LOVECRAFT'S WAKE: PESSIMISM AND CONTEMPORARY WEIRD FICTION

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines select writings from H.P. Lovecraft and a group of contemporary authors of weird fiction in the context of a wake, a term defined in two precise ways. The first meaning of "wake" refers to an influential disturbance in the history of weird fiction left by Lovecraft's writings, a seismic shift at the level of what the genre represents and the kinds of questions it asks. The second definition of "wake" refers to the fact that someone (or something) has passed, and we, the living, attend a wake to acknowledge this passing. With these two definitions in hand, the project argues that a group of contemporary weird fiction authors are writing in and at Lovecraft's wake. Put differently, certain aspects of his fictional corpus have been revised by a group of contemporary weird fiction authors such that we can, on the one hand, acknowledge Lovecraft's undeniable influence and the notion that to compose weird fiction in the present is to find one's self always already writing in Lovecraft's wake, and, on the other, to move beyond both some of the more dated questions his writing raises as well as the blatantly racist elements of some of his writing(s). Additionally, the contemporary weird authors examined in this project frame different manifestations of pessimism as a worldview that remains contingent, not on an indifferent cosmos, but on human communities in doomed worlds and the horrors that they inflict on each other in that context. In sum, the authors writing in and at Lovecraft's wake want us not to combat the persistence of pessimism but rather to learn to accept it such that we can live with others in the fundamentally finite time allotted to each of us in a more peaceful way.

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Kari, and our daughter, Sophia. The two of you mean the world to me, and I am beyond lucky that I get to share my life with you both. I am grateful for your love and support, now and always, and love you more than words could ever communicate. Thank you, for everything!

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Introduction

Contributing to scholarly discussions of H.P. Lovecraft, weird fiction, and philosophy, specifically theories of pessimism, the following dissertation, "Lovecraft's Wake: Pessimism and Contemporary Weird Fiction," examines select writings from both H.P. Lovecraft and a group of contemporary authors of weird fiction in the context of a wake, a term defined in two precise ways. The first definition of wake refers to "the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or moved, in water" (*OED* 2021). The key term in this definition is "disturbance," but "water" also holds some weight, as Cthulhu, easily Lovecraft's most well known fictional creation, resides in the deepest recesses of the ocean, "a Sleeping King," as Victor LaValle describes the entity in his 2017 novella *The Ballad of Black Tom*, a text examined in chapter three of this dissertation (50). In short, the first meaning of "wake" denoted in this project's title refers to a massive influential disturbance in the history of weird fiction left by Lovecraft's writings, a seismic shift at the level of what the genre represents and the kinds of questions it asks, a point returned to shortly.

The second definition of "wake" refers to "the watching (esp. by night) of relatives and friends beside the body of a dead person from death to burial, or during a part of that time; the drinking, feasting, and other observances incidental to this" (*OED* 2021). This meaning of the term denotes a decidedly death-related concept, related specifically to the ceremonial recognition of an individual's passing. In short, this second description of "wake" refers to the fact that someone (or something) has passed, and we, the living, attend a wake to acknowledge this passing.

With these two definitions in hand, this dissertation argues that a group of contemporary weird fiction authors are writing in Lovecraft's wake, both the influential disturbance his writing represents in the history of weird fiction and the notion that, on some interpretive register,

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Lovecraft has passed. That is to say, certain aspects of his fictional corpus have been revised by a group of contemporary weird fiction authors such that we can, on the one hand, acknowledge his undeniable influence and the notion that to compose weird fiction in the present is to find one's self always already writing in Lovecraft's wake, and, on the other, to move beyond both some of the more dated questions his writing raises as well as the blatantly racist elements of some of his writing(s). But what does it mean, exactly, to say that Lovecraft's writing has left a wake in the history of weird fiction? Perhaps more importantly, what does it mean to say that Lovecraft has passed and that a group of contemporary weird fiction authors metaphorically attend his wake with their writing?

On Weird Fiction

Let's start with "Lovecraft's wake" denoting an influential disturbance in the history of weird fiction, which requires us to define what constitutes "weird fiction." Who better to provide a definition of this term than Lovecraft himself? In his well-known 1937 essay, "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction," the author claims the following regarding his choosing to write weird fiction:

> I choose weird stories because they suit my inclination best—one of my strongest and most persistent wishes being to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which forever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis. These stories frequently emphasise (*sic)* the element of horror because fear is our deepest and strongest emotion, and the one which best lends itself to the creation of nature-defying illusions. Horror and the unknown or the strange are always closely

connected, so that it is hard to create a convincing picture of shattered natural law

or cosmic alienage or "outsideness" without laying stress on the emotion of fear.

(2009)

In this description of his commitment to composing "weird stories," Lovecraft highlights how

the genre allows him "to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or

violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law." Put differently, weird fiction

provides him a means of moving beyond the Kantian categories of perception[1] that structure

humanity's experience of reality, with time and space remaining arguably the most imprisoning

of parameters in that context. Lovecraft also notes how the horror genre lends itself to writing

weird fiction because of the instinctual "fear" that arises when faced with "shattered natural law

or cosmic alienage or 'outsideness.'"

Let's note, though, that according to Lovecraft, weird fiction does not start with him.

Rather, the genre possesses a much longer history than merely his writing(s) in the first half of

the twentieth century. He elaborates on this lengthy lineage of the weird as follows:

> While my chosen form of story-writing is obviously a special and perhaps a
>
> narrow one, it is none the less a persistent and permanent type of expression, as
>
> old as literature itself. There will always be a small percentage of persons who
>
> feel a burning curiosity about unknown outer space, and a burning desire to
>
> escape from the prison-house of the known and the real into those enchanted
>
> lands of incredible adventure and infinite possibilities which dreams open up to

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[1] Famously discussed in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), the Kantian categories of perception denote a series of frameworks that exist in the human mind, which views reality through the *a priori* lenses of, for example, space and time or cause and effect. Prior to Kant's writing(s), these concepts, specifically space and time, had been thought to exist outside of human perception and thus constituted a continuum of reality. However, via his Copernican-like revolution in the field of philosophy, Kant revealed that space and time existed solely in the human mind, not outside of it. Therefore, the reality that exists outside of human perception, the thing-in-itself (*das Ding an sich*) remains eternally out of reach, accessible via only the senses and the empirical knowledge that we can gather from them.

us, and which things like deep woods, fantastic urban towers, and flaming sunsets

momentarily suggest. These persons include great authors as well as insignificant

amateurs like myself—Dunsany, Poe, Arthur Machen, M. R. James, Algernon

Blackwood, and Walter de la Mare being typical masters in this field. (2009)

Note how in the above explanation Lovecraft equates the writing of weird fiction with both "a

burning curiosity about outer space" and "a burning desire to escape from the prison-house of the

known and the real." We can thus see that fear does not necessarily stand alone as the sole

human emotion most commonly associated with "shattered natural law or cosmic alienage or

'outsideness.'" Indeed, for Lovecraft, both curiosity and desire, which, taken together, denote a

certain feeling of awe close to that of the sublime, —the latter a topic that Lovecraft critic Alex

Houstoun discusses in detail in his 2011 article "Lovecraft and the Sublime"[2]—remain critical

aspects of weird fiction. Finally, Lovecraft claims that weird fiction is not only "a persistent and

permanent type of expression," but it is also, in fact, "as old as literature itself," with "Dunsany,

Poe, Arthur Machen, M. R. James, Algernon Blackwood, and Walter de la Mare" serving as the

author's literary forbearers and sources of influence.

Acknowledging this undeniably long literary history of the weird, this dissertation

focuses on contemporary authors working within the genre. As stated above, the project focuses

on a series of contemporary weird fiction authors who, on the one hand, carry on Lovecraft's

legacy and the notion that the author "is, in many ways, the linchpin of the twentieth-century

weird tale," as the preeminent Lovecraftian biographer and scholar S.T. Joshi posits in his 2004

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[2] Houstoun notes that, "at this point, a great deal has been written about H.P. Lovecraft and his literary themes in regard to both Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant's understanding of the sublime," and he recognizes Dale J. Nelson's 1991 "Lovecraft and the Burkean Sublime" and Bradley A. Will's 2002 "H.P. Lovecraft and the Semiotic Kantian Sublime" as "the most prominent of these pieces" (160). However, Houstoun concludes that "to say that Lovecraft was aiming to convey a sense of the sublime within his works is to completely misunderstand his philosophical goals as a writer" (160). While there is some merit to this claim, the above reference to "incredible adventure and infinite possibilities" revealed by weird fiction seems to suggest at least some level of philosophical overlap.

The Evolution of the Weird Tale (8). On the other, the authors studied in this project transcend

aspects of Lovecraft's conception of the weird, and, therefore, a new(er) conception of the genre

is warranted. Accordingly, a brief examination of the weird as described by two twenty-first-

century scholars, Mark Fisher and Benjamin J. Robertson, is discussed as a means of framing

how the authors analyzed in this project are doing something decidedly different than Lovecraft,

while still maintaining some connection to his view(s) of the weird.

In his *The Weird and the Eerie* (2017), Mark Fisher argues that "the weird is a particular

kind of perturbation," one that he suggests "involves a sensation of *wrongness*,"[3] meaning that "a

weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it

should not exist here" (15). And yet, as Fisher, notes, "if the entity or object *is*[4] here, then the

categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid," which

implies, then, that "the weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be

inadequate" (15). Fisher's definition of the weird hinges on a certain negativity, one that reveals

the aforementioned Kantian "categories" of human perception to be "inadequate." Following

Joshi, he accurately proposes that "any discussion of weird fiction must begin with Lovecraft"

because the author "practically invented the weird tale, developing a formula[5] which can be

differentiated from both fantasy and horror fiction" (16). Fisher also smartly notes that "it is not

horror but *fascination*[6]—albeit a fascination usually mixed with a certain trepidation—that is

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[3] Emphasis Fisher's

[4] Emphasis Fisher's

[5] While Fisher's delineation of Lovecraft's formula for "the weird tale" remains less than clear, Joshi offers a convincing breakdown in his *The Rise, Fall, and Rise of the Cthulhu Mythos* (2008), a monograph examined in more detail below. Joshi proposes Lovecraft's formula for the weird, as it were, features "A fictional New England topography;" "a growing library of imaginary 'forbidden' books;" "a diverse array of extraterrestrial 'gods' or entities;" "a sense of cosmicism;" and, finally, "a scholarly narrator or protagonist" (17-19).

[6] Emphasis Fisher's

integral to Lovecraft's rendition of the weird," concluding that the genre "cannot only repel, it must also compel our attention" (17). However, Fisher maps the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* onto this notion of Lovecraft's simultaneously repelling and compelling "rendition of the weird," an argument that remains untenable because of the fundamentally sexual denotation of *jouissance*, a point that Fisher glosses over in his discussion of Lovecraft.[7]

      In his *None of This Is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* (2018), literary scholar Benjamin J. Robertson provides a productive discussion of weird fiction wherein he differentiates "the generic categories of the weird and the new weird" (21). Regarding the latter, Robertson posits that "two important and related points" require acknowledgement:

> First, the term "new weird" consciously refers back to the weird fiction published
>
> in *Weird Tales*, a pulp periodical whose heyday ran from 1923 to 1938, especially
>
> in terms of the genre fluidity that characterizes the period and the periodical, at
>
> least in retrospect…Second, the new weird…rejects Tolkienesque
>
> fantasy…Insofar as it recalls a period in which genre codification had not yet
>
> limited writers to this or that set of conventions, structures, and themes, and
>
> insofar as it rejects at least one of the major codifications of fantastika (the
>
> Tolkienesque heroic fantasy), the new weird involves a reentanglement and
>
> reimagining of extant forms. (22-23)

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[7] Describing Lacanian *jouissance* as "an enjoyment that entails the inextricability of pleasure and pain," Fisher holds that "Lovecraft's texts fairly froth with *jouissance*" (17). He elaborates on this proposition, claiming that "an excessive preoccupation with objects that are 'officially' negative always indicates the work of *jouissance*—a mode of enjoyment which does not in any sense 'redeem' negativity: it sublimates it," meaning that "it transforms an ordinary object causing displeasure into a Thing which is both terrible *and* alluring, which can no longer be libidinally classified as either positive or negative" (17). While he uses the adverb "libidinally,"—a modifier whose root is "libido," a term that denotes sexual desire as such—Fisher fails to note that, for Lacan, *jouissance* remains always already a fundamentally sexual experience. Indeed, for Lacan, *jouissance* hinges on an experience of pleasure that destroys subjectivity as such via orgasmic bliss, or what scholars Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman describe quite convincingly as the unbearable nature of the sexual encounter in terms of the way that it "exceeds and undoes the subject's fantasmatic sovereignty" (2).

Robertson's bifurcated breakdown of what distinguishes the weird from the new weird is convincing, and the above explanation offers an excellent entry point into a conversation regarding contemporary weird fiction authors and what makes their fiction different from not only Lovecraft but also the aforementioned authors he cites as significant sources of influence.

Nevertheless, as Robertson observes, "the new weird remains a difficult term and movement to define," which is why he proposes a historical contextualization (24). Robertson suggests that the new weird "seems to have at least two major points of origin" (22). The first origin point is "the period between 1999 and 2003 bookended by the Seattle World Trade Organization protests" and author M. John Harrison's first usage of the term in a 2003 post "to his Third Alternative Message Board" (22-24). He claims that the other historical point of origin is "the 1980s, when writers such as Clive Barker and Thomas Ligotti and filmmakers such as David Cronenberg produced some of their most important and groundbreaking work" (24). Acknowledging that "these periodizations" need to be further fleshed out, Robertson ultimately argues that the difference between the weird and the new weird can be seen "along three closely related lines: by way of its hybridization of generic structures and conventions, by way of how its monsters imply a worldview or politics, and by way of the worlds in which it is set" (24).[8]

Though offering an insightful explanation of the difference between weird fiction a la Lovecraft and new weird fiction a la VanderMeer, Robertson's demarcation lacks a certain critical engagement with not only the question of Lovecraft's influence but, perhaps more importantly, the disturbance his writing(s) represent in the history of both the weird and new

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[8] Robertson suggests that "new weird writers such as VanderMeer, Miéville, Swainston, K.J. Bishop, and Felix Gilman consciously draw on well-understood generic structures and conventions to achieve startling results" (25). He further holds that "the new weird exhibits a general tendency to espouse a worldview more open to and receptive of the beyond than does the weird," a perspective "embodied in the relationship between its monsters and those who encounter them" (29). Finally, he contends that while "the weird posited a beyond to which humans could have no relation, inhabited by monsters no human could sympathize with, in the name of the single fact that humanity means nothing," the new weird "manifests in a world in which national borders are always already permeable…whose modes of existence enjoy strange relationships with our own" (30).

weird. In short, we still need to grasp, precisely, what it means for the authors examined in this dissertation to write in the wake of Lovecraft and what's at stake in their attending his metaphorical wake.

