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The Horror of Lovecraft: Reclaiming the Legacy of the Weird

SYDNEY RAE MILLER
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Christian P Haines
Assistant Professor of English
Thesis Supervisor

Claire Colebrook
Professor of English, Philosophy, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
Honors Adviser

* Electronic approvals are on file.

ABSTRACT

H.P. Lovecraft's work has had a resurgence of popularity in the twenty-first century. Along with the positive reaction and attention to the aspects of Lovecraft that are so loved—his tactic of weird, fictional horror, his Cthulhu mythos, etc.—there has been an increased focus on many of the underlying themes and motifs representative of his fear of racial otherness which facilitates racism and xenophobia within his stories. In this thesis, I examine the aspects of Lovecraft's horror to which readers and writers are fascinated by and attracted. I explore how these racist themes and motifs are employed as well as their effect on Lovecraft's genre. Finally, I analyze the way that modern authors have sought out to reclaim the work of Lovecraft by extracting and preserving his horror and mythos while employing new points of view from characters of minorities that negate Lovecraft's most hateful themes.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 The Tactics and Philosophies of Lovecraftian Horror	3
Chapter 2 Lovecraft’s Racism and Xenophobia	12
Chapter 3 Reclaiming the Genre.....	23
Conclusion	32
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	34
ACADEMIC VITA.....	36

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Introduction

H.P. Lovecraft innovated the genre of weird fiction/supernatural horror with his short stories that explore intense themes of human insignificance. According to the implicit philosophy of Lovecraft's fiction, human beings are nothing more than small and helpless creatures. No matter how advanced we as a species claim to be, we are destined for decline and failure at the hands of whatever is lurking within the uncharted waters of our vast and ever-growing universe.

Readers are attracted to and fascinated by Lovecraft's horror, because it addresses many of our instinctual fears regarding the possibility of humans being purposeless. At the time Lovecraft was writing his short stories, society was making great advances in schools of physics and astronomy, concretely proving that our universe is bigger and colder than we could ever imagine. Fears of death or purposelessness have been universally experienced across generations and Lovecraft's supernatural horror finds a way to access these untapped, sometimes unconscious fears.

Alongside these chilling aspects of Lovecraft's works of fiction lie his own fear of racial otherness. Themes of racism and xenophobia, deriving from nineteenth-century Nativism which set the foundation for the fear of immigration and otherness, are at the core of many of his short stories. Lovecraft's racism exists in the form of white supremacist ideology and represents the hateful opinions that many people hold regarding hierarchies of race and class.

Contemporary authors within the genre, attracted to Lovecraft's weird fiction, have made efforts to grapple with and rework some of Lovecraft's stories in order to extract and preserve his unique tactic of supernatural horror while criticizing his racist and xenophobic themes. Weird fiction authors like N.K. Jemisin and Victor LaValle write counternarratives through the perspectives of minority protagonists in order to give voices to these characters. Through this, these authors have been able to rearrange the power

imbalance recently instated by Lovecraft's stories of fiction as well as encourage other writers and readers to engage and create discourse with the works and themes of HP Lovecraft.

Chapter 1

The Tactics and Philosophies of Lovecraftian Horror

Howard Phillips Lovecraft, a now popular writer of weird/supernatural fiction, was born in Providence Rhode Island in 1890. Lovecraft's hometown of Providence motivated his famous written landscapes, including the well-known town of "Arkham" (Crow, 505). Through his many unique works and short stories, Lovecraft coined and pioneered a subgenre of gothic fiction – weird fiction – creating a whole new motif of storytelling that's now referred to as Lovecraftian Horror. Through employing his distinctive form of situational perspective, Lovecraft's horror presents a unique way of thinking about and existing within the world we know so well. Within this thesis, I will be telling the story of Lovecraft's influence within the weird/gothic fiction genre pertaining to his ethics and politics, while also analyzing both his stories and the stories of modern Lovecraftian adopters who have reinvented Lovecraft's mythos in a progressive manner.

Like any other genre of literature, within the genre of horror/weird fiction lie many subsections and subgenres each presenting unique themes and motifs that facilitate the horror we as readers experience. One after another, these subgenres of horror have been introduced and integrated into the horror genre by many pioneers of weird/gothic fiction: Gothic horror introduced readers to the haunted house; body horror introduced readers to gore; weird/supernatural horror introduced the uncanny, etc. In the 1920s, Howard P. Lovecraft introduced a new form of horror to the genre, one that reimagined the boundaries of fiction and prose by creating stories that focused on aspects outside, and far from, the box. Lovecraft does this by fundamentally basing his unique type of horror on the abundance of empty space that is only characterized by the absence of that one box (the box being our world and the space being our surrounding universe). This form of horror is known as cosmic indifferentism and it aims at putting humans in their insignificant and transitory place by challenging the popularly subscribed to belief of human supremacy.

When studying Lovecraft's many philosophies of fiction, it is important to first establish a basic understanding of what Lovecraft's horror accomplishes and what makes his form of weird fiction unique. Cosmic indifferentism, put simply, aims to challenge the idea of human supremacy to which humans unconsciously subscribe. Historical research and understanding has, in the past, caused humans to believe that we reign at the top of the philosophical and genealogical Tree of Life¹. 1. For example, we have yet to encounter competitive living beings outside of our immediate human circle that could challenge us and our well-being in any way and 2. Everything that we have created on earth, including but not limited to our advanced forms of science and technology, only supports and justifies our belief of this supremacy. Based on these two simple instances of our situation, we have naturally practiced a perspective that focuses on and revolves around only us. As flattering as this may seem, it is not that simple. Recent feats in philosophy and literature in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries have critiqued these claims which rely on a simplistic understanding of dominance and superiority, one which assumes a framework in which technological efficiency is equivalent to progress. Author and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argues that truth and purpose of human kind does not directly correlate to the progressions of science (Gilb, 1). Despite this and many other similar voices of reason on the subject, humans aren't scared of the dark for no reason. The dark is essentially the unknown and so is the vastly expanding universe around us along with whatever bigger or greater thing may be inhabiting it. Because of this, for some, it is instinctual to assume humans to be at the top of the tree—it offers security.

Lovecraft's horror/weird fiction ultimately aims to disrupt this perspective we humans so desperately hold onto, to plant a seed of an idea in our heads that we may not be as exceptional and omniscient as we think we are. Patricia MacCormack explains this challenge of perspective employed by Lovecraft's works in "Lovecraft's Cosmic Ethics": "The very orientation of Lovecraft's work as horror is

¹ The Genealogical Tree of Humanity was created by Ernst Haeckel, a German scientist, who viewed evolution as a branching tree in which the most advanced and "fit" species were placed towards the top tier branches and the least advanced and "fit" were placed at the bottom near the stump. On his tree, "Man" is placed at the top. This diagram was a response to Charles Darwin's theories of evolution, which I further explain in this chapter, and proved to be extremely flawed since it insinuated that all species are striving to evolve into humans.

based not on content but on his manipulation of perspective from subjective perspective to the opening out of imperceptible encounters” (Sederholm, 200). McCormack explains how the concrete aspects of Lovecraft’s writing are not what facilitates his horror. It is not mere jump scares or aspects of gore that send shivers down the spines of Lovecraft’s readers. It is rather how he situates these stories, focusing on the abstract and chilling perspective that he writes through. Lovecraft doesn’t blatantly state that we humans are unmatched against the cosmos. If he did, no one would believe him and we wouldn’t be studying his work today. Instead, through his writing, Lovecraft creates the anxiety that surrounds that idea and, in a way, implants the idea within ourselves, forcing us to come up with the chilling realization ourselves.

