and Salem and Marblehead” (*SL II*, 46). Ostensibly a reiteration of his earlier enthusiasm at coming home, this statement speaks less to the virtues of Lovecraft's colonial darlings than it does to his perception of New York's inexorable racial decline. Just as the evils of “Red Hook” – or at least its foreign population – survive the destruction of Suydam's congregation, the New York of reality is apparently lost, inevitably, to its ‘mongrel’ inhabitants. Lovecraft's return from New York, then, constitutes not a triumph but a defeat – an acknowledgment of the futility of ‘preserving’ the white identity of one of America's great cities. Even Providence could not deliver on the fantasies of

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<sup>4</sup> It also seems to parallel the ‘atavistic passage’ in “The Rats in the Walls” with its sense of near-hysterical linear progression (or, perhaps more accurately, *regression*). See section on “Degenerate Whiteness.”

<sup>5</sup> And, with his death, in stone. Lovecraft's gravestone at Providence's Swan Point Cemetery is marked only with his name, the dates of his birth and death, and this simple epigraph: “I Am Providence.”

racial purity that Lovecraft so desperately indulged in – and Lovecraft, whether he admitted to it or not, was well aware of this. Three years earlier, in November of 1923, Lovecraft described an outing he had taken with a friend to the less-travelled sections of Providence. What he found there shook him to his core. In one of the most luridly Gothic passages in his entire body of work,<sup>6</sup> Lovecraft describes “a squalid Colonial labyrinth in which I mov’s as an utter stranger, each moment wondering whether I were in truth in my native town or in some leprous distorted witch-Salem of nightmare... the mass’d dead of Colonial decay... No, I had not thought that Providence held such places as this” (*SL I*, 271).

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<sup>6</sup> A larger section of which is included under “Degenerate Whiteness”

## Part II.

### Mere Degradation and Degeneracy: Degenerative Whiteness in the Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft

“It is weakness in me – some subtle decadence of spirit”

- H.P. Lovecraft, pg. 291 *Selected Letters I*

“But it must after all be confessed...that it is

*our own Backsliding Heart,*

which has plunged the whole country into so wonderful a degeneracy”

- Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*: Book VII, p. 56.

In a 1923 letter to Frank Belknap Long and Alfred Galpin, Howard Phillips Lovecraft recounted for their amusement a recent trip he had made to the town of Danvers, Massachusetts. Once known as Salem Village, Danvers had been the site of the witch trials that in 1692 would leave a permanent stain upon colonial America. Well aware of the city’s historical infamy, as well as its place in the geography of Gothic America, Lovecraft described – in appropriately eerie terms – his adventure as a kind of trip back through time, “to an age of darker and weirder appeal – the age of the dreaded witchcraft” (*SL I*, 221). An avid (though amateur) devotee of antiquarian and genealogical studies, Lovecraft held a special fascination with New England’s history and architecture, and often indulged this passion with visits not only to older city districts and public museums, but also to privately-owned homes and dwellings. On this particular occasion, Lovecraft recounts his visit to the Samuel Fowler house, an “ancient brick residence” then open as a museum (*I Am Providence*, 447). Upon entering, Lovecraft found himself greeted at the door by “two of the most pitiful and decrepit-looking persons imaginable – hideous old women more sinister than the witches of 1692” (*SL I*, 219-220). Upon hearing the women speak, however, Lovecraft found himself shocked by the extension of “a courtly and aristocratick welcome in language and accents bespeaking the gentlest birth and proudest cultivation!” (*SL I*, 219-220). “Yes,” he went on, “it was the old, old New England story of family decay and aristocratick pauperism” (*SL I*, 219-220).

The ‘old, old story’ of New England aristocracy in decline is, of course, a familiar element in American Gothic literature, perhaps best immortalized in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* – a work which Lovecraft called an “immortal tale – New England’s greatest contribution to weird literature” (*Supernatural Horror in Literature*, 48). Indeed, “the final throes of what called itself old

gentility” of the novel’s Pyncheon family was a theme that may well have resonated with Lovecraft, whose own patrician ancestry was belied by his impoverished status (*The House of the Seven Gables*, 24). Highly self-conscious of his own ancestry, which could boast a lineage of “unmixed English gentry,” Lovecraft was acutely aware of the decline with which his own family had met upon the death of his maternal grandfather (*SL I*, 296). Born into “a household of four servants and three horses,” Lovecraft had, in his early teens, “seen them all go... all of these, and the old home as well” (*SL I*, 298).

Perhaps understandably, the theme of familial – and, implicitly, racial – decline is pervasive in Lovecraft’s work, appearing in some of his most famous (and most obscure) tales with varying degrees of urgency. In a body of work so preoccupied with themes of the degeneracy of civilization and the futility of human endeavor, the white body – a property so fundamentally identified with both – naturally becomes a site of racial discourse. Lovecraft’s fiction (and, indeed, Lovecraft himself) was conceived during a period of American history in which definitions of whiteness were still far from certain. Racial categories of the time “distinguished not only whites, blacks, Asians, and Latinos from one another, but also Hebrews, Celts, Slavs, Finns, Italians, Teutons, Magyars, and Anglo-Saxons” (Jacobson, 69). As such, much of Lovecraft’s work articulates anxieties regarding not only questions of *how* whiteness should be defined, but also whether – within the category of whiteness – certain hierarchies should be maintained therein. Just as some races could be more human than others, might not some whites be *whiter* than others? The boundaries and gradations of whiteness are explored most thoroughly in Lovecraft’s representations of “degenerative whiteness,” a quality embodied by characters who, though racially classifiable as “white,” are unable to perform or unsuccessful in performing “appropriate” kinds of white identity. “Appropriate” is defined, of course, along moneyed, masculine, and deeply privileged lines. Frequently at odds with these standards are poor whites, the residents of forgotten and declining backwater towns, isolated and stagnating, about whom whispers of inbreeding and *devolution* proliferate. Socially, economically, intellectually, and often physically degenerate, these characters are the “white trash” of New England’s Lovecraft Country, and their presence gnaws at the established boundaries of white identity.

Representing a kind of failed whiteness, they are assigned roles that range from harmless representatives of ‘local-color’ to the principal objects of horror within their stories. It is perhaps these characters’ complicated relationship with whiteness that broadens the scope of their narrative utility: their claim to whiteness makes their agency permissible even as their distance from it enables both author and reader to rationalize their less sympathetic actions. Though not always the *foremost* horror of their particular narratives, the presence of degenerate whites speaks to a realer – and thus more immediate – fear: the fragility of their race’s supremacy. Emblematic of the cracked foundations upon which Western whiteness stands, degenerative whiteness threatens a reversal of the evolutionary hierarchy at play. As faulty building-blocks in the supposed “pillar of civilization” that their race represents, they threaten to collapse it – and, in the tradition of Poe’s House of Usher, thus bring its “mighty walls rushing asunder” (Poe, 335).

### **I. Catskill Degenerates: Rot, Right, and Rurality in “Beyond the Wall of Sleep”**

One of the earliest of Lovecraft’s stories to address the theme of degenerative whiteness is the 1919 tale, “Beyond the Wall of Sleep.” Among the first of the author’s published works, it relates the strange case of Joe Slater, a typically backwoods denizen of the Catskills. Slater (or Slaader<sup>7</sup> – the spelling of the subject’s name is apparently unclear, presumably on account of his relative illiteracy) exhibits frequent fits of mania, which lead first to the murder of a local man, and then to his institutionalization. There, he is observed by the story’s narrator, an intern at the “state psychopathic institution” into whose care he is placed. Arriving at the institution “in the vigilant custody of four state policeman, and... described as a highly dangerous character,” Slater is from his introduction pathologized not merely in terms of his obvious mental illness and violent behavior, but as a representative of the “decadent mountain-folk” stock characterized by a kind of racial degeneration (*TCF*, 40). Slater is described as having “an absurd appearance of harmless stupidity,” with “small watery eyes,” a “scantiness

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<sup>7</sup> The spelling of ‘Slaader’ may also suggest a Dutch background, and thus detach the character even further from Lovecraft’s Anglo-Saxon ideal of whiteness.

of... neglected and never-shaven” beard, and a “listless,” “drooping... heavy nether lip” (*TCF*, 38). This assertion of “harmless stupidity” first limits Slater to his corporality – in essence limiting him to the mindless physicality typically reserved for animals and people of color – then renders that very corporality deficient. Slater’s is a body that, while “somewhat brawny” in frame, is nevertheless marked by neglect and inadequacy. In Lovecraft’s construction of degenerative whiteness, the body necessarily becomes a central object of scrutiny: if whiteness is defined, as Richard Dyer claims, by its proximity “to the pure spirit” (and consequent transcendence of corporality), then the degraded white must, in every respect, have “returned” to its (un)rightful, distinctly embodied space.

Over the course of “Wall of Sleep,” Lovecraft works to create this category of degeneracy – and the bodies that inhabit it – through a judicious (if somewhat frenzied) application of language. Frequently using such terms as “debased,” “primitive,” “decadent,” and – of course – “degenerate,” Lovecraft saturates his narrative with an overwhelming impression of deterioration that is used to underscore the “basically inferior” character and regressive whiteness not merely of Slater, but of an entire population (*TCF*, 40). The narrative is careful to acknowledge Slater’s origins, and reserves nearly as much vitriol for his community of origin – which, we are told, correspond neatly to the “White Trash” of the American South – as for Slater himself. As “one of those strange, repellent scions of a primitive colonial peasant stock whose isolation... has caused them to sink to a kind of barbaric degeneracy, rather than advance,” the degenerative whiteness in “Wall of Sleep” is grounded solidly on a foundation of both class prejudice and specifically linear, white-centered understandings of race and evolutionary progress (*TCF*, 37-38).

The perceived lack of developmental “progress” here is key: deemed “too much animal, too little man” Slater and his ilk not only represent a threat to the primacy of whiteness’ claims to humanity, but stand also as an example of the *failure* of whiteness to live up to its own standards. If whiteness is to represent the pinnacle of the evolutionary pyramid, then Slater – and his white trash brethren “as indescribable as himself” – represent a backsliding of that racial progression (*TCF*, 38). These “Catskill Degenerates,” then, (whether or not Lovecraft is quite conscious of it) threaten to expose the innate and internal contradictions of white supremacist ideology. However firmly Lovecraft may set them apart from

their more elevated brethren, they remain relentlessly visible in his fiction, and thus acknowledge the fact that white superiority is *not* an inevitability: instead, it is something that must be scrupulously – but perhaps futilely – maintained, and that is relentlessly pervaded by the many and myriad variations on its hue.

Indeed, as the narrative progresses, Slater's basic (and unquestioned) inferiority becomes the basis of the story's central conflict. Continuing to exhibit "matutinal aberrations" (e.g., fits of violence and mania that commence with his waking) characterized by an increasing frequency and violence, Slater is revealed to play host to a series of "glowing, titanic visions" of immense creativity and seeming cosmic resonance, whose scope and grandeur perplex the narrator when he learns of them (*TCF*, 38-40). Unable to reconcile Slater's "pitiable [inferiority] in mentality and language alike" with an imagination "whose very possession argued a lurking spark of genius," the narrator resolves to investigate (*TCF*, 40). He does so by attaching to Slater a device intended to generate a kind of interpersonal telepathy, granting the narrator access to his patient's mind in the hopes of discovering the visions' true source. It is worthwhile to observe that, in doing so, the narrator implicitly affirms his institutional authority – and right to domination – over Slater; the ethical dimensions of this action (undertaken, no less, by an individual pointedly without proper medical credentials) are never addressed. Slater's degenerative whiteness clearly forfeits his claim to such a basic "human" (and implicitly white) right – something that was true more generally of anyone who happened to diverge from racial, able-bodied, and sexual norms.

A study in the institutionally-sanctioned operations of white supremacy, "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" similarly reflects the heavily imperialist terms in which Lovecraft understood the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge. "How," the narrator often asks himself, "could the stolid imagination of a Catskill degenerate conjure up sights" which "were assuredly things which only a superior or even exceptional brain could conceive[?]" (*TCF*, 40). No logical answer – at least, no answer amenable to the peculiar conceits of Lovecraft's "degenerative whiteness" – is forthcoming. The narrator thus resolves to satisfy his "intense desire to probe into the dream life of Joe Slater," embarking on his oneiric investigation by way of certain "transmitting and receiving instruments" (*TCF*, 41). Technological

innovation notwithstanding, in this tale (and, accordingly, in the body of Joe Slater), knowledge is constructed as a frontier to be penetrated. It is accompanied by the assumption that its present inhabitants – at least, those marginalized by frameworks of white, able-bodied privilege – are incapable of appreciating, and are undeserving of, the resources put in their possession.

This colonial venture is rewarded. The experiment ultimately meets with success, and the narrator's suspicions – and prejudices – are overwhelmingly confirmed by its results: the titanic, cosmic visions, it is discovered, had all along signaled the presence of an immense cosmic entity, an “agency from the wall of sleep” who had unluckily chosen Slater for its host (*TCF*, 44). In this function, however, the Catskill degenerate proved inadequate, not only mentally but physically. According to the alien presence, the incompatibility between Slater's “gross body” and its own vast, cosmic intelligence resulted not in spiritual or intellectual transcendence, but in the fits of madness that led to his apparent derangement and eventual institutionalization (*TCF*, 44). Speaking to the more highly evolved – and more appropriately white – narrator, the being explains that Slater “has been [its] torment and diurnal prison” for the past forty-two years; Slater – degenerate and animalistic as he so clearly was – having been incapable of serving as a viable conduit for such a highly-evolved consciousness (*TCF*, 44). This policy apparently does not apply to the narrator (and, therefore, to superior whites), who has “been [the entity's] friend in the cosmos... my only friend on this planet – the only soul to sense and seek for me within the repellent form which lies on this couch” (*TCF*, 44).

The effect of this revelation is twofold. First, it confirms the narrative's presumption of Slater's inferiority, not merely at the physical level, but at the cosmic level as well. It thus legitimizes the racialized ideology at its core: some whites are better, whiter, and more human than other whites. This conclusion is not merely the product of prejudiced human ideology, but the experienced opinion of an objective, inhuman third party. In a statement that speaks as much to fears of miscegenation as it does to anxieties regarding white degeneracy, the entity observes to the narrator that “the cosmic and planet souls” – existing, presumably, at disparate levels of evolution – “rightly should never meet” (*TCF*, 44).

Degeneracy becomes not merely a rhetorical device, but a facet of hard, inarguable reality. Secondly, it sets a thematic precedent for Lovecraftian fiction composed hereafter. While normalcy is restored with Slater's death, the very possibility of such immense power within his grasp unbalances not only racial development, but also cosmic equilibrium. In "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" – as in much of Lovecraft's later writings – the transcendent possibilities of cosmic knowledge and exchange can only fully (and safely) be comprehended by *real* whites. This is not, of course, to say that supposedly "inferior" peoples – nonwhites and degenerate whites alike – are unaware or uninterested in them. Indeed, tale after Lovecraftian tale features the menacing results of such power in the wrong hands. Slater disturbs conventional hierarchies of whiteness not simply in existing, but also in his access to knowledge and spheres beyond the purview of even his more highly-evolved "superiors". The horror at the center of "Beyond the Wall of Sleep," then, is that knowledge and power may in fact fall into the possession of "low-grade" specimens of humanity who, terrifyingly – as we shall see in later stories – may be just evolved enough to utilize it *of their own accord* (TCF, 45).

## **II. Reeking Annals, Sunken Branches: Landscapes of Decadence & Horrific Embodiment in "The Dunwich Horror"**

In a 1930 letter to Robert E. Howard,<sup>8</sup> Lovecraft wrote at length about the "white trash" to be found both above and below the Mason-Dixon line: "inferior whites," he explains, "gradually retreated toward the backwoods, becoming in the course of time that 'mean white' or 'white trash' element so well-known to sociologists" – a process to which he ascribes not only "basic" racial degradation, but such tragic anomalies in the fabric of New England's progressive rationality as the Salem witch trials of 1692 (SL III, 177).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Lovecraft's belief in degenerate whiteness as a "highly important factor in accounting for Massachusetts witch belief and daemonology" is central to many of his horror tales, and

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<sup>8</sup> A fellow pulp fiction writer and the creator of *Conan the Barbarian*. Like Lovecraft, Howard's works are in many places informed by his white supremacist views, and he, too, would be dead within three years – in his case, of suicide.