To make such a discussion as clear and cohesive as possible, the two definitions of wake provided above are each respectively framed along the lines of different critical approaches to influence. The influential disturbance Lovecraft's writings represent for contemporary weird fiction authors is discussed via (in)famous literary critic Harold Bloom's notion of influence, alongside Joshi's thoughts regarding the possibility of contemporary "Cthulhu Mythos"[9] authors transcending rather than imitating Lovecraft's ideas. The notion of contemporary weird fiction authors attending Lovecraft's wake is considered via scholar Yumi Pak's notion of disidentification, a concept originally proposed by philosopher José Esteban Muñoz, and scholar Timothy Jarvis' argument regarding how contemporary weird fiction authors, on the one hand, may maintain fidelity to Lovecraft, and, on the other, break with the author's "reactionary attitudes" via "becoming-Other than Lovecraft," a process defined through the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2017).

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[9] "The Cthulhu Mythos"—which, according to Joshi, must be differentiated from what he terms "the Lovecraft Mythos"—denotes works of fiction by authors writing after Lovecraft who set their respective narratives in the same fictional cosmos of Lovecraft's most famous stories, "the Lovecraft Mythos." In either case, each refers to the cosmic indifference of the universe and the inarguably insignificant nature of humanity when made aware of the existence of entities such as Cthulhu, one of the Old Ones, or worse, Yog-Sothoth or Azathoth, one of the Outer Gods. In their *The Love of Ruins: Letters on Lovecraft* (2016), scholars Scott Cutler Shershow and Scott Michaelsen posit the following regarding the hierarchical nature of Lovecraft's cosmos:

> The Old Ones, their ilk, and their servants are grotesque, hyper–Frankenstein monsters, made up of disparate parts. Lovecraft often carefully marks the limit of our ability to delineate them: the similes are provisional, the list of parts potentially expandable, and the whole remains unrepresentable in language. Above the Old Ones are the figures that are closer in status to gods—Azathoth, Yog-Sothoth, Shub-Niggaruth, and Nyarlathotep—and even less can be said about them. The first two are figures for original, mad "chaos," or a kind of non-Euclidean, original (non)space in which things are not yet separate or different as such, and blind force dictates the future terms. (19)

In The Wake of Lovecraft: On Influence and Imitation

While some of Harold Bloom's claims regarding, for example, the aesthetic value(s) of literature or Shakespeare creating the human as such[10] remain a bit bombastic or downright delusional, his thoughts regarding the complicated nature of influence offer an insightful way of thinking about Lovecraft's writings and how they represent a watershed moment in the history of weird fiction. In his 2011 *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life*, which is both a response to and revision of some of his earlier ideas discussed in his well-known *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), Bloom posits that "the influence process always is at work in all the arts and sciences, as well as in the law, politics, popular culture, the media, and education" (5). Though this claim may sound like a surface-level observation of a rather commonplace truth, it accurately implies that influence is a "process," one that is "always at work," not only in the context of art but in the world writ large. In other words, we are always already influenced by the world around us, and no one ever writes in a vacuum.

This argument is not to say, however, that plagiarism and piracy are unavoidable consequences of creating art in the world, though, for some, they can be. Rather, as Bloom phrases it, "influence stalks us all as influenza, and we can suffer an anguish of contamination whether we are partakers of influence or victims of influenza" (12). The crucial detail, then, is how one responds to this influence. Put differently, if contemporary weird fiction authors such as Laird Barron, Thomas Ligotti, Jeff VanderMeer, Victor LaValle, Caitlin R. Kiernan, and Stephen King—each of whom is analyzed in this dissertation—find themselves always already writing in Lovecraft's wake, suffering the influenza-like pull(s) of Lovecraft's literary influence, then the

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[10] See Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), one of Bloom's most well-known works, wherein he makes the rather unconvincing argument that Shakespeare "went beyond all precedents (even Chaucer) and invented the human as we continue to know it" (xviii).

critical point remains: how do they swim in this wake? Let's consider Joshi's ideas regarding

contemporary "Cthulhu Mythos" authors and their imitation of Lovecraft as a means of

responding to that question.

In his *The Rise, Fall, and Rise of the Cthulhu Mythos* (2008), Joshi examines

contemporaries of Lovecraft of the early twentieth century that carried on the legacy of the

author's "Cthulhu Mythos," while also analyzing more recent authors who have written their

own stories set in the same diegesis. Consider his claim from that monograph regarding the

notion of "imitation" for contemporary weird fiction authors writing in Lovecraft's wake:

> Whether they are aware of it or not, Lovecraft's imitators are really seeking to use
>
> Lovecraft's work as a kind of literary crutch…I do not mean to suggest that there
>
> is anything duplicitous in this procedure, for it frequently occurs unconsciously or
>
> with the best of intentions—the intention, namely, of associating oneself with
>
> work that the author has found intensely powerful, moving, and evocative.
>
> Nevertheless, the end is result is that the imitator does little beyond producing a
>
> kind of tepid rewriting of Lovecraft's own stories…It is for this reason…that
>
> many of the best "imitations" of Lovecraft, are, paradoxically, precisely those that
>
> expand upon or transcend his own conceptions. It is only when this occurs that
>
> the work gains an independent aesthetic value—or, at least, has the potential to do
>
> so, if it has other literary virtues that raise it above the level of hackwork. There
>
> is no aesthetic value in merely copying another writer, even if that copying occurs
>
> on the level of deeper philosophical resonance as opposed to obvious surface
>
> features. (14)

There is much to discuss in Joshi's claims above, but before considering them, let's quickly note that he reemphasizes much of these same points in the book's rather short epilogue in which he concludes the following:

> What should be apparent is that working in the Lovecraft vein is by no means a recipe for aesthetic disaster…Samuel Johnson's blunt axiom, "No man ever became great by imitation," remains true more than two centuries after its utterance. But those writers who do something more than *mere*[11] imitation of Lovecraft have a chance to produce work that will live, and deserve to live. (370)

If we take Joshi at his word, here, then his argument(s) implies that, via a critical delineation of both the aesthetically pleasing and not pleasing imitators of Lovecraft, —the parameters of said pleasure or pain remaining consistently vague or philosophically general—certain contemporary weird fiction authors are allowed to live on in the annals of literary history, to be heirs of the empire of weird fiction, as it were. Furthermore, it is the critic in the vein of both Bloom and Joshi that makes this final judgement, thus having the ultimate say regarding when a writer of weird fiction uses "Lovecraft's work as a kid of literary crutch" or "expand[s] upon or transcend[s] his own conceptions." While meritorious to some extent, this method relies on a inarguably dated approach to literary analysis and the meaning of influence and imitation therein, one that, ultimately, sees the practice as the study of aesthetics, a classical perspective that enshrines the author as a touched-by-the-gods savant who functions, ultimately, as a conduit for transcendental beauty via the creation of his art.

In sum, though Bloom and Joshi each offer an intriguing perspective on the question of influence and imitation, their aesthetics-based approach leaves open the question of the contemporary authors examined in this study and how they remain, on the one hand, clearly

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[11] Joshi's emphasis

influenced by Lovecraft and therefore, on some level, engaging in some act of literary imitation. On the other hand, Joshi's method in particular lacks a serious engagement with not only the proverbial skeleton in Lovecraft's closet—his notably racist views that remained, at best, slightly revised over the course of rather short life—but also the questions that his fictions raises on the nature of, for example, consciousness, free will, and humanity's relationship to the natural environment and how these concepts can be considered in the context of the twenty-first century. Hence, the authors studied hereafter can be said not only to write in an influential disturbance described above as Lovecraft's wake; their fiction also attests to their attending his wake, both becoming-Other than Lovecraft, as described by Timothy Jarvis via Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and disidentifying with Lovecraft, as Yumi Pak proposes.

Attending Lovecraft's Wake: Disidentifying with and Becoming-Other Than Lovecraft

In his "The Weird, the Posthuman, and the Abjected World-in-Itself: Fidelity to the 'Lovecraft Event' in the Work of Caitlin R. Kiernan and Laird Barron," published in a 2017 issue of *Textual Practice*, scholar and author Timothy Jarvis argues that "rather than transcending or subsuming the influence of Lovecraft, Kieran and Barron are engaged in what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari term…'becoming,'" a concept predicated on the notion that "the world is in a state of constant flux and characterized by transformation," and thus "becoming is a transformation from one state to another" (2017).[12] Nevertheless, as Jarvis notes, "a becoming is always a 'becoming-Other,'" meaning that "it does not proceed by resemblance, is not part of a rational order," which suggests, then, that becoming-Other "does not tend towards apotheosis" and "is not teleological" (2017). Focusing on "two Lovecraftian tropes"—what Jarvis terms "degeneration and the blurring of boundaries"—that "can be traced from his

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[12] Worth noting, as Jarvis observes, is the fact that "in his essay 'Literature and Life,' Deleuze discusses Lovecraft's oeuvre as an exemplar of literary becoming, suggestive of a radical flight" (2017).

[Lovecraft's] influences, through his use of them, to the ways they are exploited and revivified in progressives ways," in the work of Kieran in Barron, Jarvis concludes that these two contemporary weird fiction authors "have found a vatic imaginative space in which to confront the posthuman abjected world-in-itself, the transformations humanity and the world are going through and think through their implications" (2017). Put differently, Jarvis convincingly argues that Barron and Kiernan offer "an incisive form of ideological critique" of both Lovecraft's more troubling views on race via their respective works of weird fiction (2017).

Considered more closely in this dissertation's third chapter, scholar Yumi Pak's "'This is how you hustle the arcane': The Unspeakable Thing Unspoken in Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*," published in a 2021 issue of *ASAP/Journal*, considers LaValle's 2018 novella through the lens of José Esteban Muñoz notion of "disidentification," a concept discussed in detail in Muñoz's *Disidentifications* (1999). According to Pak's reading of Muñoz, disidentification denotes "an alternative strategy that differs from identification and counteridentification" (356). In other words, Pak posits that "disidentification hearkens to the survival mechanisms undertaken by those positioned opposite to dominant ideologies, in which they rework the codes of cultural objects that are not meant for them to create counterpublics that are" (356). Though Pak's reading of LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* will be examined in detail in chapter three of this dissertation, let's note, here, that her approach offers much in the way for explaining how contemporary weird fiction authors attend Lovecraft's wake by, in the case of LaValle, disidentifying with the abject racism of Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook" and responding to it with his own novella that rewrites the narrative of "The Horror at Red Hook" as a means of directly confronting Lovecraft's troubling views on display in the story.

And yet, Lovecraft's undeniably problematic views on the concept of race remain just one point of entry into a discussion of how the authors studied in the chapters that follow attend his metaphorical wake. This claim is not to minimize race as a focal point for analysis in the context of studies of Lovecraft—indeed, chapter three engages with Lovecraft's racism in detail—but rather to highlight the need for a new way to consider the complex nature of the author's influence, both positive and negative, on a genre of which, as Joshi notes, he remains the linchpin. That is to say, we remain in need of a productive way of thinking through Lovecraft's influence on and imitations by authors of contemporary weird fiction writing in his wake. We must also comprehend how said authors may both become-Other than and disidentify with Lovecraft such that they can be said to be attending his wake and, therefore, moving the genre forward in new and exciting ways. The philosophical worldview of pessimism provides the means to achieve this task.