Lovecraft’s cosmic indifferentism makes sense when considering and reflecting on the period through which he lived. In the early to mid-1900s, newfound knowledge and technological advancements were starting to come to fruition. Lovecraft did not create this sense of false identity or perspective anxiety himself. He, instead, was tapping into this feeling of unwariness that was part of the zeitgeist. Following Einstein’s special theory of relativity founded in 1905, our world’s knowledge of astronomy and the universe was rapidly expanding. We were beginning to learn how large the universe really was and, as exciting that may sound, there was also a looming sense of dread that was fertilizing the fear within the anthropocentric world-view—on which Lovecraft would eventually capitalize upon. We as a human species were not only learning how large the unexplored surrounding space was but, more importantly, we were coming to a true realization that with every significant scientific discovery, our planet was becoming a smaller and smaller element of the cosmos. As McCormack explains, Lovecraft’s horror manifests the realization that “[o]ur ‘little spheres’ and ‘ornamental fruits of perspective’ are nothing more than coping mechanisms for a teeming universe that will always be too much for human apprehension” (Sederholm, 200). Keeping our perspectives simple and limited works to create a well-known world in which we are comfortable.

Coincidentally, not only did Lovecraft's horror sprout from fear of scientific exploration and advancement but it also proved to be a result of multiple scientific and philosophical schools of thought. But really, in the realm of Lovecraft's fiction, the weird and science go hand and hand. Lovecraft's horror produces fear from the edges of science, from the places in which science reaches its own limits or discloses something that calls into question common sense views of the universe. Lovecraft's aspects of the weird are deeply rooted in a variety of philosophical schools of thought that parallel his overarching and underlying messages. Some of these philosophies go by the modern names of posthumanism, new materialism, speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, and human-animal studies. According to Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffery Andrew Weinstock, the editors of *The Age of Lovecraft*, these theoretical genres have one thing in common that Lovecraft and his horror embodies, "an anti-humanist orientation that challenges universal human supremacy and rethinks the relation of the human to the nonhuman" (The Sederholm, 4). As I mentioned earlier, each of these philosophies shares the fact that, at their core, they make humans feel and seem much *less significant* than they believe themselves to be. Lovecraft did not invent his weird horror from scratch, he instead Frankensteined² many schools of thought that already existed into one indescribably scary monster that happens to have tentacles. Lovecraft's fiction refracts each of these philosophies and, when viewing his work through each lens, the many motives to his message are better understood.

In *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* and *Weird Realism*, Graham Harman analyzes two of these philosophies (Speculative Realism and object-oriented ontology) and their implicit presence in Lovecraft's horror. Speculative Realism greatly influenced and contributed to Harman's own, object-oriented ontology. Speculative Realism is, very briefly, a metaphysical philosophy that challenges the idea that reality only exists in the human mind. For example, Rene Descartes's "I think therefore I am"

² The term "Frankensteined" [past tense of Frankenstein] is a colloquial verb meaning to combine two or more similar elements into a consistent entity, or a cohesive idea. Mary Shelly, the author of the novel *Frankenstein*, is one of the predecessors for weird fiction—the overlap between horror and science that we see in Lovecraft and his works of fiction is strongly influenced by Mary Shelly and her novel *Frankenstein* as an antecedent.

statement implies exactly what speculative realism counters. Object-oriented ontology is Harman's own branch of speculative realism that more closely parallels the philosophies of Lovecraft. According to the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, object-oriented ontology, or OOO, is the theory of both real and sensual objects and how they withdraw themselves from human contact, maintaining a quality of themselves through more allusive means (Harman, 1). Harman presents his philosophy of object-oriented ontology, explaining that, in his opinion, "objects have autonomy separate from their relation to us...the object is more than just the sum of its parts" (Harman, 5). In his account, Harman debunks the popular idea that objects exist only for our manipulation, explaining that these objects, both real and sensual, are inscribed with autonomous meaning and purpose outside of our scope of use and purpose. Harman contends that we humans have no more meaning than that of any other object, even inanimate ones, making the way that we inwardly observe ourselves (as complex and intricate beings) seem ignorant. Through this analysis, it is clear as to why this so closely parallels the themes of Lovecraft. Not only does Lovecraft's horror facilitate something very similar to the theoretical axioms of object-oriented ontology in its emphasis on the relative insignificance of our existence, but it also "emphasizes the inability of human beings to fully grasp the true importance of things" (Sederholm, 5). According to both object-oriented ontology and Lovecraft's horror, we are extremely insignificant compared to the rest of the vast universe and the worst part is the fact that we are ignorant to the fact—we refuse to notice or acknowledge the relative scale of the rest of the universe's knowledge and agency. It is this willful ignorance that poses a fruitful reaction to the horror within Lovecraft's mythos and fiction—something that forces us to face these shocking realities whether we are prepared to or not.

The way that Lovecraft brings the posthuman philosophy to life through his horror is where the Lovecraft we know, love, and hate becomes most recognizable. Posthumanism explores the phenomenon of expanding a moral lens of focus in order to exceed humans on a universal scale, therefore characterizing the "deflating of human pretensions" and further imagining what occurrences will happen long after humans meet their end (Sederholm, 6). Lovecraft scholar and writer of *In the Dust of This*

Planet, Eugene Thacker, addresses the posthuman aspects of Lovecraft's writing, explaining that they relate to a term of his own coining: the world-without-us philosophy. In Thacker's view, the word "planet" is an idea in between that of "world" and "earth." "World" means something that is merely inhabited by us and "earth" stands as the scientific name for something that offers us samples and data. The word "planet" exceeds both of these things, describing something that "remains 'after' the human" (Sederholm, 7). Thacker introduces his theory by explaining this concept as well as including other examples of human naivety/arrogance like trying to merely come to terms with these given complexities. In his argument, confronting this lack of understanding is a crucial motif in the horror genre. It is in this aspect that Lovecraft most deliberately adopts and utilizes posthuman philosophy. Thacker aims not to explain horror through this lens of philosophy but rather explain philosophy's many facets of horror: "The isolation of those moments in which philosophy reveals its own limitations and constraints, moments in which thinking enigmatically confronts the horizon of its own possibility" (Thacker, 2). Thacker explains here that these philosophies are, at their root, horrific enough on their own. Lovecraft's horror, which springboards off of these philosophical schools of thought, facilitates a type of horror that is extremely chilling yet based in enough truth that it is hard to excuse as merely fictional.