<sup>9</sup> "For my own part," wrote Lovecraft of the 1692 witch trials, "I doubt if a compact coven existed, but certainly think that people had come to Salem who had direct personal knowledge of the cult... I think some of the rites and formulae... must have been talked about secretly [sic.] among certain elements, and perhaps furtively practiced by the few degenerates involved... Most of the people hanged were probably innocent, yet I do think there was a concrete, sordid background not present in any other New England witchcraft case" (SL III, 183).

can in part be traced back to one person: Margaret Murray (*SL III*, 177). Murray, an anthropologist and proto-feminist academic of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, published *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* in 1921. This text put forth the notion that, in Lovecraft's words, "all through history a secret cult of degenerate orgiastic nature-worshippers, furtively recruited from the peasantry and sometimes from decadent characters of more select origin" has existed not only in Western Europe, but – with the advent of European exploration – in colonial America as well (*SL III*, 178). Murray's influence is more than tangible in Lovecraft's tales, particularly those connected to his Cthulhu Mythos, with its innumerable cults, worshippers of nameless gods, and practitioners of ancient rites. Yet, as S.T. Joshi points out, Lovecraft's subscription to Murray's theories is an instance in which "his longing for some bizarre theory to be true convinced him that it actually was true," in this case because it "so perfectly meshed with some of his own *literary tropes*" (*I Am Providence*, 464). Himself of an ethnicity that strongly identified with a Protestant cultural background, Lovecraft's ascription of religious and social alterity to acceptably degenerate demographics (the lower classes and upper-class "decadents") is terribly convenient, at both the personal and literary levels. Murray's witch-cult theory, then, offers a viable lens through which Fortean degeneracy may be constructed.

Perhaps the best example of this occurs in "The Dunwich Horror," one of Lovecraft's most famous – and most canonically significant – cosmic tales. The story is set in the town of Dunwich, Mass., a rather stagnant backwater town in the heart of Lovecraft Country, and a classic example of the Gothicized New England landscape that so characterized it. At the center of the narrative dwell "the decadent Whateleys," one of the many Dunwich families who have "gone far along that path of retrogression so common in many New England backwaters" (*Tales*, 372). As in "Beyond the Wall of Sleep," Lovecraft links white degeneration with impoverished rurality, exchanging the "hilly fastness" of the Catskills for the "lonely and curious country" of backwoods New England (*TCF*, 37)(*Tales*, 370). Accessible only by taking the "wrong" turn on Aylesbury Pike (a place not to be found on any normal map), the road to Dunwich is paved with rather dismal adjectives. The surrounding fields are "barren," and their monotony is seldom broken by houses bearing "a surprisingly uniform aspect of age, squalor,

and dilapidation” (*Tales*, 370). What inhabitants remain are “gnarled,” “furtive,” and “solitary,” as much a part of their forbidding landscape as the woods and mountains, whose presence brings a “feeling of strange uneasiness” upon the unlucky traveler (*Tales*, 370). Indeed, Lovecraft seems to assume the role of authorial tour-guide, opening his tale not in the town itself, but leading his reader to it by degrees, giving directions, offering authorial commentary, and surveilling the milieu as the journey progresses.

When the narrative finally reaches Dunwich, Lovecraft allows the scenery to speak for itself. A “cluster of rotting gambrel roofs... [mostly] deserted and falling to ruin,” Dunwich impresses itself, from its introduction, as something dying – if not something already dead (*Tales*, 371). Its crumbling gambrel roofs bespeak, as Lovecraft acknowledges within the text, the ill-maintained obsolescence of “an earlier” – and, of course, Anglo-Saxon – “architectural period,” an impression that is only deepened with the vision of that most iconic symbols of small-town New England falling to ruin: the white church steeple. Dunwich’s “broken-steepled church” flies in the face of the “cult of the New England village” (*Tales*, 371)(Conforti, 149). In his survey of the development of New England’s regional identity, Joseph Conforti writes that “the compact white village, anchored by a steepled church, came to define the ‘real’ New England” (Conforti, 122). A visual and “literary icon that selectively portray[ed] the region as a pastoral, homogenous, and stable world,” the church steeple emblemized the whitewashed vision of New England that Lovecraft eulogized<sup>10</sup> – and that, in his landscapes of degeneration, thoroughly destroyed (Conforti, 149). To add commercial insult to architectural injury, Dunwich’s broken church also “harbours the one slovenly mercantile establishment of the hamlet,” (*Tales*, 371). As would later occur in stories like “The Shadow over Innsmouth” and “The Haunter of the Dark,” the rupture of the New England church – often through displacement or desertion – signifies both monstrous incursion and the decline of Anglo-Saxon supremacy.<sup>11</sup> Lovecraft effectively and consciously profanes the picture-

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<sup>10</sup> “...many of the inanimate objects which fascinate me (old steeples, Georgian doorways, mysterious ruins, etc.) do so because of symbolick connexion with the stream and drama of human history” (*SL III*, 280).

<sup>11</sup> This supremacy was also implicitly Puritan, though one that was complicated by Lovecraft’s own atheism as well as his... *fascinating* perception of Puritanism as (like Christianity more broadly) an institution of corruptive “hebraic imitation” (*SL II*, 67).

postcard image of rural New England, shattering its white-steepled charm and miring its (presumably bygone) green-lawned expanse in the sacrilege not merely of mercantile interest, but of *failed*, “slovenly” mercantile interest. Setting the stage for more literally monstrous – though equally threatening – horrors to come, Lovecraft ensures that this land, as much as the strange beings that populate it, are appropriately off-kilter, off-genre and, most importantly, off-white.

Though the symbolic function of landscape in literature is on no account novel – especially in the Gothic tradition – it nevertheless assumes particular significance in Lovecraft’s work, which can in many ways be read as horrific travelogues. As some scholars have observed, this attention to landscape brings the same preoccupation with geography, architecture, and nativism to Lovecraft’s fiction that proliferates in his travel-essays and letters; consequently, it aligns this kind of literary tourism with the production of horror – in this case, the horrifying decline of Anglo-Saxon whiteness. By linking Anglo-Saxondom and New English Americanism once again to such architectural icons as the white church steeple, the Georgian house, and the gambrel roof (an architectural detail upon which Lovecraft frequently rhapsodized), Lovecraft compounds his recurrent parallel between structural and hereditary decay. In a 1923 letter to Maurice W. Moe, Lovecraft recounts a recent expedition through one of Providence’s more impoverished neighborhoods in language even more floridly Gothic than that used in his fiction:

“... grotesque lines of gambrel roofs with drunken eaves and idiotick tottering chimneys... streets, lines, rows; bent and broken, twisted and mysterious, wan and wither’d... claws of gargoyles obscurely beckoning to witch-sabbaths of cannibal horror in shadow’d alleys that are black at noon... long, long hills up which daemon winds sweep and daemon riders clatter over cobblestones... and toward the southeast, a stark silhouette of hoary, unhallowed black chimneys and bleak ridgepoles against a mist that is white and blank and saline – the venerable, the immemorial sea” (*SL I*, 270).

He ends on a note of uncharacteristic melancholy: “There must be crime where so many dead things are... the mass’d dead of Colonial decay... the dead that draw shapes out of the night to feed and feast and fatten... No, I had not thought that Providence held such places as this” (271). Lovecraft brings this same sense of horrific abjection to “The Dunwich Horror.” Reeking both literally and metaphorically of “the massed mould and decay of centuries,” Dunwich seems to embody the sense of white, nativist impotence that – in the early twentieth century context of immigration laws and social hygiene

movements – would have seemed more dangerous than ever. While the presence of alien incursion (at least by this point in the story) may be absent, the sense of cultural and social erosion is omnipresent.

While the principal burden of Lovecraft's lamentation rests with poor, lower-class whites, he illustrates the extent of the region's deterioration with the acknowledgment that – as in his earlier visit to Danvers – the stain of the lower classes has crept up to pollute their betters. "The old gentry," we are told, "have kept somewhat above the general level of decay," though even they are not immune, as "many branches are sunk into the sordid populace so deeply that only their names remain as a key to the origin they disgrace" (*Tales*, 372). When the occasional Whateley or Bishop manages to "send their eldest sons to Harvard and Miskatonic... those sons seldom return to the mouldering gambrel roofs under which they and their ancestors were born" (*Tales*, 372). Even the gentry, however, are not above suspicion.

"Representing two or three armigerous families which came from Salem in 1692," the same year of the witch hysteria, they are clearly intended to be associated with the devilry the event bespeaks (*Tales*, 372). Indeed, several of the surnames mentioned within "The Dunwich Horror" match those of people executed or tried during the hysteria, including "Bishop," "Frye," "Corey," and "Hutchins." If Dunwich is to be understood as a landscape of fallen New England, it only makes sense that it should channel perhaps the most notorious blemish on the supposedly white, rational, and republican face of Old New England.<sup>12</sup> The outright mention of "certain forbidden cults which have come down from old times" only compounds the sense of religio-cultural otherness that Lovecraft, channeling Murray, attempts to convey (*Tales*, 398). In any case, with even the hereditary nobility failing to keep above water – and judged susceptible to "degenerate" beliefs – the town's devolution is inevitable. As the exodus of Dunwich's "good" blood undercuts any possibility of the town's regeneration, the town itself – and the white, Anglo-Saxon rurality it both harbors and represents – is left, both physically and figuratively, to deteriorate. Only the aged, the

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<sup>12</sup> As I note with regard to Lovecraft's human others, the witch trials also, significantly, cloud the notion of New England's whiteness – as well as its idealized difference from the decadent, slaveholding South – in invoking the spectre of the enslaved black woman, Tituba.

antique, and the infirm are left to populate and prop up the ailing town, and Dunwich is left inexorably to sink ever deeper into the muck.

It is thus appropriate that Lovecraft ends his initial description of the town on the following, discordant note. “Deposits of skulls and bones” found within the tumulus of Sentinel Hill, “sustain the popular belief that such spots were once the burial-places of the Pocumtucks; even though many ethnologists, disregarding the absurd improbability of such a theory, persist in believing the remains Caucasian” (*Tales*, 373). Whether this signals an unwillingness to consider the possibility that white people might in any regard sink to the level of so-called “heathen savages”, or conjures up the degenerate secrecy of Murray’s Witch-Cult, it signals a clear break in the evolutionary progression of whiteness. Certainly, it constitutes a pointed strike at the primacy of New England Puritanism.<sup>13</sup> Invoking, as Timothy H. Evans suggests, an already-deviant past in order to further “explore a perceived loss of tradition in the present,” Lovecraft uses Dunwich to destabilize and already-precarious manifestation of white American civilization (Evans, 99-100).

It is one of the “sunken branches” of the Dunwich gentry that serves as the focus of the story’s horror and as the centerpiece of its commentary on the degradation of whiteness. Not all of the Whateley sons, it so happens, are fortunate enough to matriculate at the Ivy-League-level. Among the lower-hanging (and most curious strain of) fruit on the Whateley family tree is born Lavinia Whateley, the daughter of Old Man Whateley, and one of the few prominent female characters to be found in the author’s body of work (*Tales*, 374).<sup>14</sup> Described as “a somewhat deformed, unattractive albino woman of thirty five,” Lavinia occupies a space of gendered, classed, and embodied – perhaps even racialized – marginalization (*Tales*, 374). “Isolated among strange influences,” Lavinia lacks both normative socialization (at least, with anyone apart from “an aged and half-insane father about whom the most frightful tales of wizardry had been whispered”) and any formal schooling (*Tales*, 374). She is, in effect,

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<sup>13</sup> A recurrent theme in Lovecraftian fiction. As Old Zadok Allan says in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” “Then’s the time Obed he begun a-cursin’ at the folks fer bein’ dull sheep an’ prayin’ to a Christian heaven as didn’t help ‘em none. He told ‘em he’d knowed of folks as prayed to gods that give soemthin’ ye reely need” (*Tales*, 618).

<sup>14</sup> Especially as *The Thing on the Doorstep’s* Asenath Waite proves to occupy a rather complicated gender status

robbed not only of fully-functional patriarchal authority, but also of the capacity to escape from or evolve beyond her dissolute ancestry. Even the traditional routes of feminine domesticity are closed to her, for – as Lovecraft states – there is little room for “household cares in a home from which all standards of order and cleanliness had long since disappeared” (*Tales*, 374).

Lavinia’s aberrance is evident physically as well. Described as “slatternly” and “crinkly-haired,” Lavinia falls decidedly outside accepted standards of Anglo-Saxon beauty (*Tales*, 376). She is not merely unattractive, but outright “deformed,” and thus violates the demand for physical beauty that so ubiquitously characterizes white, Western womanhood. It is Lavinia’s albinism, however, that makes her character an object of particular fascination. A kind of ultimate physical whiteness in its lack of pigmentation, albinism complicates and even destabilizes the primacy of whiteness in the Lovecraftian racial apparatus. At no point does Lovecraft mention his character’s “sickly and pink-eyed albinism” except in negative terms, and this genetic rarity seems more like an additional deformity than a point of pride, constituting yet another physical reminder of her difference and distance from the bulk of her community (*Tales*, 374).

Yet even as it clearly marks her as physiologically aberrant, Lavinia’s albinism marks her as more literally white than any other human character in Lovecraft’s body of work. Though in every respect a failed example of respectable white womanhood, Lavinia Whateley is nevertheless possessed of an undeniable and wholly unique *claim* to whiteness that problematizes its objective superiority. Lavinia in effect becomes a human landscape onto which the drama of Dunwich is mapped. If white women are to be, as many scholars have suggested, the symbols of white domesticity and properly “elevated” white civilization (wherein middle-class white women have the luxury of remaining in the home), then Lavinia Whateley embodies the threatening contradiction that Dunwich poses to this standard. Isolated, disfigured, and in errant violation of the dictates of respectable society, Lavinia is in every respect aligned with the similarly isolated, disfigured, and scarcely respectable Dunwich. Though still technically white, both Lavinia and Dunwich occupy a whiteness that has been called into question, a “race by themselves” that nevertheless has the capacity to threaten whiteness as a whole (*Tales*, 372). A litmus test and mirror

of Dunwich's degradation, Lavinia thus becomes an acceptable stage upon which Lovecraft can explore the frayed edges of white identity – which, in “The Dunwich Horror,” are hemmed with an inhuman, dangerously racialized thread.

“Inter-racial heterosexuality,” writes Richard Dyer, “threatens the power of whiteness because it breaks the legitimation of whiteness with reference to the white body” (Dyer, 25). With Lavinia Whateley, however, this legitimation has already been compromised. “Were she simply a sacrificial character,” asserts Carl Sederholm, “a pure and innocent maiden chosen to mate with a monster, the story would read much differently” – more in the tradition of *King Kong* and, indeed, *Birth of A Nation* (Sederholm, 143). “But Lavinia is not a ritual virgin, a sacrifice to a monster; she is, instead, a monstrous mother, a woman steeped in abjection, her offspring committed to the destruction of human life” (Sederholm, 143). Though technically white, Lavinia neither displays nor demands the same respectability of her more conventional sisters; there is very little in her to pity or to save. Indeed, “she seemed strangely proud of the dark, goatish-looking infant who formed such a contrast to her own sickly and pink-eyed albinism,” unconscious or uncaring of the “taint” she has brought upon her already-corrupted gene pool (*Tales*, 374). The complicated formations and implications of Lovecraftian miscegenation will be discussed in the following chapter, yet its ties to degenerate whiteness must be emphasized: through Lavinia Whateley, and similarly decadent whites, Lovecraft explicitly links white degeneracy to the act of miscegenation. While not necessarily a unique conceptualization of racial amalgamation, this particular view of racial “amalgamation” was at least a departure from the bestial black rapist popularized by such texts as Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), and its subsequent filmic adaptation, *The Birth of A Nation* (1915).

In this new configuration, the onus of the act falls on the “Decadent Whateleys,” and in doing so, whiteness – however degraded – is actually held *responsible* for its part in the transgression. This isn't to say that the racialized elements of “The Dunwich Horror” are not problematized – they very much are. Yet in conceptualizing miscegenation as an act of “black magic” (a loaded term if there ever was one) carried out by whites, it is posited as a choice – a transgression carried out by degraded whites against

their own kind (*Tales*, 380). In the character of Lavinia, Lovecraft articulates anxieties regarding racial mixture that reveal the brittleness of *all* whiteness. A weak link in the thin white line that upholds America's white/nonwhite dichotomy, Lavinia thus compromises whiteness in its totality. There are cosmic implications to Lavinia's transgression: her own act of miscegenation sets the stage for that of Dunwich. In allowing the monstrous Other to impregnate her, Lavinia allows it also to fasten "itself on the world" (*Tales*, 387). Her transgression is as much an act of cosmic miscegenation as it is a physical one. While more evolved whites, such as the reporters who guilelessly "print flamboyant stories of young Wilbur's precociousness, Old Whateley's black magic... and the weirdness of the whole region" seem deliberately detached from the ordeal, it is nevertheless the higher strata of whites – in the form of the Miskatonic Professors Armitage, Rice, and Morgan – who are left to pick up the pieces (*Tales*, 380).

### III. Beasts and Man Alike:

#### Monstrous Degeneration in “The Lurking Fear” and “Rats in the Walls”

The intense fear of racial degradation that “Beyond the Wall of Sleep” initiates, and that “The Dunwich Horror” expands can be found throughout Lovecraftian fiction. Where it reaches its fever pitch of eugenic hysteria, however is in 1922’s “The Lurking Fear” and in 1923’s “The Rats in the Walls.” Written after Lovecraft’s first few visits to “that hell called New York,” these tales – like the later “The Horror at Red Hook” – may be considered a part of what Bennett Lovett-Graff refers to as Lovecraft’s “reactionary fantasy” (*SL II*, 71). The horrors around which they revolve – whether of mongrelization or miscegenation (and frequently both) – seem to draw specifically upon Lovecraft’s newfound exposure to this “dead city of squinting alienage with nothing in common either with its own past or with the background of America in general” (*SL II*, 23). Just as New York, grown far from its own white, colonial roots, has become a twisted, monstrous version of its former self, the monsters of “The Lurking Fear” and “The Rats in the Walls” have undergone a similarly terrifying devolution.