On Pessimism and Indifferentism

While it may initially appear to be merely a bleak outlook on existence that offers nothing new in the way of theoretical insight or nuanced critique, as philosopher and legal scholar Joshua Foa Dienstag posits in his *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (2006),[13]

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[13] While Dienstag's *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (2006) stands as the most comprehensive and perceptive scholarly work on pessimism published to date, one that provides a smartly delineated history and highly engaging breakdown of significant pessimistic philosophers, his monograph does not stand alone in the field, far from it. Indeed, while Dienstag left his own wake in the growing scholarly conversation on the significance of pessimistic philosophy, including his more recent *Cinema Pessimism* (2020)—a follow-up to his ideas from *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* framed around the questions of "whether and how humanity is capable of being represented in the first place," an issue that, for Dienstag, makes pessimism "warranted," but "not about any particular film or genre, but about the general limits of representation's ability to forward democratic aims"—others have added to the discussion (5). Philosopher Eugene Thacker—whose *Tentacles Longer Than Night*, the third volume in his *Horror of Philosophy* series, will be discussed shortly—has written multiple noteworthy books on the topic, with his *Infinite Resignation* (2018) and *Cosmic Pessimism* (2016) each serving as two aphoristic engagements with pessimistic philosophy, the former more of a broad survey of pessimism and the latter a condensed summary of his own ideas. Philosopher Roger Scruton's *The Uses of Pessimism: And the Danger of False Hope* (2010) attempts to "examine optimism in what Schopenhauer called its 'wicked' or 'unscrupulous' form and show the place of pessimism in restoring balance and wisdom to the conduct of human affairs," with Scruton concluding, finally, that pessimism "is against…self-deception" and remains contingent on the idea that "civilization is always threatened from below, by

pessimism represents "an entire tradition of thought," one that "has gone missing from our standard histories of political theory" because "the nature of their [pessimists'] common project (indeed, the very idea that they have a common project) has been obscured" (3). He elaborates on this claim as follows:

> Since pessimism is perceived more as a disposition than as a theory, pessimists are seen primarily as dissenters from whatever the prevailing consensus of their time happens to be, rather than as constituting a continuous alternative. The result is that each seems disconnected from the mainstream of the history of political thought. They appear as voices in the wilderness, to put it politely—or to put it less politely, as cranks. While they are often admired for their style, or respected for the critiques they offer, their apparent lack of a "positive project" is made to appear as a badge of second-rank philosophical status. They interest us; but, it is believed, they cannot possibly orient us. With greater or lesser degree, then, pessimists have in many cases been dismissed from the upper reaches of the canon of political thought. (3)

The most significant point in the above passage is Dienstag's repeated reference to pessimism as something that should be but nevertheless remains not considered as, in the last instance, a

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patterns of belief and emotion that may once have been useful to our species, but that are useful no longer" (2). Philosopher Frederick C. Beiser's *Weltschmerz: Pessimism in German Philosophy* (2016) is a more recent study that tries "to fill a gap in the history of German philosophy in the second half of the 19th century" via a discussion "of Schopenhauer's influence on his age" (11). More precisely, Beiser aims to "reconstruct the pessimism controversy, and to rehabilitate some of the most important optimists and pessimists of the ages," and he completes this tax by providing "an introduction" to a series of "almost completely forgotten even in the German world" philosophers and an "account of their leading ideas and their intellectual development" (11). Finally, philosopher Mara Van Der Lugt's *Dark Matters: Pessimism and the Problem of Suffering* (2021) stands out for its two-part argument. On the one hand, Van Der Lugt posits that the "the age-old philosophical debate on the problem of evil"—which she claims is "*the moral background*" for any discussion of pessimism—"was reinvented and imbued with a new sense of urgency in the second half of the seventeenth century," and "this intensification and reorientation of the debate of evil created an entirely new philosophical tradition: one eventually known as *pessimism*" (3, 21). On the other, Van Der Lugt suggests that "even from its earliest beginnings, pessimism is driven by a crucial moral orientation, which in many cases it shares with the competing tradition of optimism, and revolves around the key concepts of *hope*, *compassion*, and *consolation*" (21).

political perspective. By political, though, we are not referring to the American two-party

democratic system but, at a very basic level, how humans relate to each other within different

communities and societies of varying degrees of complexity and difference. So, what, then,

would it mean to consider pessimism as a political perspective, and how can we connect this

philosophical worldview both to Lovecraft's fiction and the authors writing in and at his wake?

To answer this question, we need to comprehend, exactly, what it means to be a pessimist, and

how and why pessimism is always already political.

While there is arguably no singular pessimism but rather various manifestations of which

only a small sample—ontological, ecological, and afropessimism—are considered in this

dissertation, most share similarities in terms of their perspectives. Thomas Ligotti's novella *My

Work Is Not Yet Done* (2002) is examined in chapter one on ontological pessimism, but his

nonfictional treatise on pessimism, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (2010), offers a

precise yet simple entry point into considering these shared traits. According to Ligotti, "the

pessimist's credo, or one of them, is that nonexistence never hurt anyone and that conscious

existence hurts everyone" because "consciousness is an existential liability, as every pessimist

agrees" (75).

Indeed, human consciousness remains at the top of the reasons why one should be

pessimistic because of the way that it paradoxically separates humanity from the rest of nature in

a state of what Dienstag describes as linear time consciousness such that we feel pain in linear

time and know of the certainty of our looming morality in that very continuum.[14] And yet each

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[14] Dienstag defines pessimism as a "philosophical orientation,"—that is, a specific code for living in a disenchanted
world—by considering "a series of propositions that pessimists subscribe to in greater or lesser degrees" (19).
These pessimistic claims are as follows: "that time is a burden; that the course of history is in some sense ironic; that
freedom and happiness are incompatible; and that human existence is absurd" (19). Much of the logic of Dienstag's
argument remains convincing, and he ultimately posits that what he describes as "time-consciousness" appears
throughout the writings of all of the thinkers he discusses and remains the most important of all the pessimistic

of us remains stuck inside our own perspective, forced to use an inherited language to communicate our inner thoughts in a way that will never be accurate because we remain trapped, finally, in the prison of our own skull, employing a faulty sensorium to make meaning in and of a world that will always be just out of reach. We thus arrive at the political nature of pessimism: it unites us by acknowledging our unavoidable separation.

This point is why, in the last instance, pessimism remains a compassionate philosophy that, in the words of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, arguably the most significant and influential pessimist to be labeled as such, finds each of us as always already owing something to each other; that is, we owe it to each other not to add to the pain and suffering of existence and to help others out when we can.   Given the underappreciated necessity of compassion to the concept, pessimism offers itself, then, as a productive framework for considering not only the aforementioned paradoxical nature of human consciousness but also humanity's disconnect from the rest of nature because of our self-awareness and the motivation(s) it necessitates, and even the persistence of racism. But, again, why Lovecraft and pessimism, and, perhaps more importantly, why now?

Let's look at two quotes from Lovecraft's letters, a collection of writings that has only recently begun to receive the scholarly attention it deserves, to answer these questions. In a short piece entitled "A Confession of Unfaith" (1922), Lovecraft claims that

> The most poignant sensations of my existence are those of 1896, when I
>
> discovered the Hellenic world, and of 1902, when I discovered the myriad suns
>
> and worlds of infinite space. Sometimes I think the latter event the greater, for
>
> the grandeur of that growing conception of the universe still excises a thrill hardly

propositions (23). He concludes that "to the pessimists…the human condition is existentially unique—its uniqueness consisting precisely in the capacity for time-consciousness" (20).

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to be duplicated…By my thirteenth birthday I was thoroughly impressed with

man's impermanence and insignificance, and by my seventeenth,…I had formed

in all essential particulars my present pessimistic cosmic views (1952, 21).

In the passage above we can clearly see Lovecraft identifying himself as a pessimist. His

perspective remains contingent on a certain cosmic perspective that, in the words of Joshi,

possesses "awareness of the vast size of the known universe and a consequent appreciation of the

relative insignificance of all human life when measured on the scale of cosmic infinity" (78,

2004).

Over the course of his life, however, Lovecraft would revise his views (to an extent) and

ultimately come to reject the label of "pessimist" in favor of "indifferentist." Though, as Joshi

also notes, he was still "under the influence" of arguably the most influential pessimistic

philosopher to be labeled as such, Arthur Schopenhauer, as the following passage from his letters

indicates: "Ol' Art Schopenhauer had the straight goods—however you look at it, there's so

goddam much *more*[15] pain than pleasure in any average human life, that it's a losing game"

(1971, 139). Despite this admiration for Schopenhauer's pessimism—which is discussed in

detail in chapter one—we cannot ignore the fact that, the more he aged, Lovecraft preferred the

label of "indifferentist" as opposed to "pessimist," as the passage below reveals:

Contrary to what you may assume, I am *not a pessimist* but an *indifferentist*[16]—

that is, I don't make the mistake of thinking that the resultant of the natural forces

surrounding and governing organic life will have any connexion (*sic*) with the

wishes or tastes of any part of that organic life-process. Pessimists are just as

illogical as optimists; insomuch as both envisage the aims of mankind as unified,

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[15] Lovecraft's influence

[16] Lovecraft's influence

and as having a direct relationship (either of frustration or fulfillment) to the

inevitable flow of terrestrial motivation and events. That is—both schools retain

in a vestigial way the primitive concept of conscious teleology—of a cosmos

which gives a damn one way or the other about the especial wants and ultimate

welfare of mosquitoes, rats, lice, dogs, men, horses, pterodactyls, trees, fungi,

dodos, or other forms of biological energy. (1971, 39)

In the above passage we can see Lovecraft's clear delineation of pessimism and indifferentism,

with the former necessitating a cosmos propelled by "the primitive concept of conscious

teleology" and the latter denoting a cosmos indifferent to all forms of "biological energy," even

ones as paradoxically self-aware as human beings. So, if over the course of his relatively short

lifetime, Lovecraft went from being a pessimist with a distinctly cosmic perspective to an

indifferentist of the same ilk, how does pessimism, rather than indifferentism, offer itself as an

appropriate structuring concept for the readings that follow?

The answer to that question lies in how the contemporary weird authors examined in this

project frame different manifestations of pessimism as a worldview that remains contingent, not

on an indifferent or conscious-teleology-driven cosmos, but on human communities comprised

of individuals coexisting in doomed worlds and the horrors that they choose to inflict on both

each other and their environment as a result or in spite of the raw facts of their respective

existences. In other words, while Lovecraft's interpretation of pessimism necessitates a

"conscious teleology," an intelligent design that may or may not imply a malevolent designer,

which is why he prefers indifferentism, for the authors studied here, pessimism does not require

such a metaphysical scenario. Rather, as stated above, pessimism is always already about others,

about how humans treat both each other and the natural environment as a result of the rather

bleak nature of our affairs. The concept provides a way to think through the horrors we are willing to inflict on one another, despite the fact that, on an ethical level, we owe it to each other to learn to live together in a compassionate way that does not add to the suffering of the world, and, if possible, helps to alleviate it in some way. In sum, the authors writing in and at Lovecraft's wake want us not to combat the persistence of pessimism but rather to learn to accept it such that we can live with others in the fundamentally finite time allotted to each of us in a more peaceful way.

Following a short review of relevant studies and critical conversations related to this project's intervention, the rest of this dissertation is composed of three separate case studies on depictions of pessimism in both the fiction of Lovecraft and a set of contemporary authors of weird fiction. Each of the readings possesses a similar structure. First, a significant aspect of a specific manifestation of pessimism is described. From there, examples of said concept(s) are analyzed as they appear in a fictional text written by Lovecraft from the early twentieth century and then in a set of post-millennial weird novels engaged with similar themes. These authors first and foremost revise Lovecraft's ideas such that the horrors beyond human comprehension are not to be found in an indifferent cosmos, or even one governed by a conscious teleology, but, instead, on this planet, among members of human communities, who are anything but indifferent to each other. For the authors studied in this dissertation, to write in and at Lovecraft's wake means both to engage with and revise the author's ideas and the manifestations of pessimism therein as the fundamentally human concepts that they are, not in the context of an indifferent cosmos, but in the human-to-human relationships that comprise our shared social experience of day-to-day existence and the unavoidable sufferings therein.

Chapter Organization and Authors Examined

Chapter one considers the notion of ontological pessimism via an examination of

Lovecraft's "The Haunter of the Dark," which was published in *Weird Tales* in 1936, alongside

Laird Barron's (2012) and Thomas Ligotti's *My Work Is Not Yet Done* (2002). Barron and

Ligotti are both contemporary titans of the weird. Each is widely acclaimed, and their critical

status in the genre precedes them. Additionally, they have both repeatedly published in edited

collections of weird fiction structured around the Cthulhu mythos and/or Lovecraftian horror.

Ligotti talks at great length about the profound influence of Lovecraft on both the weird

and horror genres in *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, dubbing Lovecraft "a paragon

among literary figures who have thought the unthinkable, or at least thought what most mortals

do not want to think" (57). He elaborates on this claim, ultimately concluding that "to the

benefit of supernatural horror aficionados, Lovecraft's indifferentist philosophy"—which "sees

no malice in the physical universe but only a flux of particles"—"did not require him to

discontinue writing about pernicious things that compromise the sanity of anyone who learns

their existence" (61).

In a 2016 interview with Benoit Lelievre on the blog *DeadEndFollies*, Barron claims that

he noticed "Fritz Leiber, Jack Vance, and Roger Zelazny…even Jorge Luis Borges" all

"reference …Lovecraft," which provided Barron "different lenses to view his [Lovecraft's]

writing." For Barron, "these guys also demonstrated there are plenty of different angles to

approaching cosmic horror" (2016). However, he quickly clarifies his position:

> I don't resist Lovecraft—I embrace his literary influence. I also embrace a
>
> spectrum of authors from Borges to Martin Cruz Smith. The trick isn't to distance
>
> one's art from one's influences; the trick is to incorporate these influences and

create an alloy that is unique. The best riffs on Lovecraft tend to be the ones that

strike off into undiscovered country. (2016)

While neither *The Croning* nor *My Work Is Not Yet Done* depict any of the Outer Gods, each

novel features their own respective forces that drive the cosmos, and the influence of Lovecraft

on Barron and Ligotti is clear to see in both texts.

Chapter two focuses on ecological pessimism in the context of Lovecraft's short story

"The Colour Out of Space," published in *Amazing Stories* in 1927, and Jeff VanderMeer's

Southern Reach Trilogy, which includes *Annihilation, Authority*, and *Acceptance*, all published

in quick succession in 2014. In a 2012 blog post on the *Weird Fiction Review*, VanderMeer made

some rather striking claims regarding the nature of Lovecraft's influence in the history of the

weird as genre:

The weird has never been something with Lovecraft at the center of it. I know that

personally it is frustrating to find readers making a connection between my work

and Lovecraft's when he not only wasn't an influence, but was a writer who bored

me silly when I first encountered him. Further, regardless of how you feel about

Lovecraft and your position on the views of an author versus what's found in the

fiction itself (we feel this manifests differently in different writers and sometimes

from story to story) we hope you might agree with us that the continued adulation

for and imitation of Lovecraft is at times detrimental to originality in weird

fiction. The commodification of Lovecraft could be seen as a useful thing in

terms of an entry point for readers, raising the profile of this kind of fiction. But to

wallow in Lovecraft, to fetishize Lovecraft, to not acknowledge that for all of the

expansiveness of the idea of cosmic horror that there is not also an ironic

narrowness of vision and repetitive motion in his work…is to be blind to so many

other amazing writers and ideas connected to weird fiction — or at the very least

to render discussions about weird fiction less nuanced and complex. (2012)

S.T. Joshi criticized VanderMeer for his negative assessment of and desire to leave Lovecraft's

influence behind, especially since, according to Joshi, "there are several obvious borrowings of

specific features from his tales" in VanderMeer's fiction, one of which includes "The Colour out

Space." As Joshi rightly observes and as will be seen in chapter two, *The Southern Reach Trilogy*

represents a "clear borrowing from "The Colour out of Space" (263, 2018).