This explanation and analogy provided by Thacker reveals only the surface of Lovecraft's use of posthumanism, for the philosophy of posthumanism permeates Lovecraft's work on a much deeper level. What these philosophies have in common is the displacement of one's view of oneself and the world one lives in, while stressing the (fragile/permeable) abstract boundary that lies between the human and the "other." The idea of the "Other" can take many forms: the unknown perplexities of the universe, an object, or an animal. The boundary between the human and the the animal can be seen as one of the most prominent and anxiety-driven concerns in Western values, in large part due to the thinking of Charles Darwin, who massively repositioned the anthropocentric world-view people held in the 1800s through his study, *The Origin of the Species*, which attempted to break down the existing boundary between human and animal. Although Darwin was a keen believer in biological equality, publicly adopting and promoting

the belief that all species evolved from the same point of origin, his works regarding biological evolution were widely misinterpreted in order to justify the fear of the “other,” leading to a large motivation to oppress non-Europeans. Despite the differences between human and non-human animals, the disgust that many Westerners experienced when told they were made the same, biologically, compared to all other races/ethnicities of human paralleled that of being told you were a biological cousin to a rat or snake—they were terrified of their own proximity to the “other.” This eventually led to the advocacy of social Darwinism, which was used in the nineteenth and twentieth century in order to justify conservatism, class-stratification, and racism on the basis of “‘natural’ inequalities among individuals” (Britannica, 1). This irrational fear being inherently similar to other humans who foster insignificant differences (which still manifests today in the form of utilizing science in order to further differentiate races³) is exactly what Lovecraft implemented into many of his works of horror, leading to his notorious use of racialized stereotypes and language among many of Lovecraft’s short stories. Additionally, for many, Darwin’s theories disrupted mainstream religious beliefs that were heavily valued. Since Darwin’s studies and published work were proving that we humans may not have been created by a deity, it went against the religion of many Americans. This also illuminated that we humans may not have been meant to be the masters of nature that many religions painted us as (a theory that further parallels Lovecraft’s philosophy). Social Darwinism, a racist philosophy and ideology, became increasingly more relevant due to its similarity to religious fears of demons and witches which dominated the gothic/horror field of literature at the time. This led to Social Darwinism’s influence in literary horror and weird fiction which was driven by, and even embodied, the social anxiety surrounding the Western fear of otherness.

Lovecraft very well understood and was drawn to utilize the anxieties brought about by social Darwinism due to his own adverseness to religion that we can observe through his many uses of

³ Despite our advancements in science since the time of Darwin in the early 1900s, some people still subscribe to the belief that races are biologically different enough to justify forms of separation. Author Dorothy Roberts explains in her book *Fatal Invention* how this belief has influenced the unjust treatment of different races in the medical field as well as society as a whole.

philosophy revolving around cosmicism⁴. Lovecraft tapped into this fear of evolution that many already had in order to create a feeling of discomfort or unease within his works. He was so keen to disrupt religious belief, certainty, and security, since he himself saw no value in religion. Just as popular horror culture now plays into common fears like the fear of cancer, drowning, or stalkers, Lovecraft took this fear of Social Darwinism and more importantly the fear that these racial and social hierarches highlighted in social Darwinism could be one day overturned, and made it the underlying message of many of his short stories. It is in this aspect of Lovecraft's fiction where we see the most problematic descriptions of races that are often employed in order to justify this fear.

Many aspects of Lovecraftian horror are extremely admirable. Despite being a great storyteller who employs a unique use of language all while bringing an incredible imagination to life, Lovecraft pinpoints a new yet timeless pressure point of fear, creating a type of fiction that still satisfies many who are hungry for horror in today's day and age. To a point, Lovecraft's horror can be seen as committed writing. Although it is not revolutionary writing or any other form of commitment that can be deemed politically conscious, it does "disrupt the comforting beat" of society, something that author James Baldwin emphasized that a committed writer must do. In an essay by Baldwin titled "As Much as One Can Bear," he calls on writers to encapsulate the societal visage, and need for change, by not succumbing to the comfortable, unchanging beat but, instead, kicking over the metronome and illuminating something much larger and heavier. Lovecraft calls society out on their self-centered and troubling perspectives. Through his writing, he forces people to open their eyes and wake up to the possibility of Otherness which is always looming right outside of our comfort zones. Simultaneously, through his philosophies, Lovecraft has contributed to a form of racism that is used in order to produce a new kind of comfort in the assumed superiority of white with respect to persons of color. Amongst his many tactics and philosophies

⁴ Cosmicism is the literary philosophy that states that "there is no recognizable divine presence, such as God, in the universe, and that humans are particularly insignificant in the larger scheme of intergalactic existence" (Trung). Cosmicism's central theme revolves around the humans' fear of their own insignificance. This philosophy was developed and utilized by Lovecraft.

of horror that invert the comforting perspective to which we humans tend to subscribe, Lovecraft's horror also parallels his own fear of racial otherness by indulging in racist themes and tropes within many of his short stories.

Chapter 2

Lovecraft's Racism and Xenophobia

With H.P. Lovecraft's literary excellence within the genre of cosmic horror comes the need to recognize and acknowledge his problematic themes and subgenres which reproduce racist tropes and motifs throughout his prose. Lovecraft has heavily transfused his many stories and personal letters with the opinions, beliefs, and uses of language that place him in this category. Lovecraft's narrators employ a certain level of consistent racism which is believed to be Lovecraft's own opinions manifested into his fiction. In this section, I will be focusing on two of Lovecraft's short stories—"The Shadow Over Innsmouth" and "The Call of Cthulhu"—in order to illuminate how Lovecraft negatively projects the "Other," whether it be a genetic, racial, or ethnic other, in his work and how these projections facilitate racist and xenophobic ideologies.

"The Shadow Over Innsmouth" is a novella that was written by Lovecraft in 1931 yet it was not published until 1936, one year before his passing. Being one of Lovecraft's most well-known short stories, as well as his longest, there have been many different theories and interpretations of it. Since its publication, especially during Lovecraft's recent resurgence with modern pulp fiction and pop culture, there have been many remakes of and works influenced by "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" in various mediums including animations and videogames. One thing that stands out in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" is Lovecraft's negative portrayal of the "Other" and the way in which his obvious fear and hatred towards all things strange and foreign is clearly illuminated.

Lovecraft introduces the town of Innsmouth from the words of the locals of a neighboring town called Newburyport who inform the story's narrator, Robert Olmstead, of the many dangers of the town. The people of Newburyport have a lot to say about Innsmouth and its inhabitants, mainly painting the town in a negative light solely due to the way that the people of Innsmouth physically *look*. One local explained to the narrator why the people of Innsmouth are feared, hated, and avoided by the people of Newburyport: "I don't know how to explain it, but it [the state of these people] sort of makes you

crawl...Some of ‘em have queer narrow heads with flat noses and bulgy, stary eyes that never seem to shut, and their skin ain’t quite right” (Lovecraft 272-273). This local denizen dehumanizes the people of Innsmouth by continuously scrutinizing their looks and inferring that the hatred and fear of these people of Innsmouth stems from these observations. The people of Newburyport assign negative value to specific physical traits of the Innsmouth people like the shape and size of their heads, their eyes, and their skin which are all seemingly insignificant biological differences.⁵ This explicitly parallels how racism targets physical features of difference in order to treat a person differently and unfairly.

Later in the story, Lovecraft’s narrator, Olmstead, elaborates more on these Innsmouth people, explaining “A certain greasiness about the fellow increased my dislike...Just what foreign blood was in him I count not even guess. His oddities certainly did not look Asiatic, Polynesian, Levantine, or negroid, yet I could see why the people found him alien” (Lovecraft 279). Olmstead holds a great deal of suspicion towards those who live in Innsmouth, preestablishing a sense of judgment for them solely based off of the prejudices of the locals of the Newburyport. In this quote, the narrator immediately manifests his own negative opinions based these physical attributes. He comments on their “greasiness” which paints them as unwashed with a sort of dirtiness that tends to ooze from the inside out. Olmstead also brings up various “foreign” ethnicities/races in comparison only to rule them out—as if the people of Innsmouth are more foreign than foreign. This aspect of the language connects to nativism, the fear and hatred of immigrants, since it immediately targets the people of Innsmouth due to their foreign nature. This hastiness to subjugate the people of Innsmouth seems as if the narrator of Lovecraft’s story is attempting to imagine the threat as external, rather than internal, due to his fear that the nation, the northeast (in which the town resides), and/or himself are contaminated by racial impurities.