“No one,” writes S.T. Joshi, “is likely to regard ‘The Lurking Fear’ as one of Lovecraft’s masterworks,” though, he also observes, “it is not as contemptible a tale as many critics have deemed it” (*I Am Providence*, 435). One of Lovecraft’s earliest tales, “The Lurking Fear” is, like the horror it presents, somewhat low on the scale of evolution. Set, once again, in the New York Catskills, the tale’s setting eerily echoes that of the earlier “Beyond the Wall of Sleep.” More than a century earlier, Washington Irving immortalized the region with “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” and indeed Irving’s description of his “enchanted region,” which “continues under the sway of some witching power” and “abounds with local tales, haunted spots, and twilight superstitions” resonates powerfully with the fantastic strokes of Lovecraft’s pen (Irving, 294).<sup>15</sup> Where Irving created a kind of American fairy tale, however, Lovecraft conceives something much darker. The narrative follows a self-proclaimed

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<sup>15</sup> Lovecraft would in fact visit “the Washington Irving country,” as he called it, at least twice in his lifetime, and though he “was at every moment on the watch for the Headless Horseman,” was disappointingly “deny’d that sight by reason of the strength of the daylight” (“Observations on Several Parts of America,” 18). Maurice W. Moe, as S.T. Joshi’s two-volume biography remarks, was so enchanted with Lovecraft’s description of the region that he would include an extract of it – entitled “Sleepy-Hollow To-Day” – in *Junior Literature: Book Two (I Am Providence, 715-716)*.

“connoisseur of horror” – another of Lovecraft’s erudite, if a tad esoteric, protagonists – who comes to investigate the strange terror that has long gripped a particular region of the Catskills (*Tales*, 58). This, to be sure, is no headless horseman. Where *Sleepy Hollow*’s ghostly hessian was more myth than substance, the *Lurking Fear* leaves far more than a frightened schoolmaster – and a shattered pumpkin – in its wake. Over the course of one summer night, this bringer of “creeping death” destroys a village and its inhabitants, leaving in its wake a maelstrom of “human debris, bespeaking too vividly the ravages of daemon teeth and talons” (*Tales*, 57). Though “no one outside the backwoods” condescends to believe these “incoherent, extravagant descriptions of the half-glimpsed fiend,” the destruction it wreaks cannot be denied (*Tales*, 56). “The Lurking Fear,” then, signals the degradation not simply of whiteness, but of American myth and literature, transforming Irving’s “drowsy, dreamy” folktale into a nightmare of human blood and gore (Irving, 294).

“The Lurking Fear” borrows more from “Beyond the Wall of Sleep” than its landscape. The human landmarks of debased rurality are present as well. Lovecraft again dwells upon the “mountain mongrels” of the region, though he seems at least to reign in the vitriol of his earlier tale (*Tales*, 61). Where Joe Slater was one among many Catskill degenerates, the narrator of “The Lurking Fear” grants the natives a relatively generous – if uniformly condescending – degree of sympathy. “When we came to know the squatters better,” he recalls, “we found them curiously likeable... Simple animals they were, gently descending the evolutionary scale because of their unfortunate ancestry and stultifying isolation” (*Tales*, 62). He even goes so far as to enlist “a few of the younger men” – “inspired,” of course, “by our protective leadership” to accompany him in his investigations (*Tales*, 64). This seems less a factor of tolerance than it is of structural necessity. Where “Beyond the Wall of Sleep” uses higher intelligence – human and otherwise – as a foil for its constructions of degenerate whiteness, “The Lurking Fear” features a decadence of such intensity that it is cast in relief against a backdrop of similar (though lesser) degeneracy.

The obscure origins of the *Lurking Fear* are hinted to lie with the mysterious and long-extinct Martense family, in particular “the shunned and deserted Martense mansion, which crowned... Tempest

Mountain” (*Tales*, 56). In light of Lovecraft’s pronounced Anglophilia, it can come as no surprise that one of the first things we learn of the Martense family – namely, their being “reared in hatred of the English civilization” – serves also as an early indication of their decadence (*Tales*, 67). Pointedly of Dutch origin, the Martense patriarch’s evident dislike of “the changing order under British rule” situates the family in conspicuous opposition to the values of a self-professed “Colonial Tory of the ancient regime” (*Tales*, 66)(*SL I*, 72). Not even all-American patriotism is allowed to redeem the family; however opposed to British rule they might have been, all mention of the American Revolution is absent from their family history. “Their life,” the narrator explains, “was exceedingly secluded,” and the one member of the Martense clan to venture out into greater American society; after joining “the colonial army when news of the Albany convention reached Tempest Mountain,” this member of the Martense clan is, upon his return to the (pre-Revolutionary) fold, “hated as an outsider” (*Tales*, 67). If, in all likelihood, the reader does *not* share Lovecraft’s Tory conceits, he is nonetheless given reason enough to understand the Martenses’ racial and social alterity.

If “degeneracy” is a quality to be determined by intelligence, physicality, or demeanor, then the Martenses are shown to exceed even the “degenerate squatter population inhabiting pitiful hamlets on isolated slopes” in their decadence (*Tales*, 56). Their seclusion results in more than simply a social deterioration: “people declared that their isolation had made them heavy of speech and comprehension,” assuming, as the years progress, “an unclean animal aspect” (*Tales*, 67). Even their principle hereditary feature – their heterochromatic “dissimilarity of eyes” – speaks to a kind of mongrelism at the level of basic physiology (*Tales*, 56). Upon infrequent encounters, their physical decay is accompanied by a verbal one, and the Martenses begin to speak only “in broken gutturals” (*Tales*, 67). This condition is only hastened as the family lowers itself to the necessity of “intermarrying with the numerous menial class about the estate” (*Tales*, 67). As in previous tales, the violation of class-lines parallels violations of color-lines, in that both signify – and hasten – the deterioration of whiteness. Indeed, according to the narrator, some of the results of this decay may be seen among the “mongrel population” of the valley’s “pitiful squatters” many generations on (*Tales*, 67). The mansion now stands empty, a ruin that can only

boast of empty rooms, lonely graveyards, and the “strange myths” that have come to surround it (*Tales*, 56). Even the landscape that surrounds the Martense mansion seems unwholesome, thick with unnatural, “feverish” vegetation and scarred by “curious mounds and hummocks” that bespeak the figures “of shapes and dead men’s skulls swelled to gigantic proportions” (*Tales*, 55). Once again, Lovecraft pairs his representatives of human degradation with an equally repellent, almost cancerous landscape. In “The Lurking Fear,” as in the later “Rats in the Walls.” It is with the conjunction of the two that the real horror comes to light.

The revelation of the Fear’s true identity is the physical apotheosis of white degeneration. Digging frenziedly at the basement floor (and thus plumbing the literal depths of civilization’s landscape), the narrator discovers a passageway – the mouth of a tunnel that seems to lead interminably into the depths of the Tempest Mountain. Thinking back on the “odd mounds and hummocks” with which the region abounds, he comes to the horrifying realization that “the damned place must be honeycombed” (*Tales*, 72-73). These veins of corruption, stretching from the mountain’s summit and down into the Catskill countryside, have enabled the passage of the lurking fear from dwelling to dwelling, mansion to village, as quickly and devastatingly as disease through the body. The narrative’s attitude towards its landscape shifts accordingly. Catching sight of the autumn sunset, the protagonist finds himself sickened: “It was a peaceful Arcadian scene, but knowing what it hid I hated it... Everything seemed to me tainted with a loathsome contagion, and inspired by a noxious alliance with hidden powers” (*Tales*, 72). If white degeneration signifies a decadence that belies the externality of the surface – of skin color – then Lovecraft corrupts his landscape in reflective concurrence. The tale’s decadence is not only metaphorical, however: it is what issues from these unhallowed, inhuman depths that brings degenerate whiteness into truly monstrous relief. “The object was nauseous,” rants the narrator, “a filthy whitish gorilla thing... It was the ultimate product of mammalian degeneration; the frightful outcome of isolated spawning, multiplication, and cannibal nutrition above and below the ground; the embodiment of all the snarling chaos and grinning fear that lurk behind life” – and it is one of many such objects, part of a massive, degenerate horde infesting this subterranean world (*Tales*, 75). As is his wont when describing objects of

monstrous – or minority – abjection, Lovecraft slips into a prolix, almost overwrought style of narration. The term “degeneration” is used outright to construct the creature’s grotesqueness, and the inclusion of the term “whitish” (acknowledging, though also qualifying the thing’s relation to whiteness) makes clear the implications of its horrific creation. Most significant of all, however, is Lovecraft’s mask-like metaphor, the lurking fear’s embodiment of the horrors “that lurk behind life.” While this may surely be read in a cosmic sense, channeling Lovecraft’s much-lauded existentialist vision of human existence, it can in this context also be clearly read as an item of the tale’s ongoing racialized discourse. The climactic encounter with the Lurking Fear finishes with a final observation: that one of the thing’s eyes “was blue, [and] the other brown” (*Tales*, 75). This heterochromia bespeaks heritage, for – as the narrator concludes with the tale’s closing line – “I knew in one inundating cataclysm of voiceless horror what had become of... [the] House of Martense” (*Tales*, 76).

This is no mere case of “white trash”: deformed and devolved beyond almost all recognition – and certainly beyond any claim to human identity – the Martenses have become monsters of white degeneration, beyond even Joe Slater’s or Lavinia Whateley’s state of degradation. And there are hundred, even thousands of them, dwelling – quite literally – just beneath the surface of the idyllic American landscape that, in tales like “Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle,” had come to epitomize the pastoral ideal of white America. *This*, then, is the grinning, lurking fear that dwells behind the mask of life: the (white) American made monstrous, the degradation not only of a race, but of the land and life that it represented. The “real ‘shadow’ over Lovecraft’s” work and universe, then, is that the degraded Other may dwell within as well as without – threatening the boundaries not only of nationhood, but of the privileged white body and identity (Ringel, 169). That the Martenses are an isolated, particularly severe case of decadence does not matter; they lay bare the stark reality that whiteness, however elevated, is as susceptible to degradation as its nonwhite peers. In its path of devolution, moreover, lies its relation to “the viscous slime that was the ancestor of Aryan and non-Aryan alike,” and by falling so far, it produces an outcome that is all the more monstrous (Ringel, 169). In “The Lurking Fear.” Lovecraft renders the

degeneration of whiteness an act of revelation – and, in doing so, threatens to explode (or perhaps more accurately, excavate) the foundations of the whole white world.

It is this excavation that Lovecraft realizes most fully in “The Rats in the Walls.” Another tale of hereditary degeneration, “The Rats in the Walls” is in many respects a better-written and more gruesome reworking of “The Lurking Fear.” According to S.T. Joshi, it is also “without question the greatest tale of Lovecraft’s early period,” a claim that – in the absence of viable contenders – cannot be contested (*I Am Providence*, 457). Unusually for Lovecraft, it is set not in the mythic New-England that would come to define his work, but in his long-dreamed-of (and never-visited) Old England. Exham Priory – the English, ancestral estate of the narrative’s *American* protagonist – is, however, more nightmare than dream. As with the Martenses of “The Lurking Fear,” the Delapores (or de la Poers) boast a decidedly unwholesome lineage: the suspicious local peasantry “represented my ancestors as a race of hereditary demons,” says the narrator, for the wickedness that attends the family’s name stretches back to at least the early fourteenth century, with a 1307 “reference to a de la Poer as ‘cursed of God’” (*Tales*, 80-81).

The Priory itself, meanwhile, has an even longer history. Boasting a “peculiarly composite architecture... involving Gothic towers resting on a Saxon or Romanesque substructure, whose foundation in turn was of a still earlier order or blend of orders – Roman, and even Druidic or native Cymric, if legends speak truly,” the edifice can quite accurately be called a construction of Anglo-Saxon evolution, built with – and upon – the development of (white) English civilization (*Tales*, 77). As the narrator (the newest Delapore) begins to investigate the strange phenomena he experiences each night – the distinct sound of the titular rats in the walls – he finds himself plunging deeper and deeper into the depths of his estate, and consequently into ever-older remnants of his hereditary foundations.

Transplanted already from the modernity of the United States, Delapore finds himself drawn down from the heights of the English Gothic tower he makes his bed in, down through the ancient body of the house, the still more ancient sub-cellar, and down even further into the Roman crypt. Even this structure – thought to be the oldest part of the house – shows traces of even greater antiquity, suggesting that they “had merely been adopted by the Roman priests from some older and perhaps aboriginal temple on the

same site” (*Tales*, 88).<sup>16</sup> At the base of the pre-Roman altar, Delapore and his associates discover a still deeper – and still older – passage beneath the house, one that seems to “have been chiseled *from beneath*” (*Tales*, 92). Tracing a path of reversed evolution, Delapore’s descent through his house renders by way of physical movement the horrors that Lovecraft has in store.

Descending into the depths of the house, the explorers discover “a twilight grotto of enormous height, stretching away farther than any eye could see; a subterranean world of limitless mystery and horrible suggestion” – and with it, they discover the Delapore family’s dark secret (*Tales*, 92). Like the manse itself, the grotto plays host to a heterogeneity of architecture, Roman, Saxon, early English, as well as some “tumuli” and “a savage circle of monoliths” of presumably earlier date (*Tales*, 93). For what is uncovered in the grotto is no less than a heritage – an evolution – of unremitting monstrosity. Human remains blanket this strange space, all of “a degraded mixture... mostly lower than the Piltdown man in the scale of evolution, but in every case definitely human” (*Tales*, 93). Some of them are found to be quadrupedal in nature, apparently kept in herds within stone pens. The purpose of these herds, apparently, Delapore does not “have to ask” (*Tales*, 94). As with the Martense Family of “The Lurking Fear,” the Delapores had degenerated into cannibalism and degradation – and, in the case of their peculiar aliments, actually *bred* it in other human beings. Where the Martenses might believably be seen as the victims of tradition and circumstance, the de la Poers are quite clearly the practitioners of willful evil.

Lovecraft, in this particularly gruesome articulation of human decadence, illustrates a kind of “Race Suicide,” whereby characters who (in their ‘true’ Anglo-Saxondom) should rightfully epitomize civilized whiteness willfully stray from the path of higher breeding. A charged concept in nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourse (and one unfortunately still around today), the notion of ‘Race Suicide’ occupies a significant space in white supremacist rhetoric. Lovecraft, bizarrely (though far from uniquely)

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<sup>16</sup> Lovecraft’s substitution of Anglo-Saxon antiquity and legendry also offers a fascinating reconfiguration of what Darryl Catherine calls “white Christian sovereignty” over landscape, which is typically (and less easily) explored in American Gothic literature through the popular notion of the ‘accursed Indian burial ground.’ Lovecraft plays into this trope frequently in his works (though he seems to question it in the issue of the ‘Caucasian remains’ in “The Dunwich Horror”), but in “The Rats in the Walls” avoids having to do so.

conceptualized the first World War – in which he attempted, but was unable, to serve<sup>17</sup> – as “an elaborately staged racial suicide... wherein Germanic and Britannic Teutons are striving to annihilate each other instead of uniting against the Mongol-tainted Slav or menacing Oriental” (*SL I*, 17). A similar notion seems to be at play in “Rats in the Walls.” While no racialized menace lurks at the boundaries of the story, the Delapores put themselves on the track of race-suicide and degeneration with their deliberate abasement (one both cannibalistic *and* cabbalistic) of both themselves and of the lower-status whites on whom they prey and, in fact, *breed*. As in Poe’s *Pym*, the white Delapores of “The Rats in the Walls” need no influence from Tsalalians (or any other people of color) to engage in the heavily racialized practice of cannibalism. Indeed, they appropriate it into white culture, systematizing it in their construction of pens and herds. Perhaps the narrator’s inability to enter the grotto’s “English building” – a butcher shop – speaks to more than simple disgust. It is not only the grotesqueness of the scene that torments him: it is the fact that it is done under specifically English auspices. Yet the story – and its narrator – has still further to descend.