Let's note, though, that VanderMeer did not completely disown or disavow the influence

of Lovecraft, claiming that "it's true that riffing off of Lovecraft has created interesting and

enduring work," referencing in particular the writing of Caitlin R. Kiernan and China Miéville

(2012). Nevertheless, for VanderMeer, "the shadow of Lovecraft blots out and renders invisible

so many better and more interesting writers" (2012). He concludes that

worshipping at the altar provided by Lovecraftianism can rob us of the ability to

appreciate other approaches to story and to character. The point isn't to reject

Lovecraft, but to see Lovecraft with clear eyes and to acknowledge that weird

fiction should not and simply cannot begin and end with one vision, created by a

man who passed away in 1937. Part of moving past Lovecraft's influence is also

to acknowledge that his definition of "the weird" isn't as applicable to modern

weird (2012)

In a close reading of VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*, we will examine how VanderMeer

attempts to move past "Lovecraft's influence" and consider his claim that that "continued

adulation for and imitation of Lovecraft is at times detrimental to originality in weird fiction,"
despite the aforementioned "borrowing" of the elements "The Colour Out of Space."

Chapter three discusses afropessimism and looks at Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red
Hook" and Victor LaValle's 2016 novella *The Ballad of Black Tom*. "Dedicated to H.P.
Lovecraft, with all my conflicted feelings," LaValle's novella is not just clearly influenced by
Lovecraft; the text features the two principal characters from Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red
Hook," Robert Suydam and Thomas Malone, as major players. However, *The Ballad of Black
Tom* is a clear response to Lovecraft's troubling story and its undeniable racism, and LaValle has
acknowledged the problematic influence of Lovecraft in multiple interviews. For example, in an
interview with Sam Briger, the producer of NPR's *Fresh Air*, LaValle discussed Lovecraft's
appeal to him in his youth:

> He [Lovecraft] was one of the four foundational writers probably of my youth. I
> think I picked him up at about the age of 10 or 11. And I would say it was him,
> Stephen King, Shirley Jackson and Clive Barker were these four writers - all
> horror writers - who meant the world to me. And Lovecraft stood out in a way
> because he was the most - well, he was the oldest of all of them. He had written
> the earliest, but also he was the strangest. (NPR 2016)

As will be seen, LaValle's novella stands as a profound work of weird fiction with an undeniable
pessimistic view of race, one that reveals the lasting influence of Lovecraft on LaValle.

In a short coda following these three longer case studies, Caitlin R. Kiernan's 2016
novella *Agents of Dreamland* and Stephen King's 2014 novel *Revival* are analyzed through the
lens of compassion as defined by Schopenhauer. Kiernan has published in numerous Cthulhu
Mythos anthologies, and their 2019 collection *Houses Under the Sea: Mythos Tales* is a stellar

gathering of writings that highlight Lovecraft's obvious influence. That collection includes

"Lovecraft and I," a keynote address that Kiernan gave at the fifteenth annual Lovecraft film

festival in 2010. On the notion of Lovecraft's influence, Kiernan claims that

> Few other speculative fiction writers, and certainly very few prior to Lovecraft,
>
> seem to have so thoroughly comprehended the profundity of deep time and its
>
> consequences for humanity. Lovecraft not only comprehended it, he spent his life
>
> writing stories that, among other things, sought to convey the truth of our place in
>
> the cosmos. Sure, the monsters were great, and the disintegrating ancestral
>
> castles, and the mutant fish people – but for me, it was his appreciation for time
>
> and his ability to convey a cosmic perspective. He knew instinctively, the power
>
> of these revelations…Lovecraft didn't just write creepy stories. In his own way,
>
> he subverted religious dogma and said, "Look, we're so tiny, and we'll be gone
>
> before you know it. And nothing and no one cares. And this is terrifying, but it's
>
> also grand" (14-15)

In the above passage, Kiernan insightfully describes the lasting influence of Lovecraft and the

wake that he left in the history of the weird as a genre. In this dissertation's coda, we will

consider the notion of compassion, a concept that remains relatively absent from Lovecraft's

oeuvre, in the context of Kiernan's *Agents of Dreamland*, the first novella in a series known as

The Tinfoil Dossier, which also includes *Black Helicopters* (2018) and *The Tindaloss Asset*

(2020).

Finally, in a career that now spans six decades, Stephen King has repeatedly talked of

Lovecraft's powerful influence. In his non-fiction treatise on the horror genre, *Danse Macabre*

(1981), King claims that "Lovecraft…opened the way for me," claiming that "it is his shadow, so

long and gaunt, so dark and puritanical, which overlies almost all of the important horror fiction that has come since [his writings]" (101). Alongside a short discussion of Kiernan's *Agents of Dreamland*, King's *Revival* is examined in this dissertation's coda, and, as we will see, that novel is perhaps King's most Lovecraftian work to date.

Contributing to Critical Conversations

Aside from the already cited *The Love of Ruins: Letters on Lovecraft* from Cutler Shershow and Michaelsen, few noteworthy studies of Lovecraft have been published as of late or in general,[17] and this dissertation attempts to intervene with regards to this relative lack of a larger scholarly conversation. Moreover, beyond Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie*, Robertson's monograph on VanderMeer, and Joshi's study of the history of the weird tale mentioned earlier, very few studies on the topic are available, another critical problem that this project addresses. The two texts worthy of discussion in some detail are philosopher Eugene Thacker's *Horror of Philosophy* series, specifically the third volume, *Tentacles Longer Than Night* (2015), and, more recently, scholars Joseph Packer and Ethan Stoneman's *A Feeling of Wrongness: Pessimistic Rhetoric on the Fringes of Popular Culture* (2018).

Thacker has published widely on pessimism, but his *Horror of Philosophy* series stands out for its insightful engagement with the topic in the context of Lovecraft's fiction. Attempting

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[17] This lack of compelling scholarly readings of Lovecraft remains, indeed, a critical problem. As stated above, this project aims to contribute to the discussion, which has only a handful of standout studies. While Joshi's work is undeniably important, his approach to literary analysis writ large and Lovecraft's influence in particular leaves much to be discussed, as his methodology is overly descriptive and rigidly taxonomic to the point of redundancy at times. While each possess major flaws in their approach, other noteworthy book-length studies of Lovecraft include Graham Harman's *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012), Donald Burleson's *Disturbing the Universe* (1990), and Michel Houellebecq's *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (1991). Harman proposes that, beyond Lovecraft, "no other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess" (3). Burleson contends that "the writings of Howard Phillips Lovecraft will quite nicely support the readings that post-structuralism insists upon brining to literature" (15). Finally, Houellebecq suggests that Lovecraft's writings and their reception are predicated on a "paradox," one that hinges on the notion that "we prefer" Lovecraft's indifferent universe of Old Ones and Outer Gods, "hideous as it is, to our own reality" (43). Accordingly, Houellebecq concludes that "we are precisely the readers that Lovecraft anticipated" because "we read his tales with the same exact disposition as that which prompted him to write them" (43).

to "read Poe or Lovecraft as philosophers rather than as writers of short stories," Thacker argues

in the third volume of his pessimistic trilogy, *Tentacles Longer Than Night*, that "what is unique

about the horror genre—and particularly supernatural horror—is its indifference to all the

accouterments of human drama" (12). For Thacker, the horror genre forces readers to confront

"the fragmentary and sometimes lyrical testimony of the human being struggling to confront its

lack of 'sufficient reason' in the vast cosmos" (12). Regarding Lovecraft's writings in particular,

Thacker posits that the author's

> stories abound…with revelations, expressed through the kind of melancholic,
>
> melodramatic, purple prose that has become a hallmark of the weird tale. At the
>
> same time, these revelations point to a minimalist limit that Lovecraft's
>
> characters can only negatively articulate; the beyond, the unnameable, the
>
> nameless thing, the thing on the doorstep, the lurker on the threshold, the
>
> whisperer in darkness…the characters cam only attempt to describe what they see
>
> by reflexively referring to the genre in which they are unknowingly embedded.
>
> (113)

Thacker's discussion of a certain apophatic impulse at the heart of Lovecraft's stories provides a

productive way of thinking through the author's profound significance in the realm of weird

fiction. Additionally, Thacker's observation regarding "the interesting intertextuality" of

Lovecraft's narrators and how they both describe and define the parameters of "the genre in

which they are unknowingly embedded" is also sharp, and, again, offers a fascinating way to

consider the wake left by Lovecraft's writing(s) (113).

Packer and Stoneman's *A Feeling of Wrongness: Pessimistic Rhetoric on the Fringes of

Popular Culture* is an especially noteworthy study "that engages a wide range of popular culture

texts on the premise that nonphilosophically discursive modes of expression are better suited to

the production of pessimistic affect—of belief without cognition—that carefully argued treatises

and polemics" (4). Elaborating on this claim, they posit that the "pop culture artifacts" that they

examine "perform a purer practice of pessimism and construct an ethos more in line with the

pessimistic thought than the 'professionals'" (4). In other words, Packer and Stoneman

conclude that

> For while the philosophers and the polemicists argue for the pessimism in accord
>
> with optimistic structures of expressive thought, the texts we highlight
>
> communicate their pessimism in ways that are more properly pessimistic and
>
> rhetorically effective. Thus freed from the restrictive tools of optimism,
>
> pessimism is enable to address itself more adequately. (4)

Though there are undeniable issues with their claim for relative levels of "pure[r]" and

"proper[ly]" pessimism, which implies a strange hierarchical structure predicated on value

judgments that pit "professional" pessimists—a group of which they, apparently, exclude

themselves—against the creators of "pop culture artifacts," Packer and Stoneman make an

insightful original argument, one that sees pessimism, finally, as a form of rhetoric most

effectively communicated through the medium of popular culture.

Additionally, Packer and Stoneman devote an entire chapter of their monograph to the

topic of "weird fiction as an unconventional but potentially effective site of rhetorical invention

via-à-vis the ends of pessimism" (23). In said chapter, entitled "'No, Everything is Not All

Right': Supernatural Horror as Pessimistic Argument," they propose "that weird fiction's

production of uncanny effects functions as a workable substitute for pessimistic argumentation,

one that convinces primarily by way of affect or aesthetics" (24). More precisely, Packer and

Stoneman present a three-pronged thesis regarding the relationship between pessimistic rhetoric and weird fiction, and they contend that

> (1) weird fiction, by masquerading as a source of pleasant distraction, attracts an audience that might not be inclined to pick up a work by a Schopenhauer or a Zapffe[18]; (2) that, by subtly blurring the lines between the natural and the supernatural, weird fiction weakens readers' inclination to isolate and, hence, to neutralize the pessimistic undertones of any given weird tale; (3) that weird fiction's monstrous aberrations destabilize the conceptual-ontological categories of space and time, knowing, and performing, all of which serve to anchor human beings' feelings of existential security, both in the world and in their own skin; and (4) that the very structure of the weird fiction inhibits audiences from sublimating the uncannily horrific into a life-affirming experience. (24)

Again, while there are notable issues in some of their claims regarding what, exactly, constitutes pessimism, and, furthermore, the notion that weird fiction masquerades "as a source of pleasant distraction," Packer and Stoneman's linking of pessimism with weird fiction starts a long overdue conversation on the relationship between both topics, one that this dissertation aims to contribute to as well.

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[18] The "Zapffe" referred to above is the criminally underappreciated Norwegian philosopher, Peter Wessel Zapffe, whose "The Last Messiah" (1933) will be discussed in chapter one on ontological pessimism.

Chapter 1: Ontological Pessimism—Laird Barron and Thomas Ligotti

This first chapter focuses on ontological pessimism, a term defined in detail shortly. The Lovecraftian text examined in this chapter is the short story "The Haunter of the Dark," which was published in *Weird Tales* in 1936. The contemporary weird novels examined are Laird Barron's (2012) and Thomas Ligotti's *My Work Is Not Yet Done* (2002). The chapter argues that a thematic through line can be traced from the non-misanthropy of Robert Blake in Lovecraft's "The Haunter of the Dark" and the character's life-ending encounter(s) with horrific cosmic forces to the fundamentally human-predicated but nevertheless malevolent cosmos of Barron's *The Croning* in which the cognitive demise of the novel's protagonist, Don Miller, stems from the sinister machinations of his duplicitous wife, Michelle. Finally, in Ligotti's *My Work Is Not Yet* Done, after taking extreme offense at perceived mistreatment from his coworkers, the text's protagonist, Frank Dominio, makes a metaphysical connection with a cosmic entity known as The Great Swine of Blackness, and the violent aftermath ultimately reveals that the horror(s) of ontological pessimism depicted in these two contemporary works of weird fiction reside not in the cosmos and the possible indifference or potential malevolence therein but rather in the human and its perpetual ability to annihilate the Other merely for personal gain or petty vengeance.

Three interconnected notions of "ontological pessimism" are the focus of this chapter: the paradoxical nature of human consciousness; the question of free will and the puppet-like beings that it makes out of humanity; and, finally, the troubling idea of a primordial force that propels every entity on the planet and unites all phenomena in a singularity of suffering that composes humanity's empirical experience of reality. Though separate concepts, these ideas comprise consistent points of focus and a composite constellation of themes seen throughout the canon of pessimism, Lovecraft's oeuvre, and works of contemporary weird fiction. Again, for

the purposes of clarity and brevity, when necessary, they are referred to singularly with the term "ontological pessimism," thus denoting that these features describe the fundamental aspects of humanity's Being and the pessimistic nature of that existence.