⁵ In the early nineteenth century, the process of Phrenology was used in an attempt to make judgements about a person’s mental and physical abilities and characteristics based on the size of their skull. This theory was founded in the early 1800s by Franz Joseph Gall, a German Philosopher (Ktitowsky). This pseudoscience eventually spread to the United States in the 1830s and was then used to rationalize unattested theories of non-white inferiority (Ktitowsky).

When Olmstead arrives at Innsmouth, he describes it as a dilapidated, once popular but now run-down, smelly fishing town. In a sense, the view of the town itself validates all of his preconceived fears: The people look odd, walked oddly, and smelled odd (they emitted a stench of fishiness to be exact). Olmstead explains, “almost everyone had certain peculiarities of face and motions which I instinctively disliked without being able to define or comprehend them” (Lovecraft 282). The term ‘instinctively’ is used as if the people of Newburyport have been generationally taught to dislike the people of Innsmouth—their hatred is generations of learned behavior, as racism usually is. Olmstead gets negatively introduced to these people of Innsmouth long before encountering them face to face, rooting a fear of the “Other” within him to the point where, when he finally meets the inhabitants of Innsmouth, he already knows how he feels about them. Judging them based off of their looks was instinctual to Olmstead due to the prejudices that were introduced to him prior, just as many other people of Newburyport and on were *taught* to dislike the people of Innsmouth based on the way they looked. This suggests something more general about Lovecraft’s versions of racism, namely, that it tends to involve the past haunting the present, like some ineradicable stain on human existence.

“The Shadow Over Innsmouth” and its facets of horror strongly correlate to the many common fears and nightmares of American and European subjects during Lovecraft’s time. Throughout the story, there is a prominent theme of anti-Christianity illuminated through the town’s worship of demonic figures. Many churches in Innsmouth are converted into cult-worship spaces and the Old Ones seem to have an omniscient perspective. As explained in the last section, this push against mainstream religion employed by Lovecraft was both an extremely bold and unique literary device at the time of publication. It had enough agency in universal fear that it could have still succeeded had it been the center of Lovecraft’s horror alone. Despite this, Lovecraft chooses again and again to blur the lines between the various subareas of his horror, creating a conceptual multi-faceted nightmare that challenges the beliefs of mainstream religion as well as human inferiority and cosmic indifferentism. Most prominently, Lovecraft evokes horror through the fear of the “other” tapping into the ideologies of Nativism—eliciting the fear

and hatred that many westerner Americans have held against foreigners, immigrants, and/or people of racial minorities.

Despite altering the reader's perspective by introducing the Old Ones who are told to be a type of ancient alien that has been, up until now, unknowingly rooming the depths of our seas as well as outer space, Lovecraft utilizes a more subtle tactic of horror, tapping into the unconscious thoughts, fears, and implicit biases of his readers.⁶

Lovecraft begins his story by separating the people of Innsmouth from everyone else, allowing preconceptions, rumors, and prejudices to fester before Olmstead and us as readers are first introduced to an Innsmouth inhabitant. This story and its racist and xenophobic themes speak loudly to Lovecraft as not only an author but as a person with distinct morals as well. Although it is complicated and sometimes inadvisable to compare a writer with their main character, in the case of Robert Olmstead and Lovecraft, it can be assumed that the intensity of the racism employed in "The Shadow over Innsmouth" speaks to both the novella's purpose as well as the intent of the author.

The two main versions of Lovecraft's horror include: 1. The unknown as the "Other" which is often used to reproduce racist and/or xenophobic tropes, as in the case of "The Shadow over Innsmouth" and 2. The unknown that completely destroys the human, reminding us that the world is not reducible to us; it is not made *for* us, we just happen to exist within it. "The Call of Cthulhu" stands as a prime example of H.P. Lovecraft's second form of horror: the philosophy of human inferiority and cosmic indifferentism. This short story characterizes the many ways that humans are outmatched in comparison to the universe by directly introducing the personal tales of and encounters with the Old Ones through the unnamed narrator's late uncle. This short story, published in 1928, not only challenges the comfortable

⁶ According to the Kirwan Institute for the study of races and ethnicities at the Ohio State University, Implicit biases are "the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, decisions, and actions in an unconscious manner." It is further explained that these implicit biases do not always align with one's own declared or known beliefs. For this reason, I refer to these thoughts and fears as 'subconscious.'

perspective of human supremacy but also feeds into the narrative of white, American supremacy by persistently characterizing racial and ethnic difference as the enemy.

The short story's first lines famously introduce Lovecraft's philosophy clearly and consciously: "The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far" (Lovecraft, 139). As seen in this excerpt, the story sets out to critique the dichotomy of happiness that is achieved through ignorance, willful or not, versus seeking knowledge and holding the burden in which it fosters. This balance between happiness and ignorance is emphasized through the short story as we witness the unnamed narrator's uncle abandon his ignorance and eventually seek the knowledge of the Old Ones which leads to his resulting death. The narrator's own desire for this knowledge leads to an unfortunate end for himself after discovering and indulging in the words of his uncle.

Despite the prominent theme of tension between knowledge and happiness throughout the story, there is another theme of white/American supremacy that is more subtle yet ever so present in "The Call of Cthulhu." One of the first instances of Lovecraft's problematic descriptions of race and identity in "The Call of Cthulhu" takes place after the Inspector John Raymond Legrasse is introduced. Legrasse is in charge of leading the police into a raid in order to put an end to the condemned "voodoo" that is being practiced. Upon entering the village in which it was taking place, it is explained that the area had "Ugly roots and malignant hanging nooses of Spanish moss," "A miserable huddle of huts," and "black arcades of horror that none of them [the white officers] have ever trod before" (151). The term "malignant" used to describe the moss gives the idea that it is harmful and quickly spreading. For someone to describe moss, a beautiful aspect of nature, through this ugly and pessimistic lens requires a certain kind of prejudice. This malignancy is further emphasized by describing the moss in shapes of "nooses"—a term which has come to be one of the most prominent symbols of the racism and hatefulness directed towards African Americans, originating from the lynching's of people of color following the Civil War. In the

following paragraph, it is further established that this place is a place of evil for many reasons, including the people who settled there for it was a region of “traditionally evil repute, substantially unknown and untraversed by white men” (151). It is further understood why this place is so unappealing when the narrator specifies that there has been no white man to explore this area, insinuating that otherness (which is, in this case, anything/anyone who is not white) and dreadfulness of the area (previously described by the adjectives “malignant” and “miserable”) correlate with each other.

In “The Call of Cthulhu,” we see the climax of Lovecraft’s racist and inhuman descriptions when the narrator explains the police department’s examination of the prisoners who were captured at the site of the raid.