Distraught at this evidence of his hellish lineage, Delapore experiences “a moment of ecstatic fear” (*Tales*, 95). He begins to hallucinate, driven wild by the hints of even deeper gulfs to which man might fall. Elements of Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos intrude here as Delapore begins to contemplate “those grinning caverns of the earth’s centre where Nyarlathotep, the mad faceless god, howls blindly within “the illimitable gulf of the unknown” (*Tales*, 95). In the grip of sheer cosmic terror, the narrator finds himself unseated, wrenched from the safe confines of known and recognizable existence. As the guiding structures of racial ideology are torn away, he finds himself adrift in a violent, disorienting, and thoroughly alien world. And – as has been the case throughout the entirety of the story – the only way for him to go is *down*. The horror of “The Rats in the Walls” lies not only in Delapore’s alienation from the stability of the great white world, but in the fact that he, too, is implicated in its demise. In what is

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<sup>17</sup> Delapore’s son, notably, does serve in this war – and returns “a maimed invalid” who dies soon after his return home.

inarguably the most iconic passage in the story, Delapore's narration undergoes the same reversal of evolution he traced in his earlier passage through the house:

Why shouldn't rats eat a de la Poer as a de la Poer eats forbidden things? ...The war ate my boy, damn them all... and the Yanks ate Carfax with flames and burnt Grandsire Delapore and the secret... No, no, I tell you, I am *not* the daemon swineherd in the twilit grotto! It was *not* Edward Norrys' fat face on that flabby, fungous thing! Who says I am a de la Poer? He lived, but my boy died! ...Shall a Norrys hold the lands of a de la Poer? ...It's voodoo, I tell you... that spotted snake... curse you, Thornton, I'll teach you to faint at what my family do! ...'Sblood, thou stinkard, I'll learn ye how to gust... wolde ye swynke me thilke wys?... *Magna Mater! Magna Mater!* ... *Atys* ...*Dia ad aghaidh's ad aodann*... *agus bas dunach ort! Dhonas's dholas ort, agus leat-sa!* ...*Ungl* ...*ungl* ...*rrrlh* ...*chchch*...." (*Tales*, 96).

His ramblings slip first through time – mentioning the first World War, then the Civil War<sup>18</sup> – then proceed to devolve linguistically as well. This “atavistic passage,” as Lovecraft calls it, functions as both the climax of the story and as the apotheosis of Lovecraft's writings on degeneration (*SL II*, 181). While Lovecraft frequently illustrates aspects of degeneration in his works, here he abandons the detachment of earlier – and later – pieces. The text, as much as Delapore himself, is allowed to fall hopelessly downward, a textual implosion of “spectacular evolutionary reversal” (*I Am Providence*, 458). Writing from the standpoint of Delapore, Lovecraft is forced to inhabit the perspective of degeneracy, rather than observe it from without. The result is one of the few moments in Lovecraftian fiction where both audience and author are encouraged (in however questionable a capacity) to identify with, rather than against, the decadent Other; as such, it is at moments like this that Lovecraft – and his reader – is most vulnerable to degenerate incursion.<sup>19</sup>

As one scholar cannily observes, Delapore “has become an incarnation of all those potent fears of racial decadence and degeneration which the ‘Nordic’ Lovecraft associated automatically with Jews, Negroes, and ‘the stew of Asiatic filth’ inhabiting the New York of the mid-1920s” (St. Armand, 55). In fact, Delapore sinks even lower, coming to signify not simply a departure from whiteness, but from humanity. The melting-pot hordes of New York might be *subhuman*, but what Delapore becomes is

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<sup>18</sup> “The Rats in the Walls” is significant also for being one of the few Lovecraftian texts to mention the Civil War. In this case, the narrator is “a stolid Yankee” of decidedly Southern origin: both his grandfather and the family's Virginia estate, Carfax (itself a reference to Stoker's *Dracula*), perished in the “incendiary outrage” of the Civil War. All knowledge of their family's dark history conveniently burns with it.

<sup>19</sup> Which only really occur in equal degree in “The Shadow over Innsmouth” and “The Outsider”

something unutterably *inhuman*, something even further down the evolutionary scale. Whiteness – and the humanity which attends it – is not simply something that can be degraded over time, but something which (as Delapore finds out) can be ripped away in the matter of moments. Family histories of abject diabolism might not be thick about most English ancestries, but the terror that comes with race-suicide, the threatening advances of industrial modernity, and even Lovecraft's peculiarly bleak cosmic vision nevertheless suggest whiteness to be especially fragile.

Certainly, the characters of "The Rats in the Walls" seem to think so. By the end of the story, Delapore reports that "they" – the other whites of his narrative – "have blown up Exham Priory, taken my Nigger-Man away from me, and shut me into this barred room at Hanwell with fearful whispers about my heredity" (*Tales*, 96). "Nigger-man" in this case refers to the narrator's black cat, but seems also to speak to the loss of one of Delapore's privileges as a white man: the right to own or exert power over beings of 'lesser' spheres – in this case, one that tellingly invokes the history of American slavery (a fact made doubly significant with the mention of Delapore's own Confederate heritage). His accompanying institutionalization, as well as the destruction of Exham Priory, speak to the desperate efforts of other white authorities to contain this possible threat to whiteness – to confine it, pathologize it, and if necessary, destroy it. Rendered safely Other by the whites around him, Delapore thus embodies the scale of the threat that degenerate whiteness posed to white supremacy – Lovecraftian or otherwise. Though he may be confined within a cell, or within the pages of this narrative, the danger he posed (however fictive) was nonetheless very real, or at least real enough to warrant his creation. Like the ghostly and never-glimpsed rats in the walls, plunging ever deeper into the depths of the white consciousness, the threat of white degeneration was one that could never fully be caught or contained.

After "The Rats in the Walls," monstrous degeneration would gradually come to lose its position at the center of Lovecraftian horror. While it would still remain a significant factor in stories like "The Dunwich Horror," it would – even in this tale – become peripheral to the central horror. Fragments of it surface, for example, in "The Whisperer in Darkness," wherein the narrator – confronted with growing evidence of the utterly (and predatorily) nonhuman – anxiously gropes for explanations of a more

terrestrial sort. It could be, he thinks, “some hidden, night-haunting human being decayed to a state not much above that of lower animals... After all, there might be some queer and perhaps hereditarily misshapen outcasts in those shunned hills” – not, as the narrative ultimately discovers, some “race of star-born monsters as folklore claimed” (*Tales*, 427). The obvious desperation of this hypothesis, however, as well as its ultimate debunking, speak to the ways in which Lovecraft would move his horrors into increasingly cosmic (if, perhaps, no less racially-charged) spheres. It is *not* a specimen of degenerate whiteness that lurks within the lonely Vermont woods; that such beings may now be considered the *plausible* explanation to this mystery – the *lesser* of two possible monstrosities – brings Lovecraft’s fiction a long way away from the twisted annals of Martenses and De la Poers. Just as American shores would increasingly give way to non-European passengers (“Faugh! It sickens my blond Teuton soul!”), Lovecraft’s decadent, formerly human monstrosities would give way to creatures of loftier (and decidedly less European) origin (*SL II*, 67).

#### IV. Conclusion | The Stigmata of Degeneracy

In June of 1925, Howard Phillips Lovecraft wrote to his friend Maurice W. Moe to announce a more personal triumph over the whips and scorns of what he perceived as another kind of physical “degeneration”: weight gain. His “most spectacular feat of the season,” he wrote to Moe, “is *reducing*... reclamation of a decade-lost statue from the vile mud which had so long encrusted it ... the story is told by figures like these: weight, *one hundred forty six* pounds... And I mean to stay that way” (*SL II*, 18-19). It is in passages like these that one may glimpse a Lovecraft who was not merely unfamiliar with the precepts of body positivity, but who was deeply insecure about the possibility of his *own* degeneration. The language he uses here, even in jest, is telling: the human body becomes something to be recovered, a statue lost in the “vile mud” of perceived physiological excess. Yet it also, as S.T. Joshi observes, suggests something: “the crippling poverty” that gripped him, and would continue to do so for pretty much the remainder of his life (*I Am Providence*, 577). In announcing his triumph over a physical kind of

degeneration, Lovecraft attempted to disguise, or at least to make light of, his slippage into another – distinctly financial – kind.

Throughout his life, Lovecraft would grapple with a consciousness of his own forms of degeneration. “Being of no use to myself,” he wrote in 1917, “it was hard for me to believe I am of use to anyone else” (*SL I*, 46). His description of his (failed) attempt to enlist for service in the First World War is still more alarming: “impressed by my entire uselessness in the world,” he recalled, “I resolved to attempt enlistment despite my almost invalid condition. I argued that if I chose a regiment soon to depart for France; my sheer nervous force, which is not inconsiderable, might sustain me till a bullet or piece of shrapnel could more conclusively & effectively dispose of me” (*SL I*, 45).<sup>20</sup> In passages like these, as well as in his fiction, Lovecraft betrays a vulnerability that, taken retrospectively, resonates powerfully with the racial hysteria that frequently bleeds into his work. Acutely aware of his own inability to live up to ideal whiteness, Lovecraft’s tales of white degeneracy may be read as his own efforts to displace or even work through racial insecurities of his very own. More importantly, however, Lovecraft’s insecurities reinforce the innate fragility of the configurations of whiteness that he pens, as well as the racialized subjects upon which they depend. Created by an author who, by his own admission, felt himself to be a kind of failure, stigmatized by some “weakness in me – some subtle decadence of the spirit,” the forms that Lovecraftian whiteness take on are, from the first, compromised by the reality that their “idealized” form never actually existed (*SL I*, 291).

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<sup>20</sup> “The company I would have been in was a splendid one (9th C.A.C.) ... This company, now in Federal Service as the 55th Co., made a trip to Providence lately & gave an entertainment in the Strand Theatre. It made me feel so – shut out – left behind – that I could not bear to attend!” (*SL I*, 56).

### Part III.

#### Only Partly of Mankind Blackness, the Limits of White Purity, and the Horror of Miscegenation

“...there had been such commixture, and, as it were, adultery...  
that the production was no longer of God’s making,  
but the monstrous offspring of man’s depraved fancy”  
- Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter”

Of the many things that Howard Phillips Lovecraft was known for, perhaps the most surprising – and, indeed, the most whimsical – was his lifelong love of cats. In a 1924 missive to Edwin Bard, Lovecraft recalled (in typical third-person narration) that he had never “liked people as well as cats,” and that “it is among the Felidae that he has had his most valued friends” (*SL I*, 298). In 1933, Lovecraft even established an informal “fraternity,” comprised of “the refined and sedate club of felidae on the roof of the shed across the garden,” and bestowed upon them the title of “the Kappa Alpha Tau,” or the K.A.T. club (*SL IV*, 274).<sup>21</sup> Though his delicate financial situation prevented him from keeping any pets from his teenage years onward, Lovecraft’s ardor for cats never truly abated, and over the course of his life, he would continue to cultivate friendships with whatever feline specimens came his way.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Lovecraft’s love for cats would find frequent expression in his writings and letters, first with his 1920 short story, “The Cats of Ulthar”<sup>23</sup> – which was one of the author’s personal favorites – and again in “Cats and Dogs,” a playful 1926 composition written in for a meeting of amateur writers. In “Cats and Dogs,” Lovecraft engages in that age-old debate – which is the better animal? – and argues, predictably, for the superiority of the former. “I have no active dislike for dogs,” Lovecraft assures his readers, “any more than I have for monkeys, human beings, **negroes**, cows, sheep, or pterodactyls” (“C&D,” 185).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “I consider myself an honorary member by virtue of my lifelong regard for the feline species,” Lovecraft wrote of the K.A.T. fraternity in 1936 (*SL V*, 376). Chapters formed also in Southern and Central California, where some of Lovecraft’s correspondents lived, though Lovecraft’s own Providence chapter was indisputably the first (*SLV*, 376).

<sup>22</sup> Including the delightfully-named “Genl. Tobasco” of Clark Ashton Smith (*SL IV*, 376).

<sup>23</sup> Where, it is said, “no man may kill a cat” – a sentiment that would be echoed in a 1935 letter, wherein Lovecraft dramatically declares “Death to all oppressors and enemies of the K.A.T.!” after a few members had gone missing (*SL V*, 169).

<sup>24</sup> Bolded mine.

“Of the complete biological inferiority of the negro,” wrote Howard Phillips Lovecraft in late 1934, “there can be no question – he has anatomical features consistently varying from those of other stocks, & always in the direction of the lower primates” (*SL V*, 77). Today, Lovecraft’s racism is a well-known aspect of his life and works, but it is worth exploring the ways in which the category of blackness – specifically and continuously – occupied a unique space in Lovecraft’s racial consciousness. Lovecraft’s perceptions and representations of racialized human Others have already been discussed in this paper, yet his attitude towards blackness (as evinced in “Cats in Dogs”) was of a different character; indeed, he seems not to have understood black people to *be* human. This was not an attitude he took towards all racialized Others. “It is not that one race is any *better* than any other,” he claimed in 1934, “but that their whole respective heritages are so antipodal as to make harmonious adjustment impossible. Members of one race can fit into another only through the *complete eradication* of their own background-influences” (*SL V*, 78). Assimilation, not necessarily innate superiority, was at the center of much of Lovecraft’s racial discourse.<sup>25</sup>

What differentiated his antipathy for black people from that of Jewish people, Eastern European people, Asian people, etc. was his belief that black assimilation was entirely impossible: “Granting the negro his full due,” Lovecraft wrote, “he is not the sort of material which can mix successfully into the fabric of a civilized Caucasian nation” (*SL IV*, 230). Lovecraft’s differentiation of ‘negroes’ from human beings in “Cats and Dogs” was an articulation of his belief in the impossibility of black assimilation. By this logic, the admixture of whiteness and blackness was not simply a mixture of races, but a mixture of *species* – a concept that came dangerously close to the monstrous hybridity Lovecraft constructed at the core of many of his horror tales. In American racial discourse, moreover, blackness – at least from a white perspective – came with its own baggage of miscegenation fears, especially as it intersected with white

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<sup>25</sup> This assimilationist “logic” was applied even to Lovecraft’s anti-Semitism: “The trouble with the Jew is not his blood – which can mix with ours without disastrous results – but his persistent and antagonistic culture-tradition. On the other hand, the negro represents a vastly inferior biological variant which must under no circumstances taint our Aryan stock. The absolute colour-line as applied to negroes is both necessary & sensible, whereas a similar deadline against Jews (though attempted by Hitler) is ridiculous” (*SL IV*, 195)

femininity. When speaking of Lovecraftian constructions of miscegenation, then, it is absolutely essential that one understand the uniquely-charged meaning that blackness – in whatever strange forms it took – held therein.

The earliest literary expression of Lovecraft's negrophobic venom came in 1905, with the composition of "De Triumpho Naturae: The Triumph of Nature over Northern Ignorance." Written when he was only fifteen years old, this twenty-four-line poem laments the "folly" of Emancipation. Lovecraft blames this 'mistake' on the "Northern Bigot," who, "deaf to Nature, and to God's decree," erred when "He gave the blacks their fatal liberty" ("DTN," 1, 11-12). This fatality, interestingly enough, is to inflict black people rather than white. For, as Lovecraft thunderously proclaims:

But reckless folly can no further run;  
The will of Nature must in Time be done.  
The savage black, the ape-resembling beast,  
Hath held too long his Saturnalian feast.  
From out the land, by act of far'way Heav'n,  
To ling'ring death his numbers shall be driv'n.

"De Triumpho Naturae," 17-22

Unfit for the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, the black race has been doomed, by its foolish white savior, to ultimate extinction. As he does in "The Street," Lovecraft uses "De Triumpho Naturae" to envision a kind of inevitable, Darwinian racial cleansing. Indeed, the last few lines in the passage position American race relations as a kind of evolutionary struggle, one in which whiteness is awarded not only the sanction of "far'way Heav'n," but the accordance of "The will of Nature" ("DTN," 18). Ascribing his own racist wishful thinking to these nebulous forces, Lovecraft posits the eugenic principles of white supremacy as a kind of natural control mechanism whose very articulation betrays its unreality. The poem ends on a note of pompous racial moralizing: "Against God's will the Yankee freed the slave / And in the act consign'd him to the grave" ("DTN," 23-24). Racial distinction is consequently assumed to be inherent rather than constructed – a series of deliberate divisions imposed by a higher power. Miscegenation, then, constitutes not simply a breach in social convention, but a violation of the order of nature.

Anticipating his later weird fiction, Lovecraft adds a touch of Gothicized racism to “De Triumpho Naturae” in his vision of Reconstruction: “The halls where Southern justice once had reign’d / He now with horrid negro rites profan’d” (“DTN,” 13-14). What rites these may be are unclear; yet the sense of violation – the “profane” implications of a black presence within a white space – returns to Lovecraft’s penchant for using his landscapes as metaphor. In Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman*, published the same year that “De Triumpho Naturae” was written, the Reconstructionist moves to “Africanise the ‘conquered provinces’” result ultimately in black lawmakers – notably, the mulatto Silas Lynch – demanding “the privilege of going to see [the white man] in his house... eating with him and sleeping with him, and when I see fit, to take his daughter in marriage!” (*The Clansman*, 136, 275). Dedicated to William Benjamin Smith, author of *The Colour Line: A Brief in Behalf of the Unborn*, from whose concepts it borrows heavily, “De Triumpho Naturae” existed within and was inspired by the enormous body of racist, white-supremacist literature that enjoyed popular circulation in the United States during this period.