Human Consciousness: A Pessimistic Paradox

In "The Last Messiah," Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe describes the paradoxical nature of human consciousness in stark and unflinching terms. He calls consciousness "a breach in the very unity of life, a biological paradox, an abomination, an absurdity, an exaggeration of disastrous nature" (1933). He elaborates on the horrific aspects of human consciousness with some effective existential similes and striking Biblical metaphors:

> Life had overshot its target, blowing itself apart. A species had been armed too heavily…Despite his new eyes, man was still rooted in matter, his soul spun into it and subordinated to its blind laws. And yet he could see matter as a stranger, compare himself to all phenomena, see through and locate his vital processes. He comes to nature as an unbidden guest, in vain extending his arms to beg conciliation with his maker: Nature answers no more, it performed a miracle with man, but later did not know him. He has lost his right of residence in the universe, has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and been expelled from Paradise. He is mighty in the near world, but curses his might as purchased with his harmony of soul, his innocence, his inner peace in life's embrace. (1933)

As the passage above indicates, for Zapffe, human consciousness is a tragic paradox. Compared to the rest of the fauna on the planet, humanity is conscious of its existence and therefore its finitude, a pessimistic contradiction that, on the one hand, provides engagement with reality that, from our perspective, remains unmatched in terms of phenomenological interpretation and

subjective experience, but, on the other, insures that we are *consciously* aware of our suffering in linear time and thus our unavoidable mortality in that very same continuum. Unlike other sentient beings, which can feel pain and possess limited levels of reason, humanity not only can feel pain but also is consciously aware of its experience of pain in time. In other words, we—as self-conscious beings—know that we are suffering and are aware that one moment of pain is just that, one moment of pain, in the forever forward moving arrow of time, and that therefore it, too, can be replaced by another and then another, and so on and so forth. Though we may experience respites of pain and even moments of pleasure, from the pessimist's perspective, the former far outweighs the latter. Multiple pessimists have made this case, including (but not limited to) arguably the most pessimistic of all philosophers, Arthur Schopenhauer, to, more recently, legal scholar Joshua Foa Dienstag.

In his insightful survey of pessimism, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (2006), Dienstag considers the notion of humanity's self-consciousness in time—what he calls our "time-consciousness"—through the lens of Schopenhauer's metaphysical pessimism, a distinct version of thought that Dienstag differentiates from cultural pessimism (exemplified by the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Giacomo Leopardi); existential pessimism (embodied in the writing of Albert Camus, Miguel de Unamuno, and E.M. Cioran); and the Dionysian pessimism of Friedrich Nietzsche (9). Dienstag elaborates on the difference between these modifiers as follows, claiming that unlike these other forms, "in metaphysical pessimism, the individual confronts his temporal condition directly" (85). He provides some additional context for this clarification:

> Pessimism, to Schopenhauer, means not that our civilization or morality are
> declining, but rather that human beings are fated to endure a life freighted with

problems that are fundamentally unmeliorable. It is the unalterable conditions of

our daily existence that are the source of Schopenhauer's pessimism, with our

time-consciousness foremost among these…With a mental horizon that includes

past and future, we are vulnerable to disappointment, worry, and regret…The

fundamental horizon of our consciousness is constituted by temporality…As the

primary form of the sentient mind, time organizes all our experiences; and this,

for Schopenhauer, is where our problems begin. (87-89)

For both Schopenhauer and Dienstag, unlike the rest of the critters and crops with which we

cohabitate, humanity remains *consciously aware* of its pain and suffering *in time*. Though

providing periodic peaks of pleasure, this cognizance remains perpetually pitched towards an

awareness of pain and suffering as the dominant defects of our distinctly human condition.

In *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, Ligotti expounds on Zapffe's pessimistic

assessment of human consciousness and the repression mechanisms that we must activate in

order to maintain some semblance of sanity. Once more, the contradictory nature of our self-

awareness is highlighted as the most significant pessimistic facet of human existence:

From an evolutionary standpoint, in Zapffe's observation, consciousness was a

blunder that required corrections for its effects. It was an adventitious outgrowth

that made us into a race of contradictory beings—uncanny things that have

nothing to do with the rest of creation…While a modicum of consciousness may

have had survivalist properties during an immemorial chapter of our evolution—

so one theory goes—this faculty soon enough became a seditious agent working

against us. As Zapffe concluded, we need to hamper our consciousness for all we

are worth or it will impose upon us a too clear vision of what we do not what to

see, which, as the Norwegian philosopher saw it, along with every other

pessimist, is 'the brotherhood of suffering between everything alive.' (26-27)

Citing Zapffe's negative assessment of human consciousness, Ligotti argues that our self-

awareness has turned humanity into a series of "uncanny things." The adjective "uncanny" has

German roots in terms of the notion of the *unheimlich*, which Sigmund Freud defines as "that

class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (1).

So, what is it about our self-consciousness that makes human existence so "uncanny," and

moreover, how does it turn us into "things" that are both "terrifying" and "familiar?" For

pessimists, the answer to those queries is itself a question, but one with an answer that, in the last

instance—like our horrific self-awareness and what it entails—we cannot *consciously know* in

the name of preserving some semblance of mental stability: do we have free will?

On Free Will

In his *Free Will* (2012), neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris is right to suggest that

the "the stakes are high" when it comes to "the question of free will" (1). As Harris accurately

acknowledges, "the question of free will touches nearly everything we care about" (1).

"Morality, law, politics, religion, public policy, intimate relationships, feelings of guilt and

personal accomplishment—most of what is distinctly *human* about our lives," Harris argues,

"seems to depend upon our viewing one another as autonomous persons, capable of free choice"

(1). Harris ultimately concludes that "free will *is*[19] an illusion" that rests on the bifurcated notion

that "either our wills are determined by prior causes and we are not responsible for them, or they

are the product of chance and we are not responsible for them" (5). His dichotomous description

of our lack of free will stems from his work as a neuroscientist and volumes of evidence that

reveal "we are conscious of only a tiny fraction of the information that our brains process in each

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[19] Harris' emphasis

moment," which indicates that "although we continually notice changes in our experience—in thought, mood, perception, behavior, etc.—we are utterly unaware of the neurophysiological events that produce them" (7). Consider his compelling breakdown of the mysterious nature of our individual thoughts and their even hazier origins:

> Seeming acts of volition merely arise spontaneously (whether caused, uncaused, or probabilistically inclined, it makes no difference) and cannot be traced to a point of origin in our conscious minds…where intentions themselves come from, and what determines their character in every instance, remains perfectly mysterious in subjective terms. Our sense of free will results from a failure to appreciate this: We do not know what we intend to do until the intention itself arises. To understand this is to realize that we are not the authors of our thoughts and actions in the way that people generally suppose. (6, 13)

Harris quickly qualifies his conclusion, claiming that "of course, this insight does not make social and political freedom any less important" because, as he rightly notes, "having a gun to your head is still a problem worth rectifying, wherever intention comes from" (13). However, he ultimately reasserts his pessimistic perspective, positing that "the idea that we, as conscious beings, are deeply responsible for the character of our mental lives and subsequent behavior is simply impossible to map onto reality" (13).

His next rhetorical move is worthy of a closer look because he uses the term "paradox," which constitutes a semantic through line with both Zapffe and Ligotti, and he employs a striking metaphor that allows us to move to a detailed discussion of Schopenhauer's notion of the will. Via an imperative clause directed at "you," a second-person synecdoche for his readers, Harris writes:

Consider what it would take to actually have free will. You would need to be

aware of all the factors that determine your thoughts and actions, and you would

need to have complete control over those factors. But there is a paradox here that

vitiates the very notion of freedom—for what would influence the influences?

More influences? None of these adventitious mental states are the real you. You

are not controlling the storm, and you are not lost in it. You *are* the storm. (14)

Harris' account of our lack of free will via meteorological metaphor sounds somewhat similar to

philosopher David Hume, who claimed in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) that the self is

"nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an

inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement" (165). Additionally, Harris'

usage of "storm" to denote that chaotic flux of sensorial secretions and sequential suppositions

that comprise the self echoes G.W.F. Hegel's description of the subject in *The Phenomenology of

Spirit* (1807) as a force of "pure negativity" driven by an "unrest" in its subjective engagement

with phenomenological reality (12). Ultimately, these philosophical connections to Harris'

writing raise a specific question: what causes the storm? The answer is the will.

The Will, according to Arthur Schopenhauer

In the first volume of his magnum opus *The World as Will and Representation* (1818),

Schopenhauer uses the word "will" to denote "the innermost being of the whole of nature," a

primordial energy that enlivens "men and animals" but also constitutes "the force that shoots and

vegetates in the plant…the force by which the crystal is formed, the force that turns the magnet

to the North Pole…the force that appears in the elective affinities of matter as repulsion and

attraction, separation and union, and finally even gravitation" (110). He elaborates on the

concept as follows:

The *will* is the *thing-in-itself*; as such it is not representation at all…It is that of

which all representation, all object, is the phenomenon, the visibility, the

objectivity.[20] It is the innermost essence, the kernel, of every particular thing and

also of the whole. It appears in every blindly acting force of nature, and also in the

deliberate conduct of man, and the great difference between the two concerns

only the degree of the manifestation, not the inner nature of what is manifested

(110).

Schopenhauer argues that we are not cut off from what Kant famously called the thing-in-itself,

an unmediated experience of reality not contingent on collected empirical data via the subjective

sensorium. In other words, Schopenhauer proposes that while we are limited in our view of the

thing-in-itself because of Kant's *a priori* categories of perception that make humanity see reality

through the lenses of space and time and cause and effect, we *do know* what lies behind these

categories: the will.

In his *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (2002), philosopher John

Gray accurately and cogently captures Schopenhauer's critique of Kant's philosophy and its

wide-ranging implications. Gray claims that "like most philosophers, Kant worked to shore up

the conventional beliefs of his time," but "Schopenhauer did the opposite" (42). Engaging with

Kant's philosophy but taking his ideas beyond the questions of morality and autonomy,

Schopenhauer, Gray tells us,

was ready to follow his thoughts wherever they led. Kant argued that unless we

accept that we are autonomous, freely choosing selves we cannot make sense of

our moral experience. Schopenhauer responded that our actual experience is not

of freely choosing the way we live but of being driven along by our bodily needs

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[20] All emphasis Schopenhauer's

– by fear, hunger, and, above all, sex…It is not true that our experience compels

us to think of ourselves as free agents. On the contrary, if we look at ourselves

truthfully we know we are not…Using his critique of Kant to batter down the

ordinary view of time, space, and cause and effect, he [Schopenhauer] offered a

different vision of the world – one in which there are no separate things at all, in

which plurality and difference do not exist, and there is only the ceaseless striving

he calls Will. (43-44)

As Gray argues, via his critique of Kant's categories, Schopenhauer reveals several truths about

human existence that remain cornerstones of pessimism. While we may not be able to perceive

the thing-in-itself because of what Schopenhauer dubs the *"principium individuationis*,"—which

he defines as the principle by which the coordinates of space and time denote each "person as

absolutely different from every other and separated…by a wide gulf,"—humans can, via reason,

overcome this seemingly unassailable gap of self and other, of inside and outside, and *know*, at

the core of all things, we exist as one entity manifest in a multitude of forms and propelled by the

same perpetual force of will (365).

In his *Infinite Resignation* (2018) pessimistic philosopher Eugene Thacker writes that "at

the core of Schopenhauer's philosophy is the basic intuition that we do not so much live, as we

are lived" (2018, 353). He summarizes the will in insightful terms, suggesting that "reading

Schopenhauer's philosophy" reveals the fact that "we are nothing more than lifeforms compelled

to live, beings impelled to be, by some other, stranger, more diffuse and more impersonal force"

(2018, 356-7). Thacker continues:

Not only is the Will not human will, it is also impersonal, indifferent, and

detached from the cares of any particular living being, human or not—as

Schopenhauer puts it, the Will is "blind." The Will wills, and nothing more. It

matters little whether it be through this species or that, through this existent or

that. The Will wills, and for no reason. Its willing is not, strictly speaking,

meaningful. (357)

In sum, Schopenhauer's will is, to say the very least, a weird and powerful force responsible for

the movement of everything in existence, and, as we will see in more detail in chapter two, it

erodes the rhetorical foundations upon which the human species stands in several fields and

discourses as the most significant species on the planet. With this final aspect of ontological

pessimism now thoroughly described, we can make some important connections regarding the

concept and its manifestations in both the writing of Lovecraft and the contemporary weird

fiction authors studied hereafter.

To review briefly before pivoting to the readings, pessimists hold that human

consciousness is a nightmarish paradox that turns human beings into uncanny puppets,

contradictory figures who mistakenly believe they possess authentic selves, free to make their

own way in the world and not be shackled by questions of determinism or circumstance.

However, no such self actually exists. Therefore, we must deceive our selves (or lack thereof)

on a daily basis into believing that that we each denote a definite and unique self in possession of

both an undeniably free will and unflinchingly right reason that, together, will allow us to

conquer a universe that remains, to quote philosopher Ray Brassier and his trenchant *Nihil

Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (2007), "indifferent to our existence and oblivious to

the 'values' and 'meanings' which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable"

(xi). Finally, pessimists claim that humans mistakenly locate evidence of their agency in the

results of their seemingly autonomous actions, despite not knowing, ultimately, from whence

their desires for said actions come and thus what drives them to do anything, beyond a biological survival instinct that itself appears to be merely an offshoot of the blind and relentless force(s) of will. As was mentioned earlier, for the sake of clarity and brevity, in the readings that follow, these facets of our distinctly human existence are referred to as "ontological pessimism."

Given the rather bleak nature of its positions, ontological pessimism may come off as needlessly negative and even capable of deriving a certain feeling of dread. However, this possibility of perception in no way takes away from the tenability of its philosophical positions. More importantly, the perhaps dread-inducing nature of ontological pessimism has appeared consistently as a major theme in the fiction of Lovecraft and contemporary authors of weird fiction influenced by the author. Accordingly, let's turn to an examination of Lovecraft's "The Haunter of the Dark" in order to see the many examples of the concept in that text, and, from there, we will analyze the ways in which Laird Barron and Thomas Ligotti engage with the idea in their respective works.