Examined at headquarters after a trip of intense strain and weariness, the prisoners all proved to be men of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type. Most were seamen, and a sprinkling of negroes and mulattoes, largely West Indians or Brava Portuguese from the Cape Verde Islands, gave a coloring of voodooism to the heterogeneous cult. But before many questions were asked, it became manifest that something far deeper and older than negro fetishism was involved. Degraded and ignorant as they were, the creatures held with surprising consistency to the central idea of their loathsome faith. (153)

In this paragraph, Lovecraft’s prejudices and racist ideologies shine through clearly. From the beginning, Lovecraft attributes the idea of “mixed-blooded” to a lower status, as if differences in one’s race or ethnicity alters their social or intrinsic value. The narrator includes the term “proved” as if they had already inferred that these people would be mixed-race and, therefore, of a lower hierarchical level based solely on the area’s appearance and the “evil” happenings going on there—clarifying the kind of prejudices to which Inspector Legrasse and his colleagues subscribes. Also, the term “mixed-blooded” in itself assumes a kind of animalistic, breeding quality that exceeds baseline miscegenation. It also relates

to the fear of miscegenation that took place in the nineteenth century which was an important part and parcel of white supremacist ideology.⁷ The narrator then goes on to describe the type of people who were captured prisoner, explaining that the different races and ethnicities in the crowd give the bunch a “coloring of voodooism,” directly correlating what he describes as the obvious “Other” to a kind of evil sorcery which, in this case, is being used to worship a Satanic figure. Voodoo (or vodum) is a set of real ritual practices comprised of a syncretic blend of indigenous and African beliefs which originated in the Caribbean (Charles, 391). Here, Lovecraft is collapsing religious differences and/or Otherness into moral categories, so that the non-Christian becomes both a racial category and a marker of evil. Coming to the end of the paragraph, he matter-of-factly labels all of the shady happenings as “negro fetishism” implying that cult-worship behavior is a kind of strange normalcy for exotic locales of this dark, forbidden-to-white-men place. Just as many prejudices of the other were projected onto the inhabitants of Innsmouth, the prejudices and overall hatred towards the mixed-race people of this area are illuminated in “The Call of Cthulhu” by the way the passage above unfolds.

In the latter half of the story, after learning about the details of his uncle’s mysterious death, the narrator comes to his own epiphany regarding the downfall of his uncle. He explains, “One thing I began to suspect, and which I now fear I *know*, is that my uncle’s death was far from natural” (159). After reading through the bulk of the story, at this point, it would be rational to believe that his uncle’s death was unnatural but unnatural at the hands of the almighty Old Ones which are the pantheon alien deities buried in the middle of the earth that cause the main conflict in the story. Lovecraft builds a world in which the Other, or racial and ethnic differences, implies a connection or kinship with these Old Ones. Whiteness implies goodness, purity, futurity, progress, etc. while darkness or racial/ethnic difference implies ancientness, otherness, atavism, etc. While explaining the details of his uncles death, the narrator

⁷ Miscegenation, founded in 1963, is the theory of the blending of the races. It was first published in a pamphlet that stated this blended of the races would “ensure American prosperity” (Waldrip, 1). This pamphlet turned out to be a hoax published by authors as pro-slavery propaganda yet, it created a real fear amongst Americans living in the south. The fear of miscegenation boils down to the fear or hatred of breeding that mixes races or ethnicities.

states, “He [his uncle] fell on a narrow hill street leading up from an ancient waterfront swarming with foreign mongrels, after a careless push from a negro sailor” (159). Here Lovecraft’s racism is seen through the narrator believing that his uncle’s death was “far from natural” and at the hands of the Old Ones yet, also believing that the Old Ones compelled the negro sailor to kill his uncle, therefore assuming an alliance between the two.

Lovecraft’s fictions don’t criticize or call into question the racism they depict. Instead, they use this racism as a way of heightening terror for the sake of pleasure or a sense of fear. Although these racist tropes do lack this critical frame, the frequency and endurance of the racist representations in Lovecraft’s work prove that they aren’t subjected to fiction but instead, reflect Lovecraft as an individual. In some of Lovecraft’s letters where he is writing as himself with no other outside projection of character, the racist tropes and themes that are just as apparent. For example, here is a letter written by Lovecraft in 1931:

Now the trickiest catch in the negro problem is the fact that it is really twofold. The black is vastly inferior. There can be no question of this among contemporary and unsentimental biologists—eminent Europeans for whom the prejudice-problem does not exist. But, it is also a fact that there would be a very grave and very legitimate problem even if the negro were the white man’s equal. For the simple fact is, that two widely dissimilar races, whether equal or not, cannot peaceably coexist in the same territory until they are either uniformly mongrelised or cast in folkways of permanent and traditional personal aloofness. . . . Just how the black and his tan penumbra can ultimately be adjusted to the American fabric, yet remains to be seen. . . . Millions of them would be perfectly content with servile status if good physical treatment and amusement could be assured them, and they may yet form a well-managed agricultural peasantry. The real problem is the quadroon and octoroon—and still lighter shades. Theirs is a sorry tragedy, but they will have to find a special place. What we can do is to discourage the increase of their numbers by placing the highest possible penalties on miscegenation, and arousing as much public sentiment

as possible against lax customs and attitudes—especially in the inland South—at present favouring the melancholy and disgusting phenomenon. All told, I think the modern American is pretty well on his guard, at last, against racial and cultural mongrelism. There will be much deterioration, but the Nordic has a fighting chance of coming out on top in the end. (Lovecraft, 253)

It is clear that Lovecraft personally believed that people of color were inferior to white people due to this letter being personal with no intent to publish and, therefore, less guarded. Although we see this reflected in his work, the true motives and beliefs are most clearly shown, stated, and spelled out in his personal letters. In this letter, Lovecraft not only claims that "the black is vastly inferior" but goes on to emphasize that if African Americans were to assume a status of equality it would be a "legitimate problem" as if it is something that must be figured out and solved. Lovecraft shows fear towards the idea of equality across races and ethnicities—Lovecraft thought people of other ethnicities as *culturally dangerous*, as if their presence within in the United States will seep into and contaminate the white, American culture in place. The presence of these ethnic groups posed as a threat to what Lovecraft believed to be the pure genealogical makeup of America that he was proud of at the time.

In this letter written by Lovecraft to August Derleth, his publisher, Lovecraft personifies this 'proudness' of the America into which he was born, as well as his disgust for anything that threatens it:

I'm more interested in keeping the present 300-year-old culture-germ in America unharmed, than in trying out any experiments in "social justice" ... Some people may like the idea of a mongrel America like the late Roman Empire, but I for one prefer to die in the same America that I was born in. Therefore, I'm against any candidate who talks of letting down the bars to stunted brachycephalic South-Italians & rat-faced half-Mongoloid Russian & Polish Jews, & all that

cursed scum!^[8] You in the Middle West can't conceive of the extent of the menace. You ought to see a typical Eastern city crowd—swart, aberrant physiognomies, & gestures & jabbering born of alien instincts.

Here we see Lovecraft's obsession with racial purity along with his fear of other races and ethnicities polluting this so-called American purity. Lovecraft believed in a hierarchy of the races, putting white people, like himself, on top. But, as Keneture Brookes puts it, "with a hierarchy, there is always someone higher." Brookes speaks in the podcast episode "Inverting Lovecraft" about Lovecraft's *anxiety* surrounding whiteness, commenting on the theory that Lovecraft feared that the strength and endurance of white supremacy wasn't enough to withstand the course of history within America. Her theory poses a good point: If the Elder Gods, like Cthulu, looked down on the entirety of the human race and determined that each and every one of them were unworthy of existence, then how could Lovecraft sustain his own belief in the supremacy of one type of human over the other only based on racial whiteness?

Based on the continuous racist and xenophobic beliefs represented in his fictions and letters, the problematic morals and politics of Lovecraft are evident. Despite this fact, many people still do defend Lovecraft, claiming that his problematic traits are nothing but examples of learned behavior that resulted from a period when racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia were the normal expectancy. There is not a simple explanation for the problematic views of H.P. Lovecraft, nor can we sweep these aspects of himself and his works under the rug. Even if the author is long gone, his works are still relevant and popular today. For this reason, the facets of his horror that reproduce racism and xenophobia need to be, at the very least, acknowledged as wrong.