Consequently, even as Lovecraft’s relative isolation from the mainstream of his literary contemporaries is significant in considering his work (at least with regard to situating him in the Pulp tradition), to read him apart from those contemporaries – especially those like Dixon and Smith – is to ignore his participation in the early twentieth century’s increasingly frantic efforts to construct and maintain white identity. Lovecraft was not simply ‘a man of his time’ – he was a man who helped to create his time, and whose work perpetuated the racial ideologies that abounded therein. These ideologies were not exclusive to populations above or below the Mason-Dixon line, but in fact were bound by a common anxiety over the status of white privilege and the contours of white identity in a rapidly shifting America. “De Triumpho Naturae” was an early expression of this anxiety – but it would by no means be the last. As late as 1936, Lovecraft attempted to justify American racism – especially its specifically anti-black permutations – in both cultural and biological terms:

Altogether, many of the most ethically indefensible wars – like the snatching of the two Americas from the Indians – have been of the greatest value to the white race and its culture; giving it ampler room for development and expansion, increasing its natural resources, and providing a setting for the growth of new and beneficial cultural variants. Who would truly wish North America restored to its aboriginal tribes, or Australia to its blackfellows, or South Africa to its negroes?

Many technically 'unjust' wars are waged against races so low and degraded or mutually murderous that the conquered people are actually benefited in the end by the change (*Selected Letters V*, 249).

Perhaps the most significant prospect that “De Triumpho Naturae” – and indeed, the totality of Lovecraft’s racist and xenophobic work – puts forth, however, is this reality: that American racism knows no regional boundaries. While the American South typically receives the bulk of attention regarding American race relations (especially between white and black) the North should on no account be absolved of its own racist history – including that of black enslavement. As Joseph Conforti notes in *Imagining New England*, “New England had its own history of slavery and slave trading,” and the slave trade’s “American phase was dominated by New England and particularly Rhode Island merchants in the eighteenth century,” a fact that was frequently minimized in later centuries and by the New England-centered Abolitionist movement (Conforti, 200, 68). New England’s racism, however, lasted (and continues to last) long after the end of northern slavery, and indeed, well into the industrial revolution.

Rhode Island, of course, was Lovecraft’s home state; and Lovecraft himself drew notable comparisons between his native state and the South. “Many of the vistas in this region are said to suggest Virginia landscapes,” he wrote in one 1935 letter; “Alone in New England,” he added, “this Narragansett Country had large estates with many black slaves... my ancestor Robert Hazard leaving 133 negroes in his will. The patriarchal folkways closely paralleled those of the South – though the plantation-houses followed New England gambrel-roofed lines on the large scale” (SLV, 105). New England’s racism was also not mitigated by newer forms of racial and ethnic Otherness. Lovecraft himself observed that “The second generation of European immigrants seems to share the anti-negro attitude” (SL V, 77). As such, the anti-blackness and more generally-disseminated racism that abounds in Lovecraft’s fiction should not be interpreted merely as the foibles of an individual man, but as representative of a moment in culture. Lovecraft was not alone in the views that he espoused – and he came of age in an era where Jim Crow, lynching, and anti-immigrant and anti-miscegenation laws were part of the national conversation.

Perhaps because of these racial configurations, few Black characters of real narrative consequence appear in Lovecraft's fiction.<sup>26</sup> This is, in part, precisely *because* they are so unassimilable; so incongruous with even the decayed, chaotic vision of life put forth in Lovecraft's tales as to jeopardize its already-imperiled ideological balance. Among the first hints of blackness to appear in his fiction come – ironically enough – in the form of the creature that Lovecraft loved so well: *Felis Catus*, of the *Felidae* species. Among the most memorable aspects of Lovecraft's 1924 tale, "The Rats in the Walls," is "Nigger-Man," the "old black cat" of the narrator.<sup>27</sup> This eyebrow-raising creative choice on Lovecraft's part had its basis in reality – specifically, in biography. 'Nigger-Man' had been the name of Lovecraft's own childhood pet, a "beloved black cat" that would – despite his love for the species – be the only pet he would own in his lifetime (*I Am Providence*, 97). Its rather shocking name, S.T. Joshi writes, "was not regarded as offensive at the time – or at least not as offensive as it would be now" (*I Am Providence*, 97). Nevertheless, its implications cannot be ignored or denied – in spite, or perhaps *because*, of their basis in Lovecraft's reality.

The association between blackness (black masculinity in particular) and animality has a long and powerful history in the white American consciousness, and – especially in light of Lovecraft's grating remark in "Cats and Dogs" – it absolutely speaks to the ways in which Lovecraft conceived of blackness as an inhuman, lower order of evolution. As one critic observes, Nigger-Man the cat is doubly loaded with meaning, "a being caught midway between absolute appetite and bestiality, on one hand, and civilized man, on the other... his blackness allies him to a lower order of beings, while his very name reminds us powerfully once again of Lovecraft's personal negrophobia, which he expresses only obliquely in 'Rats' through the use of this pejorative" (St. Armand, 25). It is, moreover, all the more

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<sup>26</sup> A problem addressed in Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* and Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country*, two novels that specifically explore the problem of blackness in Lovecraft's fiction. The latter work is being adapted into an upcoming television series, produced by Jordan Peele of *Get Out* (2017) fame. Of similar interest is the Lovecraftian short story anthology, *Heroes of Red Hook*.

<sup>27</sup> He would return again – albeit in a much smaller capacity – in "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," this time shortened to the slightly less reprehensible 'Nig,'

telling that even so simple a thing as a love of cats was not untouched by Lovecraft's racial consciousness.

Lovecraftian blackness would not solely be confined to animals as his body of work grew, yet its appearance would remain extremely infrequent. There is a brief mention of a "nautical-looking negro" in "The Call of Cthulhu," whom, the narrative hints, may have a hand in Professor Angell's unexpected demise (*Tales*, 168). There is mention, as well, in "The Shadow out of Time," of Lovecraft's reviled "australoids" in the form of stereotypically fearful "blackfellows," whose "common racial legends" hint at ancient powers and knowledge of which white civilization is ignorant (*Tales*, 754).

Perhaps most notable among Lovecraft's representations of blackness, however, is that of the enslaved black person. This configuration appears, as far as one can tell, twice in Lovecraft's works. The first example of this occurs in "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," where it is revealed that the titular character's sinister ancestor, Joseph Curwen, dabbled in the slave trade. The only story in which black people are treated in a vaguely positive way is "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward." Written in 1926 – though not published until the early 1940s – this story is notable for being situated within two of the things that Lovecraft most loved: Providence, Rhode Island, and eighteenth-century colonial America. It is also significant in that it is the only one of Lovecraft's stories to deal directly with the slave trade. The depiction of black enslavement in "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward" is a surprisingly brutal one – for a man of Lovecraft's beliefs, at least. "Dark comparisons," Lovecraft writes, could be made "between the large numbers of Guinea blacks [Joseph Curwen]<sup>28</sup> imported until 1766, and the disturbingly small number for whom he could produce bona fide bills of sale either to the slave-dealers at the Great Bridge or to the planters of the Narragansett Country" (*Tales*, 228). Indeed, the enslaved black people of "Charles Dexter Ward" are Curwen's earliest stated victims: though their exact fates are never discovered, the "negro whisperings and frenzied screams, coupled with curious chants or invocations," say more than enough (*Tales*, 235). The very unknowability of their fates – the narrative's willingness to

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<sup>28</sup> The story's white villain, and the ancestor of Charles Dexter Ward

completely drop them from the story after they have been used to inspire horror – is telling of the ways in which blackness and black pain were (and continue to be) used as little more than props with which to punctuate the lives and stories of white characters.

The only other black characters in “Charles Dexter Ward” are an older black couple in the latter-day setting of the novel. “Old Asa and his stout wife Hannah” are properly “courteous” and obliging of the story’s white protagonist, Charles Dexter Ward (*Tales*, 257). The current residents of Joseph Curwen’s former residence, they graciously allow Ward to carry out his investigation of their home. Their private space – like the bodies of the enslaved people before them – do not wholly belong to them, but are subject to white intrusion and experimentation. Hannah even takes on some of the characteristics of the traditional “Mammy” role. As the story progresses, and Ward becomes increasingly unstable, Hannah expresses concern for him with appropriately deferential affection: “He was always very liberal to her and to old Asa, but seemed more worried than he used to be; which grieved her very much, since she had watched him grow up from birth” (*Tales*, 279). One of only two times that Hannah appears in the story, it is significant that even in this apparent “expression” of concern, she is not allowed to speak. Her “voice” is, instead, mediated through Lovecraft’s third-person narrator. It is, of course, this impersonality – and the servility implicit therein – that makes their (relatively) positive treatment possible. Amenable to the whims of the white characters around them, and divested of any sense of internality, Asa and Hannah are effectively robbed of any humanity that might prove too threatening to the demands of whiteness.

A considerably more fleshed-out – though significantly less sympathetic – representation of the enslaved black person can be found in “Medusa’s Coil,” which will be discussed in greater length in the next section of this chapter. In this story, the reader is introduced to Sophonisba, “the ancient Zulu witch-woman” who lives on the postbellum plantation of a wealthy white family (Lovecraft & Bishop). As “Medusa’s Coil” is a post-Emancipation narrative, Sophonisba is not technically enslaved. Her background, however, clearly includes a history of enslavement – one that is specifically linked to Lovecraft’s particular supernaturalism. Speaking in Lovecraft’s egregious “black” dialect, Sophonisba at one point recalls the circumstances of her own enslavement. “Ol’ Sophy, she done got de black stone

outen Big Zimbabwe in ol' Afriky!" she cries, "Ol' Sophy, she done dance in de moonshine roun' de crocodile-stone befo' de N'bangus cotch her and sell her to de ship folks! No mo' Tanit! No mo' Isis! No mo' witch-woman to keep de fire a-goin' in de big stone place!" (Lovecraft & Bishop, 12). As a black person (a black woman, no less) with practices and beliefs all her own, she violates the acceptable parameters of black existence put forth by white supremacy. Her connection, moreover, to the sinister rites and entities that characterize Lovecraftian monstrosity place her in an even further suspect light. The fact that she is 'cotched' by fellow Africans rather than white men not only divests the story's white author and readers of racial guilt, but also puts forth the possibility that her capture and subsequent enslavement may have been a preventative, protective matter – perhaps even one that can be justified.

In "Medusa's Coil," Lovecraft also manages to combine his dubiously 'African' dialect with that of his own alien language. During the single scene in "Medusa's Coil" where she is allowed to speak, Sophonisba is used to translate the eldritch invocation into the obvious plantation stereotype: "...pore Missy Tanit, pore Missy Isis!" she shrieks, "Marse Clooloo,<sup>29</sup> come up outen de water an' git yo chile" (Lovecraft & Bishop, 12). What exactly one is to make of this – are plantation masters and mistresses to be equated, positively or negatively, with eldritch divinity? – is unclear. In any case, it works principally to compound Lovecraft's questionable use of dialect (and the racialized Otherness it invokes) with his alien monstrosities, and in the process, to deliberately downplay the boundaries between the two.

In "Medusa's Coil," African language itself – or at least, Lovecraft's garbled representation thereof – is itself equated with Lovecraft's chthonic chantings. Close to the story's climax, Sophonisba breaks into the familiar incantation, but adds something of her own to it. "*Ia! Ia! Shub-Niggurath! Ya-R'yleh! N'gagi n'bulu bwana n'lolo!*" (Lovecraft & Bishop, 12) Where the first few exclamations appear regularly in Lovecraftian fiction, the last appears only in this story, apparently intended to represent an (unspecified) African language itself. That its constructions are so clearly related to those used in the more traditional sections (or vice-versa) is especially significant given Lovecraft's own belief that "the

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<sup>29</sup> Evidently an alternative pronunciation of "Cthulhu"

language supposed to be used by non-earthly beings – without human vocal organs and with no knowledge of terrestrial traditions – *ought not to resemble human speech in any way*. The sounds ought not to follow any human language-pattern, and ought not to be derived from – or adapted to – the human speech-equipment at all” (*SL IV*, 387). That the proximity between Lovecraft’s ‘alien speech’ and Sophonisba’s ambiguous dialect is as close as it is, reveals not only Lovecraft’s betrayal of his own creative principles, but also the degree to which he failed to consider blackness as a part of humanity.

In exploring the configurations of blackness that exist in Lovecraftian fiction, it becomes increasingly apparent that its supposed ‘inassimilability’ is, in effect, a manifestation of Lovecraft’s own anxieties regarding the implications of black humanity and personhood. Whether harmless or threatening, sympathetic or villainous, inhuman or merely subhuman, Lovecraftian blackness occupies a precarious (if frequently sterilized) space in its author’s configurations of race and whiteness. It is thus appropriate that one of, if not *the* most significant representations of Lovecraftian miscegenation – the most threatening manifestation of these conflicting racial configurations – has blackness at its core.

## **II. The Colour Line Out of Space: Blackness, Monstrosity, and the Tangled Threads of Miscegenation**

“The narratives of the West,” observes Jeffrey Cohen in *Monster Theory*, “perform the strangest dance around that fire in which miscegenation and its practitioners have been condemned to burn” (Cohen, 16). As this fire continued to burn – and as America and its literary culture were established – this strange dance would be performed again and again, changing to accommodate the needs of new places and mores, but retaining its essential features. The “tragic mulatto” would appear with Lydia Maria Child’s “The Quadroons” in 1842 and become immortalized in Eliza of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Later in the century, representations of the mulatto would assume a far greater humanity and complexity in the work of African-American authors like Charles Chesnut<sup>30</sup> and Nella

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<sup>30</sup> Lovecraft, fascinatingly, owned a copy of Chesnut’s *The Conjure Woman* – a text significant both as a foundational work of African-American literature, and as a collection of what are ostensibly early ‘weird tales’ by a nonwhite author (Joshi & Schultz,

Larsen. Yet the sympathy with which these later authors treated their mixed-race characters was the exception rather than the rule, and at least as late as 1959,<sup>31</sup> popular depictions of “mulattoes” – especially ones who were able to pass for white – typically cast them as tragically misguided, if not presumptuously aspirational in their attempts at passing. Lovecraft himself seemed to concur. As he wrote in 1933, “Nothing but pain & disaster can come from the mingling of black and white, & the law ought to aid in checking this criminal folly” (*SL IV*, 230).

That Lovecraft was committed to the maintenance of America’s racial divisions – especially with regard to black people – is a fact that cannot be denied. “In dealing with these two black races,”<sup>32</sup> he wrote in 1934, “there is only one sound attitude for any other race (be it white, Indian, Malay, Polynesian, or Mongolian) to take - & that is to prevent admixture as completely and determinedly as it can be prevented, through the establishment of a colour-line & the rigid forcing of all mixed offspring below that line” (*SLV*, 78). Lovecraft – as has been noted in other chapters – not only saw D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of A Nation* (1915), but “admitted to having read both the novel (*The Clansman*, 1905) and the play (*The Clansman: An American Drama*, 1905)” upon which the film was based (*I Am Providence*, 113).<sup>33</sup> He also owned a copy of Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots: A Romance of the White Man’s Burden*, the first in Dixon’s Ku Klux Klan trilogy, and the prequel to *The Clansman*.<sup>34</sup> With juvenile works like “De Triumpho Naturae,” which are explicitly anti-black, and elements of his later tales, Lovecraft not only consumed this brand of literary racism, but actively contributed to it.

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48). Chesnutt, however, is notably absent from Lovecraft’s *Supernatural Horror in Literature*.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas Sirk’s 1959 remake of *Imitation of Life* (1934) is perhaps the ultimate – or at least the most extravagant – realization of the Tragic Mulatto trope. (To quote Sarah Jane: “I’m someone else... I’m white... white... WHITE!”)

<sup>32</sup> Here Lovecraft refers not only to Black Africans and African-Americans, but also to aboriginal Australians, which he regarded as “Equally inferior - & perhaps even more so” to the former race (*SL V*, 78).

<sup>33</sup> *The Birth of a Nation* also includes some prominent mulatto characters, all of which are coded as specifically treacherous.

<sup>34</sup> Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), though chiefly adapted from *The Clansman*, also borrowed characters and situations from *The Leopard’s Spots*.

Lovecraft's poetic foray into specifically anti-black, pro-Confederate discourse has already been discussed. Yet there is one work of his – composed well into his ostensive authorial maturity – which cannot go unmentioned when examining his anti-black and anti-miscegenation ideologies. This work is the “confused, bombastic, and just plain silly” tale, “Medusa’s Coil,” completed in August of 1930 (*I Am Providence*, 753). Woodenly contrived, “luridly pulpish,” and fatuously racist (to paraphrase S.T. Joshi), “Medusa’s Coil” is the second of Lovecraft’s three known collaborations with fellow-writer Zealia Bishop (*I Am Providence*, 754). Such collaborations, which Lovecraft himself referred to as “revisions,” were essentially ghost-writing jobs, and – despite their general distance from Lovecraft’s acknowledged canon – a few, including “Medusa’s Coil,” are considered by scholars to be principally, if not entirely, Lovecraft’s work.<sup>35</sup> Bishop herself reportedly lamented that “The stories I sent him always came back so revised from their basic idea that I felt I was a complete failure as a writer” (*I Am Providence*, 704). In this case, however, Lovecraft’s authorship of such an overtly racist tale is a thing to be lamented – though it comes as little surprise to the dedicated reader.