"Almost Without Conscious Initiative"—"The Haunter of the Dark"

According to S.T. Joshi, "The Haunter of the Dark" "was written quickly on November 5-19, 1935, after Lovecraft had heard of the double acceptance of *At the Mountains of Madness* and 'The Shadow Out of Time' by *Astounding Stories*" (531). "'The Haunter of the Dark,' Joshi writes, "is a direct sequel to Robert Bloch's 'The Shambler from the Stars,'" and, furthermore, "Robert Blake is clearly meant to be Bloch" (531).[21] In both Lovecraft's "The Haunter of the

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[21] Compared to other major works of Lovecraft's fiction, "The Haunter of the Dark" has received little to no criticism. Only three scholarly pieces are worthy of mentioning: a chapter on the story in Donald Burleson's *Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe* (1990)—a monograph that attempts, albeit rather generally and vaguely, to read select Lovecraft stories through the lens of poststructuralism—in which Burleson argues that "the text is like its own described alternations of flashing lightning and muffling blackness, refusing to 'settle'" (155); a dissertation composed by Sean Elliot Martin entitled "H.P. Lovecraft and the Modernist Grotesque" published by Duquesne University in 2008 that describes the church on Federal Hill as an "alienating place," one that "unsettles the traditional observer by its mere presence, leading to unanswered questions about the origins, beliefs, motivations, and actions of those who dwelled within" (113-16); and a somewhat more recent article by John D. Haefele entitled

Dark" and Bloch's "The Shambler from the Stars," a writer of occult fiction returns to his

hometown of Providence, Rhode Island and is compelled into a quest for some form of forbidden

knowledge, and consequent encounters with seemingly supernatural entities result in the

respective protagonists' deaths.

In a motif that appears throughout much of Lovecraft's fiction, the narrator of "The

Haunter of the Dark" begins by questioning the validity of the events to be recounted and posits

that "the reader must judge for himself" what terrible fate actually befell Robert Blake (785).

We learn that there are "two schools of opinion" (785). The first is "the common belief that

Robert Blake was killed by lightning, or by some profound nervous shock derived from electrical

discharge" (784). The second are those "who cling to less rational and commonplace theories"

and "are inclined to take much of Blake's diary at its face value," which is to say that he

encountered the story's eponymous entity and was literally scared to death (784). The narrator

presents these two conflicting interpretations and then begins to "summarise (*sic*) the dark chain

of events from the expressed point of view of their chief actor," Robert Blake (785).

The story recounts the events that led up to Blake's death upon his returning "to

Providence in the winter of 1934-5, taking the upper floor of a venerable dwelling in a grassy

court off College Street" (785). The apartment provides him a view of "the spectral hump of

Federal Hill," a location that looms like "some unknown, ethereal world which might or might

not vanish in dream if ever he tried to seek it out and enter it in person" (786). Readers then

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"Reappraising 'The Haunter of the Dark'" and published in the 2013 volume of *Lovecraft Annual* that discusses both the lack of insightful critical readings of the story and the fact that "there is more than hitherto suspected going on in this tale" (147). While each of these readings remain insightful, none engages with any of the aforementioned aspects of ontological pessimism, and this lacuna is one of the critical interventions that this chapter seeks to address. In sum, "The Haunter of the Dark" abounds with references to ontological pessimism, but no scholars have considered the text through this lens.

learn that "of all the distant objects on Federal Hill, a certain huge, dark church most fascinated Blake" because of the way "it stood out with especial distinctness" (786). The narrator relates that "a deep restlessness gripped Blake," and that, for some reason, he found himself "more and more…at his westward window," gazing "at the distant hill and the black, frowning steeple" of the church on Federal Hill (787). Finally, "in late April…Blake made his first trip into the unknown," and he consciously decided to visit the eerily entrancing church (787).

Or did he? This detail remains in question because of the language the narrator uses to describe Blake's actions as he approaches the church, informing readers that "Blake found himself edging nearer the raised area and examining the bank wall and rusted fence for possible avenues of ingress" (790). If we break the previous sentence down to its basic grammatical components and remove all modification, then we are left with the subject, "Blake," and the predicate, "found," and, finally, a direct object, "himself." Everything else in the passage functions as modification and informs readers where, *exactly*, Blake "found himself" and what he was doing in said location. So, we are thus left with at least a one question to answer. Beyond the predictable platitudes proffered in a plethora of self-help books, what does it mean to "find" your "self?" In the context of Lovecraft's language, we can safely assume that it means to discover one's physical body completing an action (or series of actions) of which the conscious mind remains to some extent unaware. When Blake finds himself "edging nearer the raised area and examining the bank wall and rusted fence," the narration suggests that this action was not something that he consciously decided to do but rather that he was unconsciously compelled into this action by some force, what the narrator describes in the very next sentence as a "terrible lure…which was not to be resisted" (790). Similar to the "morbid instinct" that brought Blake back to Providence at the story's beginning, a malevolent force (or forces) that Blake cannot

comprehend or resist catalyzes "an oddly mounting interest" within him to visit the church on

Federal Hill (784-7).

For another example, consider the following description of Blake's seemingly[22]

unconscious behavior provided by the narrator as Blake arrives at the church entrance.

Approaching "the great doors" that "were securely locked," Blake completes "a circuit of the

Cyclopean building in quest of some minor and more penetrable opening" (790). "Even then,"

the narrator recounts, "he [Blake] could not be sure that he wished to enter…yet the pull of its

strangeness dragged him on automatically" (790). Note the way in which the clause "he could

not be sure" connotes a certain indeterminacy with regards to Blake's conscious desire or lack

thereof to enter the church. Nonetheless, regardless of this unknown, "the pull of its [the

church's] strangeness dragged him on automatically." Via the usage of the adverb

"automatically," the narrator renders Blake a paradoxically self-aware puppet in the hands of

forces he cannot comprehend or resist, his volition violently violated by a "strangeness" that

"dragged him on," eventually, to his death.

Shortly after this description, Blake finds an "unprotected cellar window" (790). Again,

the narrator describes the lack of Blake's agency with regards to his actions, stating that he was

"acting almost without conscious initiative" when he "crawled through the window and let

himself down to the dust-carpeted and debris-strown concrete floor" (791). The narrator's usage

of the adverb "almost" to describe the possibility of Blake's "acting…without conscious

initiative" is crucial. Unlike Laird Barron and Thomas Ligotti, with "The Haunter of the Dark,"

Lovecraft lets the possibility of Robert Blake's free will or lack thereof remain just that, a

possibility. As the narrator tells us at the beginning of the story, "the reader must judge for

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[22] The adverb "seemingly" is used to modify "unconscious" because, as we will see shortly, though it remains unlikely, Lovecraft leaves the possibility of some sort of self-conscious human agency or subjective autonomy open for Blake throughout the story.

himself" the extent to which Blake's actions are his own in the story, whereas in the fiction of

Barron and Ligotti, no such interpretative leeway is provided. While evidence would seem to

suggest that Blake is, in fact, propelled by the forces of "Ultimate Chaos, at whose centre

sprawls the blind idiot god Azathoth, Lord of All Things," readers must remember that Lovecraft

leaves open the possibility that Blake's actions may be his own, even if they lead to a fatal

confrontation with the force that drive the universe itself (802).

The above reference to the entity known as Azathoth brings us back to Schopenhauer's

idea of the will. In *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, Ligotti argues that "in conceiving

Azathoth, that 'nuclear chaos' which 'bubbles at the center of all infinity,' Lovecraft might well

have been thinking of Schopenhauer's Will" (57). Ligotti expands on the connection between

Lovecraft's malevolent cosmic force and Schopenhauer's Will, and his analysis is quoted at

length below:

> Schopenhauer's insights are yoked to a philosophical superstructure centered on
>
> the Will, or the Will-to-live—a blind, deaf, and dumb force that rouses human
>
> beings to their detriment… Here, then, is the signature motif of the pessimistic
>
> imagination that Schopenhauer made discernible: *Behind the scenes of life there is*
>
> *something pernicious that makes a nightmare of our world*…As instantiated in
>
> Lovecraft's stories, the pernicious something that makes a nightmare of our world
>
> is individuated into linguistically teratolgoical entities from beyond or outside of
>
> our universe. Like ghosts or the undead, their very existence spooks us as a
>
> violation of what should and should not be, suggesting unknown modes of being
>
> and uncanny creations which epitomize supernatural horror. (56-57)

In the above passage, Ligotti lucidly limns a supernatural horror that arguably epitomizes both

the philosophy of Schopenhauer and the fiction of Lovecraft: what we perceive as our self-

conscious, free-will-predicated experience stands as merely a fabricated façade that covers what

Ligotti dubs "chaos at feast," that is, the blind force of will reproducing and devouring itself,

with humanity alone to view the horror show *in time* through the lens of its own self-

consciousness (14).

Returning to "The Haunter of the Dark," upon entering the church, Blake discovers "a

curiously angled stone pillar" on which "rested a metal box of peculiarly asymmetrical form"

that held "an egg shaped or irregularly spherical object" (793). This object "turned out to be a

nearly black, red-striated polyhedron…either a very remarkable crystal of some sort, or an

artificial object of craved and highly polished mineral matter" (794).   Consider the narrator's

description of the object's eerie effects on Blake and the force(s) he feels encapsulated within:

> This stone, once exposed, exerted upon Blake an almost alarming fascination. He
>
> could scarcely tear his eyes from it…Into his mind floated pictures of alien orbs
>
> with great stone towers, and other orbs with titan mountains and no mark of life,
>
> and still remoter places where only a stirring in vague blackness told of the
>
> presence of consciousness and will. (794)

The passage above tells us that the stone "exerted upon Blake an almost alarming fascination."

This description of an inanimate object as possessing a primordial power or force encased within

it maps onto the conception of the will that Schopenhauer suggests "turns the magnet to the

North Pole," meaning the will is responsible for the existence and energy in all entities,

regardless if they are animated or not. Additionally, the idea of a "stirring…in vague blackness"

sounds akin to the force(s) of will, that is, a violently vitalizing dynamism that drives the day-to-

day grind of human work and play, propelling all that is in the horror show of suffering, decay, and death that denotes existence as such.

Nevertheless, the key word in the above passage is "almost," an adverb that modifies "alarming," which itself describes "fascination." To wit, the narrator's usage of "almost" harkens back to the earlier appearance of the word wherein it describes Blake's lack of "conscious initiative." Textual evidence suggests that, lacking free will because of a "morbid instinct," coupled with "the pull" of the forces of Azathoth encapsulated in the crystal, Blake encountered and thereby released a physical manifestation of the titular entity.[23] However, via precise modification—in this instance, the adverb "almost"—Lovecraft leaves the possibility of Blake's conscious agency and therefore a scientific explanation for the events that comprise "The Haunter of the Dark" open, a thematic point of emphasis that Barron and Ligotti each departs from in their own respective fiction(s).

Frightened by his seemingly supernatural experience in the church, Blake returns to his apartment and "read much in certain books" and "worked feverishly" (797). However, "every evening the old impulse to gaze westward returned," and Blake remains under the mental and physical influence of a sinister force localized in the church on Federal Hill (797). His lack of conscious agency is repeatedly described in terms of an energy that unconsciously pulls him back to the location: "some morbid instinct" (784); "a morbid longing" (799); and, "a constant tugging at his will" (801). Eventually, readers learn that the pressure of this force led to "Blake's partial breakdown" (801). During this time, "he did not dress, and ordered all his food by telephone," while "visitors remarked the cords he kept near his bed" because Blake had

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[23] According to S.T. Joshi, the monster of the story's title is not Azathoth but in fact a frightening form of one Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Chaos, who, according to Lovecraft scholar David Harms, serves as a messenger for the Outer Gods. See the entry "NYARLATHOTEP" in Harm's *The Cthulhu Mythos Encyclopedia* (2008).

apparently been "forced…to bind his ankles every night with knots" due to repeated episodes of sleepwalking (801).

The narrator's description of this breakdown contains one of the two direct references to Azathoth in "The Haunter of the Dark," and the passage thus stands as one of the most significant example of the story's engagement with ontological pessimism. The narrator first provides the following details:

> After retiring on the night of the 30th he had suddenly found himself
>
> groping about in an almost black space. All he could see were short, faint,
>
> horizontal streaks of bluish light, but he could smell an overpowering foetor and
>
> hear a curious jumble of soft, furtive sounds above him. (801)

Later, we learn that Blake's "groping hands encountered a pillar of stone with a vacant top" and that "he found himself clutching the rungs of a ladder built into the wall…fumbling his uncertain way upward toward some region of intense stench where a hot, searing blast beat down against him" (802). Note how throughout the passage Blake's actions again contain the same connotations of unconsciousness—"suddenly found himself"; "later he found himself"—seen throughout the story. Finally, Blake seems to encounter the entity responsible for his somnambulistic actions, Azathoth:

> Before his eyes a kaleidoscopic range of phantasmal images played, all of them
>
> dissolving at intervals into the picture of a vast unplumbed abyss of night wherein
>
> whirled suns and worlds of an even profounder blackness. He thought of the
>
> ancient legends of Ultimate Chaos, at whose centre sprawls the blind idiot god
>
> Azathoth, Lord of All Things. (802)

Suddenly, Blake is jolted from his trance-like state by "a sharp report from the outer world" (802). The narrator relates that Blake "knew instantly where he was," the church on Federal Hill, and he flees to his apartment in terror (802). We then learn that "on regaining consciousness in the morning he found himself lying on his study floor fully dressed" with "dirt and cobwebs" over "every inch of his body" and "badly scorched hair" (802). The narrator tells us "it was then that his nerves broke down" (802).

As claimed above, this scene constitutes one of the most significant examples of ontological pessimism in the "The Haunter of the Dark," so there is much to examine. First, we should note that Blake's experience on "the night of the 30th" has resulted in him tying himself to his bed on a nightly basis because he believes he no longer possesses control over his body and thus, ultimately, that he lacks free will when in this sleepwalking state (801). Second, consider that Blake experiences multiple levels of consciousness in this scene, which is to say he possesses different levels of perception of "the outer world" via his altered state of sleepwalking (802). For example, the narrator states that "after retiring on the night of the 30th" Blake "suddenly found himself groping about an almost blank space," which indicates that he went to sleep for the night and then regained some level of consciousness via sleepwalking wherein he literally finds his body in an unknown location completing actions of which his now semi-conscious mind remains unaware. It is in this semi-conscious state of somnambulism that the narrator informs readers that Blake "thought of the ancient legends of Ultimate Chaos, at whose centre sprawls the blind idiot god Azathoth, Lord of All Things" before "the outer world broke through his stupor and roused him from the unutterable horror of his position" (802). What are the implications of Blake's differing levels of consciousness as depicted in this scene, and why did Blake think of Azathoth at this exact moment in the story?