Eric Molinsky, the host of the episode "Inverting Lovecraft" from the podcast *Imaginary Worlds*, weighs the options with handling Lovecraft's reputation in light of his recent spike in popularity. He

⁸ Lovecraft's reference to a "candidate" here is referring to Al Smith. Smith ran against Herbert Hoover for the presidency in 1928. Smith was proud and public about his Irish immigrant decent and was, therefore, an enemy in the eyes of Lovecraft.

makes it clear that, if anyone is worthy of a “canceling,” it would be Lovecraft, yet that would be a simple solution to a complicated matter considering all that Lovecraft has contributed to literature. Lovecraft is racist, yet there are interesting things about his work that are not reducible racism. Although a complicated statement, Lovecraft’s racism is interesting as well. Lovecraft uses his racism in an attempt to protect himself from something he is even more afraid of: the fact that there might not be meaning in the universe for humans or that human existence in itself might be a puny, insignificant thing.

Many modern authors within the weird fiction/cosmic horror genre are currently reworking the concepts of Lovecraftian horror in order to reclaim and preserve the core of the genre while leaving Lovecraft’s aspects of racism and xenophobia behind. Why do these authors keep returning to the well with Lovecraft when there are many other authors creating supernatural horror that are much less racist, xenophobic, and overall problematic? These authors aren’t compelled to Lovecraft because he is a racist man; they are attracted to Lovecraft because of his fascinating and unique aspects of horror in the supernatural dimension as well as the way he frames this racism. Both despite its racism and because of its racism, authors and readers are attracted to Lovecraft’s work.

Chapter 3

Reclaiming the Genre

Many artists in literature and pop culture continue to incorporate Lovecraft's universe into their work. Authors have been able to create original pieces of literature while still making their work "Lovecraftian." Lovecraft's longevity raises a question considering he wasn't very famous during his lifetime: Why are the legacies of Lovecraft's stories so relevant and praised today, especially considering their racism? The answer is Lovecraft's compelling mythology. Lovecraft actively encouraged writers of his generation, as well as the following generation of writers, to adopt and incorporate his Cthulhu Mythos. By promoting the participation and discourse of later writers in the genre, Lovecraft created a foundation for new, talented writers to build on the genre of weird, supernatural fiction long after his lifetime.

In recent news of the twenty-first century, some authors of novels and scriptwriting have made the first move in acknowledging and ultimately rectifying some of Lovecraft's most brutal themes. Because of this, many have been aiming to reimagine the works of H.P. Lovecraft from the point of view of people of color—telling many of Lovecraft's most famous stories through the perspective of black protagonists challenges many of Lovecraft's racist themes and motifs. These revisions of Lovecraft's work aim to bring awareness to the fact that Lovecraft, an author who has found a great resurgence in recent popularity, was profoundly racist, yet his "sandbox" can still be utilized in order to create a new type of "Lovecraftian" horror. In a way, these new forms of Lovecraftian horror keep the authentic mythos of Lovecraft's supernatural fiction alive while rewriting the power imbalance previously fueled by racism and xenophobia. The voice of the podcast "Inverting Lovecraft" poses the question: "How do you walk that line of using the mythology of a racist author to talk about the experience of being a marginalized person?"

John Jennings, a Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at UC Riverside, aims to answer that very question, explaining that for many people of color, repurposing content coming from a writer whose

work is rooted in racism can be empowering and even restorative. He goes on to explain that, as a writer, he often encourages himself and others to grapple with these kinds of harmful words/messages instead of shunning them or hiding them away. Not to mention that one of his central motivations to reform Lovecraft's mythos as a person of color stems from a cathartic fantasy of revenge: Lovecraft would have hated it (Molinsky).

Many modern authors have followed in the footsteps of Jennings by reimagining and repurposing Lovecraft's famous mythos into their own pieces and perspectives of weird fiction. They've written fiction that highlights the experiences of people of color and minorities, making non-majoritarian characters the protagonists. Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016) and N.K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* (2020) are both examples of counter-narratives of modern Lovecraftian horror which feature multiracial characters. Counter-narratives are messages that respond to extremist propaganda or beliefs in order to offer a more positive alternative. Through the use of these counter-narrative strategies, these stories by LaValle and Jemisin raise the question: If Lovecraft consistently produced racist, bigoted, and antisemitic pieces of literature, why is he more popular today than ever before? Simultaneously, these authors answer the question: Why does Lovecraft's fiction remain useful to contemporary antiracist authors despite or perhaps because of its racism?

Victor LaValle created his counter-narrative, *The Ballad of Black Tom*, to directly critique one of Lovecraft's most racist short stories, "The Horror at Red Hook," written in 1927. He rewrites Lovecraft's story from the perspective of a black man living in Harlem in the early 1920s. LaValle was inspired to join the conversation surrounding Lovecraft after the racially motivated police brutalities and murders which took place in 2014 and 2015 (Molinsky). He wanted to bring awareness to the individuals who really pay at the hands of police brutality without directly representing the recent deaths of black Americans. LaValle centers the issue of police violence by employing two important characters in his novel, Detective Malone and his partner Detective Ervin Howard, to personify two different forms of racism: overt racism and microaggressions.

The first half of LaValle's novel focuses on the main character, Tommy Tester, an African American musician living on West 144th Street with his father, Otis Tester. Tommy exemplifies the African American experience while living in New York City in the 1920s: he is required to be overly cautious of his actions at all times due to the kind of violence he may face if he 'steps out of line.' Throughout the early sections of the novel, we see him strategizing which trains to take and which to avoid, how to walk along the street in order to draw no suspicion, and even with whom to interact— mishandling any of these actions leads to scuffles with authority figures. Tommy explains this strategy as being "unremarkable, invisible, compliant" in order to survive (LaValle, 12). After his father Otis is shot by Officer Ervin Howard, who treats the incident as if it were routine business, the novel presents a new, transformed side of Tommy.

The novel details the account of Otis's death, specifying the words and actions of Howard during the scene. When entering Tommy and Otis's apartment where Otis was in the bedroom innocently playing guitar, Howard states, "'I felt in danger for my life,' Mr. Howard said. 'I emptied my revolver. Then I reloaded and did it again'" (LaValle, 65). From this moment of Howard's unnecessary violence and on, Tommy takes a new, transformed identity named Black Tom who is fueled by this cruelty. LaValle explains Tommy's newfound perspective, explaining that Tommy "saw the decaying façade of his tenement with new eyes; he saw the patrol cars parked in the middle of the road like three great black hounds waiting to pounce on all these gathered sheep. What was indifference compared to malice?" (LaValle, 66). Black Tom, the version of Tommy that inhabits some of Lovecraft's previously employed dark and twisted character traits, comes to recognize the real horrors living in New York City. Black Tom drives the rest of LaValle's narrative down a rabbit hole of hatred and violence, mirroring his continual loss of sanity as the novel progresses. Black Tom concludes his mission by gruesomely murdering a room full of police. By the end of the novel, we as readers are not necessarily meant to be on Black Tom's side—his character turns irrationally angry and violent to a point where he seems to have no regard for human life quiet similarly to one of the main fears that Lovecraft's horror addresses. Despite this, we are

meant to empathize with Black Tom's desperate response to violence, the way in which he instinctively reacts to the racial motivated murder of his father.