“Medusa’s Coil” is by far the most racially-charged of Lovecraft’s (surviving) collaborations with Bishop. It is also almost unique in Lovecraft’s corpus of work in being one of only two tales located in the American South – in this case, the “southern Missouri lowlands” somewhere off Cape Girardeau (Lovecraft & Bishop, 1).<sup>36</sup> Following in the footsteps of Charles Chesnut and other Southern gothicists, “Medusa’s Coil” is set amidst the ruins of that ultimate symbol of the bygone South, the Plantation house. This particular house belongs to the de Russey family, “an ancient, powerful, and cultivated line of Louisiana planters” (Lovecraft & Bishop, 3). Lost in the rural countryside, the story’s unnamed narrator seeks refuge from a sudden storm at the crumbling plantation house, which he initially assumes to be abandoned. “Its state of decay,” he remarks, “was extreme and obvious; one of the vast columns having

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<sup>35</sup> *I Am Providence*, 704-706.

<sup>36</sup> The other being “The Statement of Randolph Carter,” set somewhere near Florida’s Big Cypress Swamp. “The Call of Cthulhu,” as well, is set partially in Louisiana – though its narrative travels all over the globe, and its action is technically centered in (of course) Providence, RI.

rotted and fallen to the ground” (Lovecraft & Bishop, 1). In spite of the punishing years, however, this “decrepit pile” nevertheless manages to invoke “the graces and spaciousness of a bygone era and a far more southerly environment” (Lovecraft & Bishop, 1). It is, moreover, not *entirely* dead. Upon entering the rotting edifice, the narrator finds it to be inhabited by Antoine de Russy, the lone survivor of his noble lineage, who – in the tradition of Poe’s House of Usher – seems to mirror the decaying condition of the building around him.

Well aware of the genre parameters in which he operates, Lovecraft conjures up a vision of white Southern decadence – a civilization “gone with the wind,” so to speak – almost laughable in its conventionality. “Many people,” Lovecraft wrote in a 1935 letter, “wonder why I don’t exploit the traditional element of weirdness in the South – the brooding cypress swamps, the mouldering plantation-houses, the whispered negro lore, etc. etc. The fact is, however, that I can’t feel the same deep, Gothic horror in any mild and genial region that I can in the rock-strewn, ice-bound, elm-shaded hillsides of my own New England.” (SLV, 180-181). Lacking the technical subtlety or social nuance of authors like Chesnutt or William Faulker,<sup>37</sup> Lovecraft is forced to resort to Gothicized stereotype, ones of which – as his letter attests – he was clearly aware. “Medusa’s Coil” makes liberal use of “the mouldering plantation-houses,” and, with the story’s main action, “the whispered negro lore” as well. Of the conventions enumerated in his letter, Lovecraft abstains only from the “brooding cypress swamps” (which he uses in stories like “The Statement of Randolph Carter” and “The Call of Cthulhu”). His main departure from convention rests in his replacement of the black “Uncle Remus”<sup>38</sup> with the aging de Russy patriarch – and to this effect, he relates this Southerly narrative through a markedly white medium. The story’s most appreciable stereotype, however, comes in the form of Marceline Bedard, the mysterious new bride of the de Russy family’s son and heir.

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<sup>37</sup> Lovecraft owned none of Faulkner’s works, but praised “A Rose for Emily” as “a great story,” though one that “is not *weird*. It belongs to a different genre, & brings a shudder of repulsion & physical horror rather than one of cosmic wonder” (SL IV, 15).

<sup>38</sup> Changed in Chesnutt’s “Conjure Tales” to “Uncle Julius,” and given substantially more agency.

Strange, otherworldly wives are by no means anathema to Lovecraft's body of fiction. "The Thing on the Doorstep," for example, features the sinister Asenath Waite, who (in the tradition of Poe's "Ligeia") instructs her husband in the pursuit of occult erudition before bringing about his horrifying, necromantic downfall. "The Shadow over Innsmouth" likewise mentions the second, inhuman wife of Obed Marsh, "*that nobody in the town ever see,*" a fate shared by the 'Ape Princess' of "Arthur Jerymn" (*Tales*, 623). In each of these cases, these women bring to their respective marriages (and texts) a doubly racial and sexual threat. Both the second Mrs. Marsh and the Ape Princess constitute a specifically inhuman, tacitly amalgamist menace. Despite their marginal narrative presence, the influx of their inhuman blood into the (white) family line is in fact the central conflict of their respective stories. Asenath Waite, meanwhile, introduces her own kind of bodily transgression into her marriage, although one more concerned with gender. She is also implicitly coded as Jewish, a fact that some commentators have interpreted biographically.<sup>39</sup> Even the few prominent unmarried women in Lovecraft's fiction, such as Lavinia Whateley<sup>40</sup> of "The Dunwich Horror" and Keziah Mason from "The Dreams in the Witch House" are inflected with a kind of sexual taint, either from a literal monstrous congress, or – in Old Keziah's case – dealings with "the 'Black Man' of the witch-cult" (*Tales*, 678).<sup>41</sup>

The fact that the majority of Lovecraft's prominent female characters are thus constructed as threats to the white, male order is *highly* telling. Female embodiment, with its reproductive capacities, is positioned as a site fraught with racial and sexual danger – one central to the rhetoric of anti-miscegenation and the maintenance of the color-line. "As the literal bearers of children," notes Richard Dyer, "women are the indispensable means by which the group – the race – is in every sense reproduced"

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<sup>39</sup> Lovecraft's wife, Sonia Haft Greene, was herself Jewish.

<sup>40</sup> Though, interestingly enough, Old Wizard Whateley does use a kind of marital analogy in referring to the mysterious father of Lavinia's child: "I calc'late her man is as good a husabn' as ye kin find this side of Aylesbury; an' ef ye knowed as much about the hills as I dew, ye wouldn't ast no better church weddin nor her'n" (*Tales*, 375).

<sup>41</sup> To continue Cohen's metaphor of "that fire in which miscegenation and its practitioners have been condemned to burn," he notes that "Among the flames we see the old women of Salem hanging, accused of sexual relations with the black devil" (Cohen, 15). In Alan Moore's *Providence*, Keziah Mason takes on explicitly sexual contours.

(Dyer, 29). Miscegenation, then (whether of a racial or monstrous kind) problematizes, and renders overtly menacing the female presence – whatever her race may be. It is in “Medusa’s Coil” that Lovecraft most conspicuously articulates these fears, and it is in the character of Marceline Bedard that he most fully and overtly demonstrates his association of race, monstrosity, and the horrific implications of miscegenation.

Long before the reader is introduced to Marceline, the story works to establish the white, patriarchal household that she inevitably corrupts. The first character that the narrator encounters is, as has been mentioned, Antoine de Russy – the last surviving member of his clan. From him, in typical tale-within-a-tale format, the narrator is told the story of Denis de Russy, Antoine’s only – and long-dead – son. Denis de Russy was, in the words of his father, a young man who “didn’t need much training when it came to points of honour. It was in him, I reckon” (Lovecraft & Bishop, 3). Innately honorable, the younger de Russy is thus established as the hero of the story – and the standard of vigorous, youthful whiteness against which the racialized, feminine Other may be measured. As is his wont, Lovecraft ties his notions of ‘honour’ specifically to his understandings of racial purity. Denis de Russy was a “Romantic young devil – full of high notions – you’d call ‘em Victorian, now,” apparently exemplified in the fact that his father had “no trouble at all to make him let the nigger wenches alone” (Lovecraft & Bishop, 3). The implications of this comment are manifold, but the most fascinating is the fact that, in its specificity, Lovecraft seems to acknowledge a form of miscegenation that was rarely spoken of during this period: the reality of interracial sexual activity – almost always of dubious consent – between black women and white men.

As was evident in much of Lovecraft’s contemporary media (including, as has been mentioned, texts that Lovecraft himself was known to have consumed), the most visible configuration of interracial sex typically found expression in the deeply racist and exceedingly pernicious myth of the black male rapist. From *Birth of a Nation*’s blackfaced Gus, to *King Kong*’s relentless pursuit of the “golden

woman,”<sup>42</sup> the violent pursuit of white women by black men came to define American understandings of miscegenation from Reconstruction onward. The effects of this poisonous stereotype were enormous: over the course of Lovecraft’s lifetime, hundreds of African-American men would be lynched in the United States.<sup>43</sup> Frequently, the “justification” for such extralegal atrocities was the claim that the victims had sexually assaulted white women. Yet, this insidious rhetoric disguised another, far more entrenched pattern of interracial violence. In her seminal 1892 text, *Southern Horrors: The Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, Ida B. Wells wrote candidly on the hypocrisy of white proponents of racial purity. “The miscegenation laws of the South only operate against the legitimate union of the races; they leave the white man free to seduce all the colored girls he can, but it is death to the colored man who yields to the force and advances of a similar attraction in white women” (Wells, 50-51). That Lovecraft displays an awareness of miscegenation’s “other side” is fascinating, though on no account should it be taken as evidence of any kind of racial progressivism. “As for the negro question,” he wrote in 1933, “I think that intermarriage ought to be banned in view of the vast number of blacks in the country. Illicit miscegenation by the white male is bad enough, heaven knows – but at least the hybrid offspring is kept below a definite colour-line & kept from vitiating the main stock” (*SL IV*, 230). Lovecraft’s acknowledgment of the sexual violence that black women faced at the hands of white men was merely a criticism of improper *white* behavior, an anxiety that was in keeping with his extant racial anxieties.

In “Medusa’s Coil,” its mention simply signals the moral elevation of Denis de Russy’s racial character – and marks the heights from which he will inevitably fall. The “honor” that de Russy displays is that of a white man aware of the “need” of maintaining racial boundaries, and of preserving the ideologies attendant upon them. Nevertheless, its deliberate inclusion speaks to an uncomfortable

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<sup>42</sup> Lovecraft apparently did see *King Kong* upon its release, “but said only that it had ‘good mechanical effects’” (*I Am Providence*, 928).

<sup>43</sup> On August 7th, 1930 – the same month that “Medusa’s Coil” was completed, J. Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Smith were murdered by a mob numbering in the thousands in Marion, Indiana, ostensibly for robbery, murder, and rape. The photograph of their lynching taken by Lawrence Beitler is today one of the most iconic, most devastating images in American history.

awareness on Lovecraft's part of the colour-line's long history of violation – one with wide-ranging implications. As we have seen throughout much of Lovecraft's work, the pedestal upon which whiteness is placed is frequently revealed to possess cracked foundations. Thus, even as Denis de Russy is framed as an especially "honorable" and especially *white* heroic figure, he is no less vulnerable to the threat of racial pollution.

Naturally, it is in "sophisticated," "continental," and tacitly decadent Paris that de Russy first encounters the woman who will be his downfall (Lovecraft & Bishop, 4). Pursuing his postgraduate studies at the Sorbonne, Denis stumbles into a "puppy infatuation" for Marceline Bedard, apparently "the left-handed daughter" of a French aristocrat (Lovecraft & Bishop, 4). Having left behind the more safely segregated boundaries of American culture, Denis exposes himself to the decadence of a comparatively exotic land, with "different standards from our old American ones" (Lovecraft & Bishop, 4). This may be read in a number of ways, but chiefly seems to reinforce the alterity of Marceline's character. It also works to heighten the perception of (white) American wholesomeness, rendering its ultimate degradation all the more horrifying.<sup>44</sup> Thus, from the moment of their introduction, Lovecraft makes sure to associate Marceline with illicit sexuality, one that opens up questions as to her breeding and ancestry.

These questions are from the outset threaded with a foreboding hint of racial transgression. According to the elder De Russy, Marceline had "lived for a time in the West Indies – Martinique," a French colonial holding with a history of African enslavement. The priestess of a local "cult of prehistoric Egyptian and Carthagian magic," which de Russy senior inexplicably chalks up to Bohemian faddishness, Marceline easily captivates young Denis with both her air of mystery and tremendous physical appeal (Lovecraft & Bishop, 4). As Antoine de Russy admits, "Marceline was beautiful – there was no denying that... She did have an air of breeding, and I think to this day she must have had some strains of good blood in her" (Lovecraft & Bishop, 4). This reluctant acknowledgment of Marceline's "strains of good

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<sup>44</sup> In specifying the 'continental' aspect of this newfound setting, Lovecraft also tactfully omits his beloved England from these implications of sophisticated, worldly Otherness.

blood” reaffirms Lovecraft’s own racism, and the white, privileged gaze with which Marceline is regarded.

The young woman’s appearance brings similar scrutiny. “Her complexion,” recalls the elder de Russy, “was a deep olive – like old ivory – and her eyes were large and very dark. She had small, classically regular features – though not quite clean-cut enough to suit my taste” (Lovecraft & Bishop 4). But by far the most singular aspect of Marceline’s appearance is her head of luxuriant, jet-black hair – “that dense, exotic, overnourished growth of oily inkiness” (Lovecraft & Bishop, 5). Couched in language that emphasizes its exoticism, Marceline’s femininity is thus obviously and deliberately Othered throughout the narrative. Ultimately, however, she is coded as black by the narrative’s preoccupation with her hair, which takes on the contours of the stereotypically exotic and excessive sexuality that black women are habitually labelled with. Thus confined (as women of color often are) to her body, Marceline occupies a unique space in Lovecraftian fiction in that her sexuality – unlike that of Lavinia Whateley, Asenath Waite, or indeed any other female character in Lovecraftian fiction – is obvious, even central to her characterization. It is this sexuality, however, that aids in the formation of the principle horror in “Medusa’s Coil.”

Bringing his strange new bride home to Riverside, the familial estate, Denis de Russy attempts to make the best of married life. Soon enough, however, cracks begin to form in this façade of domestic tranquility. Antoine de Russy admits that “I failed to like her wholly, no matter how hard I tried... Something about her repelled me very subtly, and I could not help weaving morbid and macabre associations about everything connected with her. Her complexion called up thought of Babylon, Atlantis, Lemuria, and the terrible forgotten dominations of an elder world” (Lovecraft & Bishop, 5). Returning once more to the use of exotifying – and, therefore, ethnically Othering – metaphor, Lovecraft positions Marceline as alien not merely to the white South, but to Western civilization as a whole. The sense of inexplicable repulsion which Lovecraft attributes to de Russy renders Marceline an object of even further suspicion – and posits this antipathy as something instinctual, even natural. The elder de Russy’s dislike of his daughter-in-law becomes a matter of instinct rather than of learned prejudice. This aversion,

significantly, is not to be understood as solely white, for de Russey's unease is shared by the family's black servants. "The darkies around the house seemed very sullen in their attitude toward her, and in a few weeks all save the few who were strongly attached to our family had left" (Lovecraft & Bishop, 5). He initially attempts to dismiss this irrationality with racist stereotype – "Blacks are superstitious creatures" – yet the fact that Marceline is rejected by both white and black characters speaks to (and indeed, anticipates the depths of) her liminality. Shunned by both, Marceline belongs to neither.

As the narrative continues, Lovecraft constructs a rather half-hearted plot of supernaturally-charged domestic intrigue. Frank Marsh, an acquaintance of the couple, comes to visit them, intent on painting Marceline's portrait. Apparently familiar with Marceline's enigmatic background (and the significance of her extraordinary hair), Marsh resolves to paint a "true" image of the new Mrs. de Russey – one that, he vows, shall "actually represent" her (Lovecraft & Bishop, 11). Marceline, in true *femme fatale* form, proves utterly faithless, and much to her husband's chagrin, falls in love with Marsh. De Russey *pater*, however, jumps at the opportunity to extricate his son from her sinister grasp. Marsh begins painting, refusing to let anyone see his progress, and the tension in the household increases as Marceline's (unrequited) "dog-like infatuation" becomes increasingly obvious to all involved (Lovecraft & Bishop, 9). Matters come to a head when the younger de Russey comes home one day to find Marsh painting his wife in the nude. Enraged, he demands to see the picture, and when Marsh initially refuses, the two men resort to violence. While they are thus occupied, Marceline takes the chance to see the picture for herself – and is horrified by what she sees. Her scream alerts the men, and in the ensuing confusion, Denis catches a glimpse himself. While the reader is not apprised to the horror he sees, Denis comes to a simple conclusion: he must "exterminate her – she was the devil – the summit and high priestess of all evil – the spawn of the pit" (Lovecraft & Bishop, 10).

Now apprised of Marceline's "whole monstrous" – and still unspoken – background, he kills her and scalps her, in the process robbing her not only of her life, but of her chief source of power: her strange, unnatural hair (Lovecraft & Bishop, 11). Following in the tradition of Perseus, Denis de Russey effectively decapitates his narrative's representative of the monstrous feminine, as well as the threat it

poses to white, masculine civilization. Indeed, the comparison between Marceline and the mythical Medusa is invoked time and time again in the story, not only in its rather on-the-nose title, but throughout the text. Lovecraft validates this comparison by reinforcing it with supernatural detail. In fact, we learn, “She was the thing from which the first dim legends of Medusa and the Gorgons had sprung,” a primordial and primogenitive source of feminine monstrosity (Lovecraft & Bishop, 14). The true horror of this strange tale, however, lies beyond – or, perhaps, *beneath* – the level of literal monstrosity.