To answer these questions, let's first return to Sam Harris' argument on humanity's lack

of free will with regards to the origin of our thoughts. According to Harris, we are not in active

control of our thoughts but rather "unconscious neural events determine our thoughts and

actions…and are themselves determined by prior causes of which we are subjectively unaware"

(16). He further posits that "you are not in control of your mind—because you, as a conscious

agent, are only *part* of your mind, living at the mercy of other parts" (38-39). Harris' language is

striking in the previous passage, specifically the notion of human consciousness living at the

mercy of the unconscious mind, because it allows us to make some connections with Lovecraft's

story and Blake's thinking of Azathoth at such a precise moment in the text. If we consider

Azathoth to be a reasonable depiction of Schopenhauer's will, then the entity must be understood

as a blind force of chaotic energy responsible for the fabric of the cosmos itself, propelling

animate and inanimate entities through reality via an endless series of reproduction, violence,

and death. Is it so much to go a step further and posit that this same force—Schopenhauer's will

and/or Lovecraft's Azathoth—serves as the source for our thoughts? That is to say, if one can

reasonably argue, for example, the notion that Schopenhauer's will "is the missing metaphysical

ground required…for the resolution of quantum paradoxes," as Bernado Kastrup cogently

claims, then why cannot it function in the same way to explain the origins of our thoughts (57-

58)?[24] While this proposition may appear unproductively hyperbolic or philosophically

untenable—meaning that Schopenhauer's will begins to function as a systemic solution for any

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[24] In his *Decoding Schopenhauer's Metaphysics: The Key to Understanding How It Solves the hard Problem of Consciousness and the Paradoxes of Quantum Mechanics* (2020), Kastrup argues that "the unexamined assumption underlying the metaphysical qualms of RQM (relational quantum mechanics)" is that "only the contents of perception exist" (57). However, as Kastrup notes, "next to the contents of perception there are, of course, also non-perceptual experiential states, such as volition," which he argues implies that "in Schopenhauer's terminology, next to representation there is also the will" (57). Put differently, Kastrup concludes that "Schopenhauer thus sketches…a solution to the metaphysical qualms of RQM by positing that the world-in-itself is not constituted by physical quantities, but by the volitional states of the will," which "provides a substrate for what we call 'information'" and "avoids solipsism, even each individual observer has his or her own physical world" (57).

and all philosophical aporias or scientific paradoxes—let's reconsider the passage with the assumption that said entity remains responsible for Blake's unconscious actions and serves as the source for his conscious thoughts.

Blake's sleepwalking confrontation with Azathoth takes on a much more sinister tone when read with the assumption that Blake remains under the influence of the entity not only in this particular moment but also throughout the text as a whole. When viewed in this light, the varying degrees of Blake's consciousness come into play in an unsettling way as well. Readers must remember that Blake first returned to Providence because of "some morbid instinct," one that eventually morphs into "a deep restlessness," which quite literally drives Blake "into the unknown" and, ultimately, to his experience(s) with the church and the force(s) therein (531-4). Blake's actions do not appear to be his own throughout the entirety of the text, but the titular entity responsible for his movements seems to choose precisely when and to what degree it manifests for Blake's consciousness. It is only when Blake is asleep, semi-conscious, or directly looking into the polyhedral crystal that he becomes aware of "some formless alien presence close to him and watching him with horrible intentness" (796). The narrator relates that Blake "felt entangled with something—something which was not in the stone, but which had looked through it at him" (796). He felt a "kind of unholy rapport exist[ed] between his mind and that lurking horror in the distant steeple," and his journal "entries dwell monotonously on certain terrible dreams, and on a strengthening of the unholy rapport in his sleep" (801). With these passages in hand, readers can conclude that from the beginning of the story to its conclusion, Blake remains under the influence of the forces of Azathoth encapsulated within the alien object. However, his different degrees of consciousness possess relative levels of awareness regarding the puppet-like

nature of his existence, meaning that he appears to be more vulnerable when semi-conscious or asleep, a motif that appears in much of Lovecraft's fiction (796).

While the conclusion to "The Haunter of the Dark" relies on rather trite Manichean notions of light and darkness, the story nevertheless concludes with a telling reference to Azathoth. During a "great storm that broke just before midnight on August 8th," the titular entity comes into some sort of material existence as "a great spreading blur" of "smoke that shot with meteor-like speed toward the east" and thus escaped the church on Federal Hill (802-4). It is during this terrifying tempest that Blake meets his mortal end, as "his rigid body" is found deceased" the next morning with "glassy, bulging eyes and the marks of stark, convulsive fright" on his face (806). The narrator closes the story by providing Blake's final diary entries, which include the story's last direct reference to Azathoth, and they are quoted at length below. Note how even before the final entry appears and his presumable death at the hands of the eponymous entity, Blake already seems to be in the grips of a terrifying existential crisis in which he questions his identity on a cosmic level:

> "The thing is taking hold of my mind"…"Trouble with memory. I see things I never knew before"…"My name is Blake – Robert Harrison Blake of 620 East Knapp Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin"..."I am on this planet"…"Azathoth have mercy...I can see everything with a monstrous sense that is not sight…light is dark and dark is light…sense of distance gone – far is near and near is far – am mad or going mad – I am it and it is I" (807).

When read through the lens of ontological pessimism discussed in this chapter's beginning, these diary entries offer readers an intriguing conclusion to the story. They also provide a nice pivot

point for moving to a consideration of the first of the contemporary weird novels to be discussed in this chapter, Laird Barron's *The Croning.*

Blake's final recorded thoughts in "The Haunter of the Dark" suggest a certain crisis of identity wrought by his encounter with the monstrous force(s) of Azathoth encased within the crystal. At this point, regardless of what level of cognitive awareness he feels, Blake loses hold of his self-consciousness on an ontological level, claiming that "'the thing is taking hold of my mind'" and showing him "'things'" he "never knew before.'" He tries to remind himself of his identity—"'my name is Blake – Robert Harrison Blake of 620 East Knapp Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin'"—but then seems to move his ontological anxieties away from his sense of self (or lack thereof) to a certain cosmic perspective—"'I am on this planet.'" Blake even addresses Azathoth by name and begs for mercy, writing that he "'can see everything with a monstrous sense that is not sight.'" Via his entanglement with the titular entity, Blake can now see reality through the cosmic perspective of Azathoth, which means, to quote Thomas Ligotti yet again, Blake has a front row seat to the horror show of "chaos at feast" (2010, 14).

Put differently, Blake now sees beyond what Schopenhauer called the "*principium individuationis*"—that is, the perceived separateness of ontical entities in space and time because of the Kantian categories of perception in our brains that program humanity's experience of reality—and thus feels his "'sense of distance gone,'" claiming that "'far is near and near is far.'" However, rather than this revelation serving as a catalyst for compassion, it makes Blake feels as if he is "'mad or going mad.'" Ultimately, he comes to the self-shattering conclusion that "'I am it and it is I,'" which we can read as Blake realizing the fact that he is merely one horrifyingly miniscule piece of the cosmic force(s) of Azathoth. In sum, "The Haunter of the Dark" ends with the notion that there is no Robert Blake, and there never was a Robert Blake. There was

only a paradoxically self-aware human being whose sense of agential existence was merely a farce, a puppet show in the hands of sinister forces beyond his comprehension.

Perhaps this pessimistic reading of "The Haunter of the Dark" and its ending under appreciates crucial details that, from beginning to end, the narrator repeatedly reinforces: Blake wrote occult fiction, possessed an "abnormal imagination," was prone to "unbalanced emotions," and was thus possibly a victim of detrimental delusions wrought by his own psyche (806). According to "the coroner's physician…examination," Blake did not die from supernatural causes but "nervous tensions induced by electrical discharge" (806). While this point may appear to counter my reading of the story, we should recall that Blake's final diary entries come after these diegetic details regarding his death are recounted by the narrator, which means that Lovecraft leaves readers the same way he began the story. He provides interpretive agency but surrenders his own partiality in the name of an unsettling ambiguity that leans towards the pessimistic. No such ambiguity exists in Laird Baron's *The Croning*.

"His so-called future, his so-called past, were puppet shows"—Laird Barron's *The Croning*

Laird Barron's *The Croning* tells the unsettling story of Donald "Don" Miller, an accomplished geologist, who comes to realize via a series of increasingly horrific episodes that his memories are deeply distorted. His seemingly autonomous actions have been merely the machinations of his wife, Michelle, a regarded anthropologist, whose unbeknownst-to-Don involvement in a cult that worships entities known as the Children of Old Leech comprises the central conflict of the novel. Before considering *The Croning*'s engagement with ontological pessimism and what makes it both similar to and different from Lovecraft's, a recap of the novel's rather lengthy fairy-tale-inspired prologue is provided. This first section of *The Croning* establishes both the text's major themes and the narrative structure repeated in what horror

fiction author and critic John Langan calls "the novel proper," that is, Don and Michelle's

narrative (2012). From there, the reading moves to a more detailed discussion of the monstrous

being known as Old Leech, which can be read as Barron's monstrous conception of

Schopenhauer's will.

The Croning's prologue is entitled "Looking for Mr. R." (1). Similar to the rest of the

chapters in the novel, the first one includes a time stamp that temporally situates readers with

regards to the events depicted therein, and this one reads "*Antiquity*[25]" (1). Over the next twenty

pages, the narrator recounts "the venerable fairytale of the Miller's daughter and the Dwarf who

helped her spin straw into gold" (1). The source material for the chapter is obviously the

Brothers Grimm fairytale known as "Rumpelstiltskin." However, "the popular version" features

"a happy ending," but, according to the narrator, "the events that inspired the legend, not so

much" (1). The fairy tale known "Rumpelstiltskin" recounts the story of a miller who lies to a

king that his daughter can spin straw into gold. After the king locks the miller's daughter away

to do just that, a devious dwarf helps her, but in exchange for first her jewelry and then her

firstborn child, that is, unless she can guess the dwarf's name in three days. Seeking the upper

hand in their high stakes agreement, before the final night, the miller's daughter spies on the

dwarf in his forest cabin and learns his four-syllable name, saving her unborn child and the

proverbial day.

In *The Croning*'s adaptation of the fairy tale, Barron changes key elements of the

narrative and brings horror to the fore. He introduces a male character dubbed "the Spy," who is

in an incestuous relationship with his "sister, the Queen" and "also the daughter of the Miller,

albeit of a different mother" (2). The Queen is imprisoned after she claimed to be an alchemist,

but "the old King called her bluff" and threw "her in a dungeon with a pile of straw and a dawn

[25] Barron's Emphasis

deadline" (2). Enter "the Dwarf," who provides the queen with gold via an exchange for her recently born child (1). The Dwarf of *The Croning* makes a similar deal with the Queen—guess his name in three months, or he takes the baby—as the eponymous character does in "Rumpelstiltskin," but here is where the two texts truly start to differ.

The prologue then pivots to descriptions of the Spy on a "perilous mission into the Western Mountains" to kill the Dwarf before he can collect on his deal with the Queen after the three months have passed (1). Upon arriving at a nameless village, the Spy notices that "a half mile north of town lay a bluff upon which loomed a temple built in ancient times" that he thought simultaneously "extravagant beyond the wildest imaginings" and "fabulously decrepit" (6-8). The similarities to Lovecraft's "The Haunter of the Dark" cannot be ignored, as the Spy's behavior in the novel is reminiscent of Blake's in the story, with each individual drawn to a dilapidated yet desire-inducing religious structure that appears older than either character could imagine and connected to forces beyond their comprehension. However, significant differences between the two texts exist in this same context as well.

The first difference is that in "The Haunter of the Dark" Blake was brought to Providence by "some morbid instinct," which indicates he lacks free will and remains under the influence of Azathoth throughout the story's narrative. In *The Croning* the Spy appears to have free will to some degree, meaning that he consciously chose to begin his quest to find and kill the Dwarf on behalf of his half-sister and lover, the Queen. However, as we will see shortly, the Spy is very much a puppet, but in a different way than Blake. Additionally, Barron chooses to populate his abandoned church with a sinister human character. In Lovecraft's story, the church on Federal Hill remains abandoned, excluding the decomposed corpse of another individual named Edward R. Lillibridge, a reporter who "had come to the deserted edifice forty-two years before in quest

of a newspaper sensation" (795). In *The Croning*, upon inspecting the temple further, the Spy

encounters a female character that he "assumed" was "a priestess," but she quickly disabuses

him of this notion (11). She informs him that she intends on "undergoing an initiation," what she

calls "a croning, of sorts," and instructs him to leave. She utters a simple declarative

statement—"there are frightful things"—and warns him that "the stables never prepared him" for

the forces with which she conspires (12-14). Before fleeing in terror, the Spy is gripped by "an

instant of dark epiphany" that "permitted him a glimpse of a vast, squamous truth of the universe

as it uncoiled" (14). The Spy views a horrendous image of "a colossal worm that had swallowed

whole villages, cities…a leech of nightmare proportions" that "shat the populations of entire

worlds in its slithering wake through the night skies" (14). This passage is the novel's first

description of the entity known as Old Leech, and it is significant for several reasons.

  First, note how the Spy's thoughts are not his own at the end of this scene in the same

way that Blake's thoughts remain outside of his control throughout much of Lovecraft's story.

The noun phrase "an instant of dark epiphany" connotes a certain violence committed against the

Spy's psyche by outside forces. Consider also the narrator's description of the content of this

dark epiphany, that is, a crystallization of a "vast squamous truth of the universe" embodied in

the entity known as Old Leech, "a colossal worm" or "giant leech of nightmare proportions"

responsible for destroying "populations of entire worlds." This cosmic parasite can be read as

Barron's conception of Schopenhauer's will, and it both aligns with and diverges away from

Lovecraft's conception a la Azathoth in "The Haunter of the Dark." While Lovecraft's monster

appears as an ontic entity via a hazy outline of formless smoke released via Blake's engagement

with the alien crystal, Barron's takes the form of a giant leech beyond the scope of space and

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time that devours the "populations of entire worlds" and is worshipped by a select group of humans who know about its existence.