The second half of LaValle's novel is told from the perspective of Detective Malone. Malone was a character in the original short story by Lovecraft, "The Horror at Red Hook," where he was seen as more tender and less blatantly racist than the rest of the detectives and cops. LaValle explains that it was this empathetic aspect of Malone that he most wanted to examine (Molinsky). Especially by supplying Malone with a blatantly racist counterpart, Howard, he was able to highlight a different side of racism which encapsulated aspects of passive racism and microaggressions as well as silence and contentedness within a racist system. Within *The Ballad of Black Tom*, Malone feels he is distinct from the other cops in his department—put simply, they believe that "poets should be dreamers" and "cops should be rough" (LaValle, 62). Malone doesn't exactly approve of the other cops' blatant acts of racism, which is why he finds himself as more of an outsider, yet he possesses his own racist opinions that manifest in different forms. Detective Malone is disgusted by the amount of 'illegal' Syrian, Persian, and African immigrants in Brooklyn and Red Hook, describing their groups as "hordes" that were unjustly smuggled into these sub-cities and burrows, unearthing issues alongside them (LaValle, 58). Detective Malone harnesses the empathetic traits that could have made him an ally of Tommy Tester's, yet Malone allows his own forms of selfishness and racism to outshine his empathetic traits, resulting in him turning a blind eye to the police brutality and violence directed towards people of color within the story. This 'blind eye' cast by Malone takes a very literal turn after Tommy Tester evolves into the character Black Tom and slits Malone's eyes instead of killing him, making him completely blind. Through the character of Detective Malone, LaValle brings awareness to the inseparability of different kinds/intensities of racism.

Despite his many characters and motives promoting the need for police reform and therefore critiquing the racist aspects of Lovecraft's original short story, LaValle's multifaceted novel also recreates an authentic Lovecraftian tone and atmosphere. Through the character Suydam, an old man who is obsessed with the occult and the unknown, LaValle fully transports his novel into Lovecraft's universe.

Suydam, like Howard, takes a position as an overt racist. He regularly refers to Tommy and the rest of the African American community as “your people” as well as characterizing Harlem itself as over-populated and filthy, an opinion that was shared by Lovecraft as well (LaValle, 47). Suydam’s character in the novel brings in aspects of the supernatural by incorporating features of reality shifting and interdimensional travel, as well as personally introducing Tommy to the all-knowing creatures that are seen looming at the bottom of the sea, ready to pounce on humanity at any given moment. Suydam offers to show Tommy the grandeur of his beliefs, asking “The veil of ignorance has been set over your face since birth. Shall I pull it free?” (LaValle, 45).

By fusing his own powerful perspective on Harlem with the genuine facets of Lovecraftian horror that have previously been put into place within “The Horror at Red Hook,” LaValle creates a multifaceted novel that raises awareness of the presence of racist motives within Lovecraft’s literature as well as within the African American experience in America. In *The Ballad of Black Tom*, LaValle also successfully entertains through his writing in a way that aligns with the traditional Lovecraftian horror/weird fiction by implementing—and therefore preserving—many of Lovecraft’s own unique tactics of supernatural horror.

N.K. Jemisin offers a similar counter-narrative to LaValle’s based on telling the story of New York City through the eyes of a multiracial group of minorities. In her novel, *The City We Became*, N.K. Jemisin offers a critique of white supremacy, turning a mirror on H.P. Lovecraft’s xenophobic and racist tropes regarding New York City, showing how the city’s diversity offers vitality and personality. In Jemisin’s novel, each city of the world is embodied by an avatar, someone who portrays the spirit or essence of each area. For New York City, the central focus of the novel, the main avatar is accompanied by five avatars representing each borough—Manny as Manhattan, Padmini as Queens, Bronca as the Bronx, Brooklyn as Brooklyn, and Aislyn as Staton Island. Each avatar has a duty to protect the city from the novel’s antagonist, Dr. White, who represents the forces of racism, white supremacy, and gentrification in the novel.

Jemisin includes many of the classic tropes of Lovecraftian horror in her novel. For example, we see talk of ‘the Old Ones’ amongst characters, tentacle-like beings rising up from the water aiming to take over the city, and the widespread unspoken name of the main antagonist, the White Lady or Dr. White, which echoes the unspoken secrecy and knowledge in many works of Lovecraft. One of the most prominent aspects of Lovecraft’s presence is characterized by a piece of artwork that is presented and criticized by the character Bronca, who serves as an avatar for the Bronx. This painting depicts an image of Chinatown that represents its inhabitants with indistinguishable faces walking the streets. “There’s something about them,” Bronca explains, “They are dirty these figures...They loom, these dirty creatures, for whom the word people is a laughable misnomer” (Jemisin, 145). The prominent use of the word “creatures” dehumanizes the people of Chinatown, suggesting they are something less than human, and the specific use of the term “dirty” stands as the opposition to notions of racial purity. Bronca makes it clear that there was great “technique” employed in order to create a painting at this skill level, suggesting that the meaning within the piece was completely intentional, which is also Jemisin’s way of arguing that a piece can have a high degree of artistic craft, while still being pernicious. After seeing the painting, Bronca is furious. Replying with a sarcastic tone, she says, “That was H.P Lovecraft’s fun little label for folks in Chinatown” (Jemisin, 148). The painting of the city of Chinatown the way in which Lovecraft viewed the city of New York—this play on perspective in order to show both cities through Lovecraft’s eyes is employed multiple times throughout the novel. This specific, descriptive diction regarding the painting is used to not only describe Bronca’s journey through discovering each aspect of the painting but also to bring attention to the unsettling beliefs that many of Lovecraft’s racist themes and motifs root from. Jemisin represents a xenophobic and racist view of New York through this painting in order to critique a white supremacist view of the city.

The goal of the main antagonist in the story, Dr. White, is to gentrify each borough, to take away unique culturally-specific landmarks and replace them with luxury living apartment complexes and hipster coffee shops. According to Neil Smith and Richard Schaffer in their piece “The Gentrification of

Harlem?,” “In different locations gentrification takes different forms, but the common thread is the renovation of old inner and central city building stock for new uses, generally associated with the middle class (Schaffer, 347). The avatars of the boroughs describe the abundant amount of coffee shops found on each corner as a depletion of the city’s “original character” which is one of the many negatives associated with gentrification (Jemisin, 381). Cities replace small businesses and original storefronts with chain stores like Starbucks in order to facilitate more curb appeal and revenue when, in reality, “big chain stores make a city less unique, more like every other place” (Jemisin, 384) According to Lisa Garforth and Miranda Iossifidis in their piece “Weirding Utopia for the Anthropocene,” “Jemisin is redressing the whiteness of Weird fiction, by explicitly taking aim at the legacies of Lovecraft and the threads tying racist speculative fiction to the alt-right’s penetration of all levels of cultural production, from social media trolls, memes to ‘high art’” (Garforth, 14). Throughout the novel, the Lady in White’s offers countless efforts to stifle the diversity that comprises the city, explaining at one point that “Lovecraft was right...cities are an endemic problem of life amid these branches of existence: put enough human beings in one place, vary the strains enough, make the growth medium fertile enough, and your kind develops...hybrid vigor” (Jemisin, 341-342) She explains the diversity within New York City to be an “endemic problem” as if it needs to be solved, cured, and/or eradicated all together. Her use of the dehumanizing words “develops” and “hybrid” relates to the fear of miscegenation, that I commented on in my previous chapter, which was an important part and parcel of white supremacist ideology in the 19th century. Her relentless attempts to divide and conquer the city in the name of white supremacy are deeply rooted in Lovecraft’s racism; she is Lovecraft in the sense that she views the diversity of inhabitants living in cities like New York as a contagious virus.