Following in both the Pulp and the Gothic traditions (as was characteristic of his work), Lovecraft was partial to ending his short fiction on a note of terrifying revelation. “The Dunwich Horror,” for example, concludes with the revelation of its titular horror’s genesis: the great, monstrous thing that has so menaced the folk of Dunwich turns out to be Wilbur Whateley’s previously unknown twin brother – one that “*looked more like the father than he did*” (*Tales*, 414). Likewise, Lovecraft’s 1926 tale, “The Outsider,” ends with the earth-shaking realization that the “putrid, dripping eidolon of unwholesome revelation” from whose visage the protagonist shrinks is, in fact, his own image; he comes to this realization only upon touching “*a cold and unyielding surface of polished glass*” – in other words, after discovering that this vision is, in fact, his own reflection (*Tales*, 14). “Medusa’s Coil” uses this same tactic. As with the previous tales, the revelation of “Medusa’s Coil” comes at the very end of the story, singling it out from the rest of the narrative and thus highlighting its centrality to the narrative’s production of horror.

It would be too hideous if they knew that the one-time heiress of Riverside – the accursed Gorgon or lamia whose hateful crinkly coil of serpent hair must even now be brooding... beneath a charred foundation – was faintly, subtly, yet to the eyes of genius unmistakably the scion of Zimbabwe’s most primal grovellers... for, though in deceitfully slight proportion, Marceline was a negress (Lovecraft & Bishop, 17).

“Feminine and cultural others,” writes Jeffrey Cohen, “are monstrous enough by themselves in patriarchal society, but when they threaten to mingle, the entire economy of desire comes under attack” (Cohen, 15). Such seems to be the case in “Medusa’s Coil,” wherein Marceline’s human Otherness – her blackness and her femininity – is posited as even more fearsome, even more horrific than her literal monstrosity. To the story’s narrator, that Marceline is “the thing from which the first dim legends of

Medusa and the Gorgon's had sprung" is subordinated, both structurally and tonally, to the fact of her being a black woman (Lovecraft & Bishop, 17). Notably, her strange, sentient "serpent hair" – which lives on after her death to haunt the grounds of Riverside as a kind of ghostly black snake – is suddenly described as "crinkly," a common racialized adjective used in reference to the hair of black people. This descriptor is only used after the knowledge of her blackness is imparted. Lovecraft also goes so far as to describe blackness in as Gothic terms as possible – "the scion of Zimbabwe's most primal grovellers" – and fashions it into a monstrosity of its own. Thus, when Denis de Russy describes "a taint that wholesome human blood couldn't bear," his meaning encompasses both racial and monstrous horror, and echoes his own author's claim that "Nothing but pain & disaster can come from the mingling of black and white" – indeed, Lovecraft makes sure of it (Lovecraft & Bishop, 11)(*SL IV*, 230).

If, as Matthew Jacobson postulates, "multiracial crosses," in the view of white supremacists, display an "ineluctable tendency toward decline," what Marceline threatens in "Medusa's Coil," just as Wilbur Whateley and his horrifying twin do in "The Dunwich Horror," is no less than a kind of monstrous erosion, whose implications concern the human race as much as it does the white race (Jacobson, 161). Other Lovecraftian tales carry similar messages about the perils of admixture, monstrous or otherwise. Infiltrating civilization under a subversive veneer of humanity, Lovecraftian half-breeds are dangerous in a way that more recognizable monsters cannot be, for they possess the ability to pass as human. Just as racially mixed people were said to have appropriated the privileges of whiteness in their ability to pass as white, the ability to pass as human not only assumes the privileges of humanity but also makes possible their destruction from within. Passing, in tandem with monstrous miscegenation, translates an existing – and seemingly "normal" – fear into constitutionally horrific terms. More than the capacity to appropriate white identity, passing as human becomes an additional weapon in the possession of a more cosmic threat to human existence.

### **III. Passing Strange: "The Shadow over Innsmouth" and the Politics of Passing**

Lest Lovecraft's Confederate sympathies be misconstrued as aberrant of his contemporaries in the Northern United States, it may be useful to refer to his own reassurances as to the solidity of the Northerly color-line. Writing in 1934, Lovecraft reported that "most Northerners react similarly when it comes to a practical showdown, no matter how much abstract equalitarian nonsense they may spout as a result of the abolitionist tradition inherited from the 1850s"; indeed, he concluded, "there is scant question but that the descendants of Wendell Phillips, Charles Sumner, & William Lloyd Garrison would stand side by side with those of Jefferson Davis & John C. Calhoun in fighting its ultimate implications to the death" (*SL V*, 78).<sup>45</sup> This claim was by no means without a basis in truth: as early as 1863, with the New York City Draft Riots, the North proved itself guilty of the same racial intolerance it condemned in its Southern cousins. As the decades progressed, this trend would hold true: even northern states that had no anti-miscegenation laws, or that had repealed such law during the nineteenth century, such as New York, Ohio, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania, "proclaimed their willingness to enact them" (Pascoe, 166). As such, it seems only fitting that both of Lovecraft's "masterpieces" of anti-miscegenation horror-fantasy, "The Dunwich Horror" and "The Shadow over Innsmouth," are set in the annals of contemporary Massachusetts – right, incidentally, at the epicenter of Lovecraft Country.

A common thread in the racialized horror that both "Medusa's Coil" and "The Dunwich Horror" excite is the ability of their respective mulattoes to *pass*. In Lovecraft's strange fusion of race and monstrosity, however, the ability to pass refers not only to passing for white, but to pass for *human*. Much of the horror that results in these narratives of passing is derived not just from the revelation of their "true" non-white and/or non-human identity, but from the implication that such elements – disguised by skin color or outward form – are capable of infiltrating and becoming part of the privileged (white) category. What miscegenation threatens, then, is not simply the boundaries of race or embodiment, but

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<sup>45</sup> Lovecraft displays a similar skepticism with regard to the ideological and practical discrepancies of white communists: "Blood is thicker than doctrine – the reason the Russians can accept an equality programme with equanimity is that they are already largely mongrelized with Mongol blood, & also that they are not faced with the practical problems of dealing with vast hordes of beings as widely & utterly aberrant as the negro" (*SL V*, 77).

the hierarchies that those categories were created to uphold. The revelation of Marceline's blackness in "Medusa's Coil" is so horrifying as to transcend – in the structural hierarchy of the horror narrative – even her actual "monstrous background" (Lovecraft & Bishop, 11). Similarly, "The Dunwich Horror" revolves initially around Wilbur Whateley's imperfect ability to pass, and finds its own climactic horror in his twin's inability to even tangentially do the same. Of all of Lovecraft's tales of miscegenation and racial passing, however, it is "The Shadow over Innsmouth" that is his crowning achievement.

Written in late 1931, "The Shadow over Innsmouth" is not only one of Lovecraft's most famous works, but was the only one of his stories to make it to print in any professional capacity. Lovecraft did not think particularly highly of this tale, to the extent that he did not even bother to submit it to *Weird Tales*. This was in part because the magazine's earlier rejection of *At the Mountains of Madness* still smarted with him, but also because its composition had been, for Lovecraft, especially grueling. According to S.T. Joshi, Lovecraft went through four drafts – "whether complete or not is not clear" – before settling on his final manuscript, and even this draft did not satisfy him wholly (*I Am Providence*, 791). Writing to August Derleth in 1931, he reported that "The result, 68 pages long, has all the defects I deplore... No – I don't intend to offer 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' for publication, for it would stand no chance of acceptance" (Derleth & Lovecraft, 419-20). Indeed, it did not. When Derleth submitted it to *Weird Tales* without Lovecraft's knowledge, it was rejected, though Farnsworth Wright, *Weird Tales'* editor, confessed that the story fascinated him (*I Am Providence*, 799).

By 1936, however, Lovecraft managed to have the story published in book form. In a letter to Elizabeth Toldridge in December of that year – only a few months prior to his death – Lovecraft described its publication with relatively good cheer, though also with clear self-abnegation:

Meanwhile, my book-form *Shadow over Innsmouth* is ready at last, and can be supplied – cloth-bound, 156 pp., and with 4 excellent illustrations by Frank Utpatel – for the modest and reasonable sum of one dollar, post-paid, by the publisher... There are 33 bad misprints, but a table of errata on an inserted slip helps to neutralize that. Crawford also advertises a leather-bound edition – reg'lar de luxe stuff – for \$2.50, but anybody who pays that much for such a lousily printed mess is a sucker! Fine bindings don't make good text! (*SL V*, 359).

Indeed, the published text of *The Shadow over Innsmouth* was – in the words of S.T. Joshi, "an error-riddled debacle" (*I Am Providence*, 997). According to Lovecraft's biographers, of the four hundred

copies of sheets printed, only about half were bound; the remaining unbound sheets were ultimately destroyed (*I Am Providence*, 999).<sup>46</sup> Even the bound copies of *The Shadow over Innsmouth* met with relatively sluggish sales, a fact unmitigated by textual flaws that included the “33 bad misprints” that Lovecraft mentions to Toldridge. In many ways, *The Shadow over Innsmouth*’s publication mirrored, both structurally and procedurally, the same sense of degradation that characterized its narrative.

“The Shadow over Innsmouth” opens with its destruction. “During the winter of 1927-28,” begins the narrator, “officials of the Federal government made a strange and secret investigation of certain conditions in the ancient Massachusetts seaport of Innsmouth,” culminating in “a vast series of raids and arrests... followed by the deliberate burning and dynamiting... of an enormous number of crumbling, work-eaten, and supposedly empty houses along the abandoned waterfront” (*Tales*, 587). Exacerbating the mystery of these actions, the narrator adds, is “the secrecy surrounding the disposal of the prisoners. No trials, or even definite charges, were reported; nor were any of the captives seen thereafter in the regular gaols of the nation. There were vague statements about disease and concentration camps... but nothing positive ever developed” (*Tales*, 587). Thus, from its very first sentence, “The Shadow over Innsmouth” assures the reader of Innsmouth’s dangerous, even contagious Otherness – one extreme enough to warrant state action. The objectivity of Innsmouth’s threatening alterity is even bipartisan. Anticipating, even fictively, the inevitable civil rights backlash to these decidedly fascistic operations, Lovecraft makes note of the “Complaints from many liberal organisations,” which are quickly silenced – becoming “surprisingly passive and reticent” by “long confidential discussions” and “trips to certain camps and prisons” (*Tales*, 587). What kind of horror, one wonders, could so unite the American people?

“It was I who fled frantically out of Innsmouth in the early morning hours of July 16, 1927,” reveals the narrator, “whose frightened appeals for government inquiry and action brought on the whole reported episode” (*Tales*, 588). In so launching his tale, Lovecraft seems to alert the reader to its ending – Innsmouth’s destruction – and sets up the ensuing narrative as a kind of investigation: what happened to

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<sup>46</sup> This first edition is today something of a collector’s item among Lovecraft fans.

the narrator in Innsmouth? What horrors did he encounter? Why was its destruction brought about?

Before it even begins, Lovecraft's tale is framed as one of decline, a narrative sliding horribly and inevitably to a preordained end. In knowing this end – or thinking that one knows it – the reader is primed to seek an explanation rather than anticipate the conclusion. "The Shadow over Innsmouth" is no longer simply a story – it has become an historical investigation.

Investigation, incidentally, is exactly what brings the narrator to Innsmouth in the first place. In the midst of a "sightseeing, antiquarian, and genealogical" tour of New England, the narrator finds his curiosity excited by a passing reference to Innsmouth, "a town not shewn on common maps or listed in recent guide books" (*Tales*, 389). In the tradition of the explorers of old – those adventurers, prospectors, and imperialists who sought entry into the uncharted seas, the Americas, and (of course) Darkest Africa – the narrator resolves to penetrate the mysteries of "shadowed Innsmouth," a decision that becomes doubly charged with Imperialist meaning as the town's racialized characteristics become increasingly evident (*Tales*, 589).

Lovecraft wastes little time in situating Innsmouth within dual frameworks of degeneration and miscegenation. Like Dunwich before it, Innsmouth is a snapshot of small-town New England in decline. Based on Lovecraft's impression of "rotting Newburyport," it is a city "gone to pieces in the last hundred years or so" (SLV, 138)(*Tales*, 589). Lovecraft also draws yet another comparison to "what they call 'white trash' down South – lawless and sly, and full of secret doings" (*Tales*, 593). Containing no railroad, and "no business to speak of except fishing and lobstering," Innsmouth has more empty houses than it does people – a statement that takes on increasingly loaded meaning as the narrative progresses (*Tales*, 589). Innsmouth's decline, moreover, is of the racial as well as the economic character: the locals "have developed some skin disease of deformity" that distinguishes them from rest of the population (*Tales*, 590). Its annals, moreover, are tainted with further racial contagion. Old Man Marsh, the owner of Innsmouth's gold refinery (also its single remnant of industry), seems to be the descendant of a white man and "some kind of foreigner – they say a South Sea islander" (*Tales*, 590). Between these two hereditary "taints," the folk of Innsmouth have evidently come to constitute a race of their own – and the white New

Englanders of the surrounding region have reacted to this ambiguous admixture accordingly, effectively shunning Innsmouth and its residents from respectable society.

Indeed, this consciousness of Innsmouth's racialized aspect is made extremely explicit. The man whom the narrator questions about Innsmouth's strange reputation readily admits that "the real thing behind the way folks feel is simply race prejudice," and, he adds, "I don't say I'm blaming those that hold it" (*Tales*, 591). Thus acknowledged, this admission of racism is reinforced by Lovecraft's ensuing reference to New England's decidedly off-white past: "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 brought back with 'em" (*Tales*, 591). The text even goes so far as to locate this racial incursion in the actual geography of New England, mentioning a "Salem man that came home with a Chinese wife, and... a bunch of Fiji Islanders somewhere around Cape Cod" (*Tales*, 591).<sup>47</sup> Moving beyond the fictive – and therefore protective – barriers of Lovecraft's imagined New England, the story not only situates Innsmouth's contaminated existence within a history of similar racialized transgression, but also destabilizes the boundaries between fiction and reality, with the latter setting the stage for the horror of the former.

Innsmouth, for all the hysteria attending its introduction, may be – as the narrator initially assumes – "merely an exaggerated case of civic degeneration" (*Tales*, 594). This degeneration is cultural as well as physical. Just as "The Dunwich Horror" signals its town's degeneration through the violation of its New England iconography (most significantly in the dilapidation of its steepled church), "The Shadow over Innsmouth" features its own reflective landscape of decay. The town, writes the narrator, was a "vast huddle of sagging gambrel roofs and peaked gables" that "conveyed with offensive clearness the idea of wormy decay, and... many roofs had wholly caved in" (*Tales*, 600). This decadence extends to its churches – that age-old symbol of the region's Anglo-Saxon Protestantism – for their "three tall steeples loomed stark and unpainted against the seaward horizon. One of them was crumbling down at the top, and

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<sup>47</sup> According to *The New Annotated H.P. Lovecraft*, "Lovecraft apparently saw such a colony in 1930 on a drive to Onset, Massachusetts, a small summer resort for Bostonians" (*The New Annotated H.P. Lovecraft*, 577).

in that and another there were only black gaping holes where clock-dials should have been” (*Tales*, 600). Yet this decay is more than external, for, as the narrator learns, all of Innsmouth’s orthodox churches have been engulfed by “The Esoteric Order of Dagon,” a “debased, quasi-pagan thing imported from the East a century before” (*Tales*, 596). Tales of devil-worship abound, and the power of this strange “cult,” as it is frequently referred to, is such that it has penetrated even into “the old Masonic Hall” – yet another symbol of white American heritage and authority (*Tales*, 596). That Innsmouth’s houses of power (whether theological or otherwise) have been thus penetrated is significant; for it signals that the town is gripped not merely by degeneration, but also by active incursion from without. Where the church of Dunwich has merely been debased, those of Innsmouth have been invaded, taken over by a strange, alien influence. Both “The Dunwich Horror” and “The Shadow over Innsmouth” are tales of monstrous degeneration, but – as the landscape of the latter so clearly attests – it is Innsmouth whose admixture is a horror not merely of size, but of scale.

“The Shadow over Innsmouth,” at first glance, does not seem to be a narrative much concerned with passing. This is because a central aspect of the story is the Innsmouth folk’s *inability* to pass. The “Innsmouth look,” as it is called, refers to the peculiar physical aberrations that have apparently come to mark the natives of Innsmouth. Indeed, it is not until the protagonist encounters his first Innsmouth native, however, that the full effect of the town’s degeneracy begins to register with him. “He had a narrow head,” recounts the narrator, “bulging, watery blue eyes that seemed never to wink, a flat nose, a receding forehead and chin, and singularly undeveloped ears. His long, thick lip and coarse-pored, greyish cheeks seemed almost... queerly irregular, as if peeling from some cutaneous disease” (*Tales*, 598). The abnormality of these features – which are shared by the majority of Innsmouth’s residents – is apparently such that the narrator himself initially assumes the Innsmouth folk to be of mixed ancestry. “Just what foreign blood was in him I could not even guess,” he remarks, “His oddities certainly did not look Asiatic, Polynesian, Levantine, or negroid, yet I could see why the people found him alien. I myself would have thought of biological degeneration rather than alienage” (*Tales*, 598).