Jemisin situates her novel in a way that actively combats the antagonist symbolizing Lovecraft’s perspectives and beliefs. Her borough avatars, each representing a minority culture and identity, unite in the end to not only protect New York City but also to exemplify the multicultural layers of the city that so many people call home. With the combined efforts of each borough, they end up defeating the Lady in

White. The main avatar of New York City, a young, queer homeless man represents this unification of cultural diversity. The first line of the book comes from him, it reads “I sing the city” followed by, “Fucking city. I stand on the rooftop of a building I don’t live in and spread my arms and tighten my middle and yell nonsense ululations at the construction site that blocks my view. I’m really singing to the cityscape beyond. The city’ll figure it out” (Jemisin, 1). The first line, which parallels Walt Whitman’s “I Sing America,” sets this avatar up as the voice of New York. He doesn’t sing to the city; he sings for the city, from the city, and as the city. Jemisin not only critiques the white supremacy of Lovecraft, she also argues (with the downfall of her antagonist who symbolizes Lovecraft himself) that the battle against white supremacy can be fought and can be won.

Jemisin was inspired to write this book critiquing the kind of white supremacy that can be symbolized by Lovecraft after hearing word of the World Fantasy Award given to Nnedi Okorafor, a Nigerian American author, a few years prior. Okorafor was awarded a stylized head of H.P. Lovecraft for her book *Who Fears Death* and was shocked, explaining her reluctance to the idea of displaying the head of a notoriously racist man in her home next to her other awards. Jemisin explains in an interview with *Vox* that she had never really paid much attention to Lovecraft prior to Okorafor’s criticism of the statue she was awarded. Jemisin clarifies that she wasn’t driven to write her novel by her own opinions of Lovecraft but, instead motivated to engage in the conversation because of the fact that many people know this about Lovecraft and his racist roots yet refrain from acknowledging it. She explains:

The part that I was really engaging with, was the idea that our faves are problematic but we’re going to ignore the problem. There was a whole debate about, “Do we go with the author-is-dead interpretation? Do we ignore the part of his life that was racist and just focus on the work?” Well, you can’t, with him. Because when you look at his letters and how he describes people of color and people who lived in New York City, you realize that that is the basis for his fear of the other, his fear of the unknown. (Jemisin, *Vox*)

In this expert of her interview, Jemisin comments on something that I alluded to in my previous chapter: Whether the fear of the unknown in Lovecraft's fictions is reducible to the fear of the other? While it may not be a direct correlation, there is an overlap between these two aspects of fear. Lovecraft uses his racism as a shield against a greater, more metaphysical fear of the unknown, similarly to what he describes as the universe's indifference to human life. It is this interrelationship of fear that Jemisin wanted to engage with, highlight, and ultimately springboard off of in order to create a powerful counternarrative told through the eyes of the five boroughs, each standing as a different perspective of minority.

Both Victor LaValle's and N.K. Jemisin's novels are great examples of the ways in which contemporary authors rework Lovecraftian horror. By employing these critical perspectives, LaValle and Jemisin respond to and invert this perception of New York City that was, in the first place, painted by Lovecraft. Keneture Brookes mentions in "Inverting Lovecraft" how there is great importance in teaching works like LaValle's and Jemisin's in schools and universities. She explains that by teaching these revisionary treatments of Lovecraft, it gives students, especially African American or minority students, their own agency to decide whether or not they would like to engage with writers like Lovecraft. These counternarratives also show that literary traditions can be changed and, given the opportunity, bettered. By reading and teaching authors like Jemisin and LaValle, who reclaim the genre of weird fiction, there is hope that the next generation of readers and writers will also set out to grapple with the social ills that haunt the past and present. It is about engaging and creating discourse with what exists in order to better literature in every aspect. LaValle explains his own hopes that, in the future, a talented writer will come along and reinvent his works of literature to offer new, strong perspectives that he was unable to provide on his own (Molinsky). It is this spirit that drives the authors of the twenty-first century to reimagine Lovecraftian horror and it is this spirit that will continue to revise that tradition of progressing literature.

Conclusion

Why do writers of color like Victor LaValle and NK Jemisin continue to return to Lovecraft and Lovecraftian horror despite recognizing the racism and xenophobia embedded in his work?

I have always been a fan of reading horror. When I was younger, it was the “true” accounts of paranormal stories that initially reeled me in. As I moved into gothic horror after high school, it was the uncanny and the feeling of discomfort that sits with you long after actually reading the story that I grew to crave. My relationship with H.P. Lovecraft has not been strictly positive. Upon discovering him, I was a full-fledged fan. His writing seemed to expand the boundaries of the prose that I thought I knew so well. Discovering his work was exciting—it opened up a whole new realm of weird fiction that I could not wait to explore. As I worked through more of Lovecraft’s pieces as well as compared them to other stories/authors within the genre, I became very aware of his hatred for anyone different from him. As I matured amongst our society and became more aware of other people and their unique experiences, Lovecraft’s racist and xenophobic themes and motifs became more and more chillingly relevant and troubling to me.

It was not until this past year that I discovered modern authors within the supernatural/weird fiction genre like Jemisin and LaValle who grapple with the many facets of Lovecraftian horror—extracting Lovecraft’s brilliance while combating his hatred. It is this brilliance, Lovecraft’s proximity to the unknown and willingness to refresh our perspective as well as our fascination with our own fears that keep readers and authors like Jemisin and LaValle coming back. Lovecraft’s stories shake our confidence regarding modern scientific pursuits for knowledge of the universe. Using physiological schools of thought, Lovecraft awakens the fear of insignificance deep down where it can only spread from there. Lovecraft, as a human, is not immune to this instinctual fear—he uses his racism and xenophobia to shield himself from the fact that he himself is also insignificant relative to the vast cosmos. In a way, this

aspect of Lovecraft's horror also continues to resonate with people today who share similar racist and xenophobic views. As described by Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffery Weinstock, we live in "a world that would like to think of itself as 'postracial' but demonstrated again and again that it is far from having overcome race-based hatred" (Sederholm, 37). It is this relevancy that brings a sense of urgency and realism to the stories of Lovecraft. It is the motivation to continue progression in the name of racial equality that attracts readers and authors to experience, grapple with, and challenge Lovecraft's works.

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ACADEMIC VITA

Sydney Rae Miller

Education

Bachelor of Arts in English

Graduation: **December 2021**

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

Schreyer Honors College

Honors: English

Dean's List: 5/5 Semesters

Project Experience

Research Assistant – On Campus/Remote

January 2020 – Current

- Assisted Ph.D. Robert Ross, a Social Justice professor at Point Park University, in organizing, managing, and condensing research for his upcoming book based on social justice imbalances in South Africa
- Researched and summarized many different forms of documents and archives in order to simplify Dr. Ross's work efforts
- Polished my time managing skills and flexibility while working in a professional, hands on work environment

Teacher's Assistant – On Campus

January 2021 – May 2021

- Assisted Sommar Chilton, an Associate Teaching Professor of American Sign Language at Penn State University
- Managed course work and administered/corrected quizzes and tests in a timely manner
- Coordinated personal office hours and tutoring sessions with students who needed extra attention

Skills

Language Proficiency: English (Native), American Sign Language (Fluent)

Community Service

Friday Night Lights Out—Penn State Counsel of Sustainable Leaders- 2019-2020

Providence Care Center Nursing Home, Beaver Falls, PA- 2019-2020

Beaver County YMCA, New Brighton, PA- 2020

Club & Organization Participation

- Penn State University's Sign Language Organization Fall 2020-Current
- Penn State University Coffee Club Fall 2020-Current