In fact, the people of Innsmouth are neither. The Innsmouth Look, such that it is, comes not from any human race, but from a strange, aquatic race of “god-things,” a species of “frog-fish monsters” that one of the town’s seamen, Captain Obed Marsh, had encountered while on a voyage in the South Seas (*Tales*, 615). There, he had found them being worshipped by a race of islanders, to whom they provided gold and an abundant supply of fish. Some of the islanders, however, look “durned queer even fer Kanakys” – because, as Marsh comes to realize, the islanders pay for the creatures’ supernatural services, quite literally, in flesh (*Tales*, 614).<sup>48</sup> In mating with these strange beings, the islanders create mixed-blood children that “look human at fust, but later turn more’n more like the things, till finally they’d take to the water an’ jine the main lot o’ things daown thar” (*Tales*, 616).<sup>49</sup> Marsh, interested in the promise of gold, ends up transplanting this faith – and the sexual practices it demands – back to his native Innsmouth. The Innsmouth Look, such that it is, is simply the result of nearly a century of interbreeding. The people of Innsmouth, then, do pass, but only barely – and not for white, or at least ‘well-bred’ white, but for human. In keeping with his themes of degeneration and miscegenation, moreover, Lovecraft once again links them explicitly to the monstrous: “Seems that human folks has got a kind o’ relation to sech water-beasts – that everything alive come aout o’ the water onct, an’ only needs a little change to go back again” (*Tales*, 616). The interbreeding of the Innsmouth folks and the fish creatures, then, is simultaneously an act of cross-species miscegenation and an act of evolutionary degradation – returning back to an earlier stage of being. “The Shadow over Innsmouth” is thus the monstrous apotheosis of Lovecraft’s racial anxieties, the horrific expression of a whiteness besieged both from within and from without.

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<sup>48</sup> Of considerable significance is the fact that it is the Deep Ones who initiate this sexual economy. As Bennett Lovett-Graff writes, “Not surprisingly, the desire to violate the sexual taboo against interbreeding is cast as the sick desire of the alien other” (“Shadows over Lovecraft,” 184).

<sup>49</sup> The rather odd spelling of this explanation constitutes one of Lovecraft’s shaky attempts at dialect, in this case that of the ninety-six-year-old Zadok Allen. “The Shadow over Innsmouth” is actually Lovecraft’s most elaborate study in dialect writing, and is almost unique among his stories in that large, expository chunks of it are delivered as dialogue.

The worst, however, is yet to come. What truly makes “The Shadow over Innsmouth” a narrative of passing is not the semi-human townsfolk that the narrator encounters, but the narrator himself. Where “Medusa’s Coil” turns upon the revelation of a character being mixed-race, “The Shadow over Innsmouth” is revealed to be *narrated* by this mixed-race – in this case, mixed-species – character. After fleeing from Innsmouth, and alerting the authorities to its monstrous denizens, the narrator still has one horror left to face: the fact that he, himself, is similarly tainted with monstrous blood. Returning to his genealogical studies, he discovers that he is descended from a branch of the Marsh clan – the same Marshes who, with Captain Obed Marsh, introduced the monstrous taint to Innsmouth in the first place. Hints of the narrator’s “true” race may be found throughout the story, primarily in the mentions of the strange sense of “evil pseudo-memory” with which the narrator is periodically struck (*Tales*, 602). As he describes it, “a subtle, curious sense of beckoning seemed superadded to the grim repulsion; and oddly enough, I found this overtone more disturbing than the primary impression” (*Tales*, 600). The narrator finds himself both repelled and attracted by the strange people and practices he comes across. In this regard, “The Shadow over Innsmouth” proves significant among Lovecraft’s works not simply for the totality of its racial expression, but for the fact that it is actually *narrated* by a character occupying that space of racialization. Where “Medusa’s Coil” is a story of miscegenation viewed from without – and through significantly privileged perspectives, “The Shadow over Innsmouth” does so from within, and in doing so asks the reader to identify with that perspective as well.

With the knowledge of his newfound ancestry, a change begins to come over the narrator. “Some frightful influence,” he says, “was seeking gradually to drag me out of the sane world of wholesome life into unnamable abysses of blackness and alienage” (*Tales*, 651). The change shows physically as well as mentally. According to Zadok Allen, “Some was more teched than others, an’ some never did change quite enough to take to the water; but mostly they turned aout jest the way them things said” (*Tales*,

616).<sup>50</sup> Just as some mixed-race people are better able to pass for white than others, the children of Innsmouth are touched by their aquatic heritage in varying degrees. In the narrator's case, his ability to pass as human had held steady for most of his life, yet in the present moment, it finally begins to falter. "My health and appearance," he writes, "grew steadily worse, till finally I was forced to give up my position and adopt the static, secluded life of an invalid. Some off nervous affliction had me in its grip, and I found myself at times almost unable to shut my eyes" (*Tales*, 651). Eventually, he wakes up one morning with his fate decided: "I had acquired *the Innsmouth look*" (*Tales*, 652). In so structuring the narrator's predicament, Lovecraft further collapses the effects of miscegenation and degeneration into one another. In "The Shadow over Innsmouth," miscegenation constitutes (and brings about) its own kind of rapid, otherworldly degeneration. Both racialized ruptures, in the end, conspire to bring about the implosion of whiteness.

As in "The Rats in the Walls," however, the reader's identification with the disruptive perspective cannot necessarily be equated with sympathy. For, in "The Shadow over Innsmouth," even the narrator's hereditary epiphany is not the ultimate, final revelation of the narrative. Where "Medusa's Coil" ends with the climactic and racially-charged discovery of Marceline's blackness, "The Shadow over Innsmouth" comes to this realization earlier on in its narrative. It ends, instead, with the narrator's final transformation: that of his psyche. Though he initially reacts with horror to his transformation, beset by "frightful dreams" which habitually send him "awake in a frenzy of screaming," the narrator becomes increasingly adjusted to his identity, and the implications thereof (*Tales*, 652). In the final few paragraphs of the story, he seems to accept, and even welcome the future that his ancestry has set in store for him: "Stupendous and unheard-of splendours await me below, and I shall seek them out soon. *Ia-R'lyeh!* *Cthulhu fhtagn! Ia! Ia!* No, I shall not shoot myself – I cannot be made to shoot myself!" (*Tales*, 653). He

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<sup>50</sup> This recalls the following passage from "The Dunwich Horror": "Of [The Old Ones'] semblance no man can know, *saving only in the features of those They have begotten on mankind*; and of those there are many sorts, differing in likeness from man's truest eidolon to that shape without sight or substance which is *Them*" (*Tales*, 385).

resolves, instead, to return to the bosom of his ancestors. For, he discovers, the government's efforts at extermination have not been enough:

Y'ha-nthlei was not destroyed when the upper-earth men shot death into the sea. It was hurt, but not destroyed. The Deep Ones could never be destroyed... For the present they would rest; but some day, if they remembered, they would rise again for the tribute that great Cthulhu craved. It would be a city greater than Innsmouth next time... but now they must wait once more (*Tales*, 652).

In the act of animating his protagonist's fall from whiteness, then, Lovecraft simultaneously "hints tantalizingly of the future destruction of the entire [human] race" (*I Am Providence*, 798). As Bennett Lovett-Graff points out, "In keeping with the eugenic vision of an uncontrollable immigrant sexuality, there is also the quiet suggestion of subjugation through sexuality, conquest through adulteration" ("Shadows over Lovecraft," 184).

Despite the best efforts of enfranchised white society, its violent institutional efforts at containing and destroying the racialized, monstrous Other have failed, just as legislation and even extralegal vigilantism (i.e., lynching) would fail to prevent racial incursion and admixture at the merely human level. The true horror of Innsmouth, then, is not simply the premise of miscegenation, monstrous or otherwise. It is, instead, the prospect that such admixture cannot ultimately be stopped – and that, worse, its effects might be embraced. For "The Shadow over Innsmouth" ends not on a note of horror, but on a note of triumph – and it is this triumph, this failure to react with loathing, that is horrific in itself. "We shall swim out to that brooding reef in the sea and dive down through black abysses to Cyclopean and many-columned Y'ha-nthlei, and in that lair of the Deep Ones we shall dwell amidst wonder and glory forever" (*Tales*, 653).

### III. Conclusion

The "Commonplace Book" of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, comprised of notes made from 1919 to 1934, is by no means a unique object in the body of Western literature. In the category of American writers alone, Lovecraft is joined by such lofty personages as Mark Twain, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. Nevertheless, of the several items of interest to be found within the H.P. Lovecraft

Collection of Brown University, this small, worn notebook ranks among the best. In the years since Lovecraft's death – and with the advent of his ever-increasing, posthumous popularity – his *Commonplace Book* has become a source of tremendous interest to fans and scholars alike. This is not only because of its use in illuminating Lovecraft's literary techniques and principles (the volume contains "A List of Certain Basic Underlying Horrors Effectively Used in Weird Fiction," "Suggestions for Writing Story," and numerical lists delineating both "elements" and "types" of weird stories) but also because it contains more than two hundred of Lovecraft's ideas for possible literary endeavors (*CB*).

Typically fragmented, frequently illegible, and nearly all of them ranging from a few words to a few sentences in length, the story ideas compiled in Lovecraft's *Commonplace Book* run the gamut from daring to dismal. Yet among them can be recognized some of Lovecraft's most famous tales, including "The Shunned House" ("Horrible colonial farmhouse & overgrown garden on city hillside – overtaken by growth") and "The Shadow Out of Time" ("In ancient buried city a man finds a mouldering prehistoric document in English in his own handwriting telling an incredible tale. Voyage from present into past implied. Possible actualization of this")(CB). It is the fragments of stories never written, however, that are of perhaps the greatest interest.<sup>51</sup> While not every jotting seems to evince the shattering brilliance of such entries as the simply-stated "Vampire dog," many are nonetheless deeply revealing of the ways in which Lovecraft conceived horror, and of the molds into which he cast these fears (*CB*). One especially notable cluster reads as follows:

Educated mulatto seeks to displace personality of white man & occupy his body  
Ancient ruin in Alabama swamp – voodoo  
Ancient negro voodoo wizard in cabin in swamp – possesses white man (*CB*).

Racial fear lies at the center of each of these entries – in particular, the fear of racial displacement, whereby the racially abject Other – an "Educated mulatto" or an "Ancient negro voodoo wizard" – takes over the body of a white man. Even the second entry, describing only the vagaries of concept and setting, looks askance at a religious folk practice associated with African-American identity, spirituality, and

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<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Jeffrey Cranor – one of the co-creators of the popular (and clearly Lovecraftian) podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* – actually co-authored an anthology based on this text, entitled *A Commonplace Book of the Weird: The Untold Stories of H.P. Lovecraft*

(perhaps most threateningly of all), power. Each entry, in its own way, seems to challenge the limits of white control – whether over black minds and bodies, or their own. Of particular interest, however, are the entries dealing with literal, bodily displacement. A variation on the theme of Metempsychosis,<sup>52</sup> Lovecraft’s version makes manifest white fears of racial usurpation and advancement – with white embodiment indicating, of course, a peculiar kind of upward mobility. It also hints at that most palpable of threats to the boundaries of whiteness: miscegenation.

“If races are conceptualized as pure,” writes Richard Dyer, “with concomitant qualities of character, including the capacity to hold sway over other races... then miscegenation threatens that purity” (Dyer, 25). While not overtly “amalgamist” in nature, Lovecraft’s entries (and their supposed value as horror tales) are predicated upon the fragility of racial embodiment, and the possibility that the barrier between whiteness and the racially Othered might be transgressed. In the sense that they violate the traditional, white-supremacist order, as Dyer notes, of the (white) capacity to control or the non-white obligation to be controlled, Lovecraft’s racialized metempsychoses constitute a kind of miscegenation in themselves – especially in their violation of white corporality. Both are concerned with the intrusion of nonwhiteness into a white space. A form of racial transgression in its most literal sense, miscegenation is here abstracted into a narrative of possession and violation.

Situated within a Lovecraftian context, miscegenation is frequently and (un)naturally taken to monstrous extremes, occurring not only along (or perhaps more appropriately, across) racial lines, but also between the human and nonhuman – oftentimes both. Of course, when the line between identities is blurred, the liminality that results can be dangerous to everyone involved. Thus, the ability to pass – whether as white or as human – becomes crucial, though not always in the interests of whiteness or humanity. Other entries in Lovecraft’s *Commonplace* book meditate on this theme of passing, including one that describes an “Inhabitant of another world – face masked perhaps by human skin, or surgically altered to human shape, but body alien beneath robes. Having reached earth tries to mix with mankind.

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<sup>52</sup> A staple of weird and Gothic fiction typified by Edgar Allan Poe

Hideous revelation” (*CB*).<sup>53</sup> Monstrous passing and admixture would indeed become the core of some of Lovecraft’s finest tales, including “The Dunwich Horror” and “The Shadow over Innsmouth.” Though ostensibly part-human, these monster-human hybrids are functionally all monster, and the very nature of their creation actually seems to render them even more monstrous than their inhuman parents: “Monstrous Birth,” appropriately enough, numbers among Lovecraft’s list of “Primary Ideas Motivating Possible Weird Fiction” – for, it is quite clear that this notion was *thoroughly* utilized in both (*CB*).

The shadow of miscegenation hangs not only over Innsmouth, but over much of Lovecraftian fiction. This for good reason: miscegenation brings whiteness into contact with the Other in a way that it cannot escape, bringing whiteness itself into the purview of the strange and dehumanized. Where ‘pure’ monstrosity is simply an externalized Other, hybridity constitutes a violation of the self – whether white, human, or both – by that Other. In *Barbarian Virtues*, Matthew Frye Jacobson posits that “the underlying peril of the ‘melting pot’ ideal” is that “the mixture of two races, in the long run, yields a race reverting to the ‘lower type.’ The cross between a white man and an Indian is an Indian’ the cross between a white man and a negro is a negro” (Jacobson, 161). Alienated from itself, the whiteness present in these unions is corrupted from the inside-out.

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<sup>53</sup> Lovecraft realizes a few versions of this concept in “Beyond the Wall of Sleep,” “The Whisperer in Darkness,” and “The Shadow out of Time.” Clearly, the fear of threatened bodily autonomy resonated powerfully with him.

## When the Stars Were Right

“The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear,  
and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”

- H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*

When Howard Phillips Lovecraft died on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1937, he left very little in his wake.

Financially, at least, Lovecraft was nearly destitute, a state he had occupied for nearly the entirety of his adult life. What existed of his estate was comprised mainly of the various books, curios, and manuscripts that he had accumulated over the course of his forty-six years of life. Yet within these manuscripts lay a fortune in and of itself, whose value would be recognized and realized in the decades to come. Today, H.P. Lovecraft is inarguably considered to be one of the most popular and influential writers of horror fiction in the United States. Innumerable editions of his books have been published, not only by independent or genre-specific publishing houses, but by the likes of Penguin, Random House, and The Library of America. His fans number in the thousands, and contain in their ranks such creative luminaries as Guillermo del Toro, Stephen King, and Joyce Carol Oates – to name only a few. Nevertheless, this apparent cultural embrace of Lovecraft is not without its problems, chief of which – as has been discussed here at length – are his reprehensible views on white supremacy.

When I set out to write this thesis, I was frequently asked why I had chosen Lovecraft, specifically, as my topic of interest. What, exactly, was the point of exploring – perhaps even inadvertently elevating – the writings of an acknowledged white supremacist in 2019?

I do not think that this is an unfair question. In fact, it is a question that I feel that every one of Lovecraft’s readers should ask of themselves as they consume his work. We no longer live in a time where the political implications of art – however seriously consumed – can be ignored, especially when those creative politics are complicit in the advocacy and perpetuation of unquestionably racist iconographies. While, as I have shown in this paper, those iconographies are much more complex than they are frequently assumed to be, and often have the effect of revealing the hypocrisies of white supremacy, they are nevertheless part of a larger narrative of American racism whose effects continue to

be felt in our cultural consciousness. Though H.P. Lovecraft has been dead for more than eighty years, his views on race are very much alive – and their influence grows with every new printing of his works. There are implications, then, to consuming Lovecraft’s work, to attending fan conventions like NecronomiCon, and to taking selfies with his bust at the Providence Athenaeum – all of which I have done. Indeed, there are implications to writing one’s honors thesis on Lovecraft, and spending hours, resources, and mental energy on the exploration of his work.

I approached this project with the intention of holding myself accountable as a reader – and, indeed, as a fan – of the work of H.P. Lovecraft. An awareness of his racism was not enough: I needed to understand the ways in which it operated, the history in which it was grounded, and the lasting effects that its creation has supplied. If, as Lovecraft famously wrote in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown,” it is only through knowledge of Lovecraft’s life and work that we can hope to fully contend with the implications of his legacy. Lovecraft constitutes a wholly unique point of entry into innumerable branches of these conversations: the horror genre, early twentieth-century history, pulp fiction, regional literature – the list goes on. He is a part of our literary and cultural history – representing, at times, some of its ugliest aspects – and as such, he cannot be discarded. The stars are right, in this cultural moment, for his inclusion in our conversations about horror, race, and whiteness – and, I suspect, they always will be.

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