Returning to the novel's prologue, after his frightening experience in the temple, the Spy decides that clues to the Dwarf's whereabouts "might lie within the walls of Count Mock's castle," a creepy structure that lies beyond the village (15). Hitching a ride with "a Peddler," the Spy heads to Mock's castle (16). Upon arriving, the Spy meets the Count's daughters, Yvonne and Irina, and after dinner with the Peddler and the three members of the Mock dynasty, he explores the castle alone after hours. During his twilight exploration "the Spy had the queer and unwelcome sensation of sleepwalking, or trudging through a vivid dream that was rapidly becoming a festering nightmare" and later "pinched himself, glumly hoping to wake from this awful dream" (18-19). Once again, the similarities to the narrative elements of Lovecraft's "The Haunter of Dark" are readily apparent, as Blake remains in a perpetual state of semi-conscious sleepwalking throughout much of Lovecraft's story. The key difference, however, is that Blake is always by himself on his sleepwalking escapades, and he appears not to encounter any other human beings during his unconscious travels. This is not the case with the Spy in *The Croning*'s prologue.

What makes the Spy's dream-like experience exploring Count Mock's castle so horrific is that he witnesses the Count's daughters, Yvonne and Irina, ritualistically maim "the beautiful woman from the temple" in a "blood sacrifice" that "dissolved" both his "naïve assumption that the universe was in anywise sane" and "his *own*[26] sanity" (19). He flees the scene in terror and "made it to the Peddler's quarters" before the two of them "fled across the forsaken landscape" (20). Assuming they had reached a safe distance away from Count Mock's castle, the Spy and the Peddler converse in their room at a local inn, and "the Spy, numb from the horrors he'd

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[26] Barron's Emphasis

witnessed and the knowledge he'd failed his sweet sister, grasped the Peddler's shoulders and confessed why he'd journeyed to the valley" (20). The Peddler responds with some unsettling information quoted at length below:

> He [the Peddler] told a story then of how once, as a young, green trader, upon his first visit to the valley he'd gotten lost in the mountains during a thunderstorm and taken shelter in a cave. The Dwarf was drawn to the cheery blaze of the Peddler's fire and the two spent a long evening smoking from the dwarf's hookah and swapping tales as the wind howled and lighting cracked the sky…An exceedingly odd thing disquieted the Peddler. Perhaps his senses were distorted by whatever powerful herb was percolating in the hookah barrel; nonetheless, he'd received a fright when at one point it appeared the Dwarf's face was melting. Right before the Peddler collapsed unconscious, the Dwarf lifted the man's chin with a razor-sharp fingernail and told him to relay a message to the son of the miller when they met one day. The message was, *There are frightful things, Groom. Time is a ring. My name won't save you or your sister.* (20-21)

With regards to Barron's engagement with ontological pessimism in *The Croning*, this passage bears a great deal of significance, so let's take a closer look.

The message the Dwarf gives the Peddler to deliver to the Spy negates any notion of free will that the characters may possess. The Peddler tells the Spy a story from a number of years ago when he was "a young, green trader," which means that the events of his story took place well before the two characters had any knowledge of each other's existence. Therefore, the content of the Dwarf's message for the Spy via the Peddler indicates that the Spy, along with the Peddler, are puppets and that their seemingly free-will-predicated actions remain merely

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manipulated machinations. The Dwarf of *The Croning*'s prologue possesses forbidden

knowledge regarding the very nature of time itself, claiming that it is a "ring," which means, on

some level, he knows the sequence of events that comprises the respective lives of the Spy and

the Peddler. An immediate philosophical connection for a circular conception of time is

Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence in book four of *The Gay Science* (1882), but

this association excludes an important detail in the same scene, specifically another line of

dialogue, one that allows us to go beyond the apparent reference to Nietzsche and back to his

biggest philosophical influence, Schopenhauer.

Before retiring for the night, the Spy asks the Peddler, if he should die on his quest, that

the Peddler would "bear the Dwarf's name to the Queen" (22). The Peddler agrees, and the two

characters bid each other good night. In an intriguing example of ambiguous direct discourse,

the narrator tells readers that a nameless "She" then spoke the following lines of dialogue "into

the Spy's ears": "We meet again. Yes, time is a squirming hungry ring that wriggles and worms

across reality. It eats everything, lover'" (22). The narrator then informs readers that the next

morning "the Peddler roused and discovered" the Spy was gone with "a few bloody footprints"

left in his wake, but nothing else (22). Contextual evidence in the chapter indicates that the

anonymous "She" is likely the woman from the temple, but we know that the Spy just witnessed

her ritualistic maiming at the hands of Yvonne and Irina, the Count's daughters. These

conflicting details suggest that, from *The Croning*'s prologue onward, supernatural events are not

up for debate as they are in "The Haunter of the Dark." Rather, the fairy-tale inspired prologue

immerses readers in a supernatural diegesis, one mimicked on a structural level in the story of

Don and Michelle Miller. That is to say, both the prologue and novel proper depict characters

living under the delusions of free will when they are in fact merely fodder for the supernatural

force(s) of Old Leech, which brings us back to the Nietzsche and Schopenhauer philosophical connections.

As claimed above, Nietzsche conceived of time as a flat circle, one that was endlessly spinning in the same motion for eternity. For Nietzsche, the key point is not the scientific veracity of this metaphysical claim. Rather, as will be discussed in detail in chapter two, his notion of eternal recurrence can be considered a sort of thought experiment that compels the individual to consider her life in the ever-fading present if this claim were the case. Put differently, Nietzsche argues that the circular and repetitive nature of time should not be thought of as a pessimistic fact of existence but an exciting catalyst for one's will to power, meaning that one should start to live life in such a way that eternally repeating it would be a divine gift. For Schopenhauer, regardless of what comes after our mortal existence, no such life-affirming response to the relentless nature of the will affords itself to humanity. While he argued we categorically "owe[s]" compassion to our "*fellow sufferer*," Schopenhauer thinks such compassion, like all human endeavors, comes down to a matter of one's personal will, which one can easily keep focused on the self and thus requires relentless practice to control (2010, 14-15). Furthermore, he argues that "*time*"[27] is ultimately how "the will makes itself known and comprehensible to the intellect that is rooted in the individual" (24). He posits that it is only "by virtue" of "time" that "all our pleasures and enjoyments come to naught in our hands" and suggests that "time is the *a priori* necessary form of all our perceptions; everything must present itself in time, even we ourselves" (2010, 24-25).   Schopenhauer ultimately concludes that time is that which "proclaims the judgement of nature on the worth of all beings that appear in it, since it destroys them" (2010, 24-25). Here, then, lies one of the crucial differences between Nietzsche and Schopenhauer's philosophy: for Nietzsche, time is a flat circle in which we eternally repeat

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[27] Emphasis Schopenhauer's

our separate yet shared experiences of the world; for Schopenhauer, time is a monstrous force responsible for the existence and annihilation of all that is, with humanity alone left to be consciously aware of the destruction left in its wake.

Returning to *The Croning*, note the utterances of both the Dwarf in the Peddler's story and the nameless She who speaks to the Spy at the prologue's conclusion. In each instance, the characters describe time in Nietzschean terms, equating it to a "ring," but the latter exchange includes some adjectives that read more in line with Schopenhauer's philosophy. The nameless She clarifies what kind of ring time actually is, a "squirming hungry ring that wriggles and worms across reality" and "eats everything." The animalistic adjectives—"squirming, hungry"—coupled with similar sounding verbs—"wriggles," "worms," and "eats"—connote a decidedly non-Nietzschean conception of circular temporality. Rather, this description appears to be equating time with something along the lines of Old Leech, a god-like being that literally devours humanity and possesses the metaphysical power "to raise the rotting corpse of Jesus or one of a hundred saints" (225).

With this connection in mind, relative to Lovecraft and "The Haunter of the Dark," we need to consider how Barron modifies characters' encounters with Old Leech, and, more importantly, what they do in the aftermath of these encounters. Let's recall that in "The Haunter of the Dark," Blake returns to Providence and is drawn to the church on Federal Hill for reasons that he cannot explain, and he is killed in his confrontation(s) with Azathoth. While other characters in the story are frightened by the titular entity as it flies from the church, Blake is the only one that appears to confront it directly, and, even then, only while sleepwalking. Other than the already deceased Lillibridge, Blake is also the sole casualty of the story, meaning the entity destroys him alone. In the novel proper of *The Croning*, Don and Michelle Miller encounter Old

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Leech in precise contexts and with distinctly different outcomes from Blake in "The Haunter of the Dark."

The novel proper of *The Croning* is set, for the most part, in the state of Washington and during the present—or "*Now*"—wherein Miller is a recently retired geologist who lives with his equally successful wife Michelle, a highly respected anthropologist (49). The characters have two grown children, Kurt and Holly. The most significant narrative through line of Don and Michelle's narrative is what Langan accurately describes as Don's "amnesia" (2012). Langan provides the following explanation not only for the existence of Don's amnesia throughout *The Croning* but also for its very necessity. The connections to ontological pessimism—specifically what Zapffe and Ligotti describe as a need to "to hamper our consciousness for all we are worth" because "it will impose upon us a too clear vision of what we do not what to see"—are noticeable:

> For Don Miller, the worst thing that can happen is to remember in full, because to
> do so is to find himself confronted with…the revelation that our childhood
> anxieties about the monster in the basement, in the woods, were in fact correct,
> and, what is more, that the knowledge we have gained as adults—discoveries in
> the sciences hard and soft—only supports and reinforces those creatures'
> existence. Knowledge will not save us. (2012)

In the same way that Zapffe and Ligotti suggest that, in the name of mental preservation, humanity cannot know the true nature of its horrific existence in the universe, Langan argues that Miller performs a similar feat of denial. Miller cannot remember many of the major events that comprise his life because it would force him to confront his lack of free will and the horror show behind the scenes of his subjective experience of reality, that is, the terror-inducing existence of

Old Leech. Let's clarify what, exactly, Miller cannot remember and, in doing so, discuss the

pivotal role Michelle plays in *The Croning*'s depiction of ontological pessimism and Barron's

representation of the concept relative to Lovecraft.

For the sake of his own mental preservation, Miller cannot remember the fact that

Michelle remains in control of the actions and events that make up, at the very least, his adult

life. Therefore, in the words of the narrator, "his so-called future, his so-called past, were puppet

shows" (233). Consider his recollection of meeting Michelle for the first time at an occult art

show "in the spring of 1950," and note also her maiden name, Mock (109). The scene is quoted

at length below:

> "We meet again," a beautiful girl in a mohair sweater said to Don, her breasts
>
> flattened against his shoulder as she leaned in to fix him with her dark, dark eyes.
>
> Those eyes belonged to a much older, more worldly soul than fresh-faced
>
> Michelle Mock, however precocious she might've been in stodgy 1950. A
>
> magical moment, in a black way. It was as if they'd known each other forever.
>
> Don was neck deep in trouble before he even opened his mouth to stammer his
>
> name. She smiled and held his hand and said she already knew, they'd taken a
>
> philosophy class together. He didn't believe it. (110)

First, the fact that Michelle's maiden name is the same as that of Count Mock and his sinister

daughters, Yvonne and Irina, is no coincidence. In other words, the lengthy Rumpelstiltskin-

inspired-prologue is repeated at a structural level in the novel proper, with Miller as the Spy,

Michelle as the woman in the temple, and a character named Bronson Ford—a monstrous entity

in a child's body discussed in detail shortly—as the Dwarf. Second, from this initial meeting in

1950 to their last encounter described in the novel's closing chapter, Michelle remains in control

of the events that comprise her husband's life. The narrator even goes so far as to say "that every step he'd taken since they met at that fateful art show in 1950 was the jig and jog of a dance she [Michelle] called with small twitches" of the "marionette strings extending from his back" (233). Another question thus needs to be answered: how is Michelle able to control the events that comprise Don's life, and, furthermore, what are her reasons for doing so? In order to answer these questions, we need to discuss Bronson Ford.

Bronson Ford is the adopted son of Barry and Kirsten Rourke, the wealthy neighbors of the Millers. He appears only three times in the novel, and the latter of the two instances he interacts with Miller in one-on-one conversations wherein he reveals his true nature, a disguised-in-human-form entity that serves Old Leech known as the Children of Old Leech. Consider the first of the two exchanges between Bronson Ford and Miller in *The Croning*, which appears in a flashback chapter set in 1980. Via Miller's dream in the novel's present, the narrator describes the characters' meeting at a wake for one of Michelle's colleagues held at the mansion of one Connor Wolverton, "a sort of a northwest Howard Hughes who made like a hermit in rural eastern Washington on a huge estate" (113). While wandering around the esoteric house that contains a literal museum, Miller sees Bronson Ford smoking a joint. The narrator states that "Bronson Ford produced another" and that they "each toked heavily," leaving Miller "fascinated at the odd blurriness of the lighting and the background textures while the boy, or whatever he was, became sharper and more in focus" (138). From Miller's perspective, Bronson Ford exudes "an ineffable *something*"[28] that "disturbed" him "on a more immediate and much deeper level" (138). Whatever this "ineffable something" is, it prompts Miller to consider Bronson Ford's existence on an ontological level—"whatever he was"—, and this questioning parallels the Peddler's ontological questioning of the Dwarf's in *The Croning*'s prologue—"I

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[28] Emphasis Barron's

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trow (*sic*) the Dwarf perished and what now walks the earth in his skin is something altogether different"—which is itself described via flashback and thus repeated at a structural level in Don's conversation with Bronson Ford at the Wolverton estate (22). This structural repetition suggests, then, that Bronson Ford will eventually reveal his monstrous nature to Miller in the same way that the Dwarf does to the Peddler at the end of the prologue, which is exactly what he does in the novel's final scene when he confronts Don one last time.

In *The Croning*'s present, while Michelle and their daughter, Holly, are on a secretive trip in Turkey, Miller goes camping with some friends and his son, Kurt, but things go awry and he is left stranded with his dog, Thule. He passes out from fear and exhaustion after encountering a mysterious dolmen in the woods and then awakens back at his house, realizing in horror just how much Michelle has controlled the events of his adult life via a series of flashbacks. After said recollections, to get some final answers, he decides to explore his home's long forgotten cellar that contains many artifacts from Michelle's career as an anthropologist. However, Kurt, too, has somehow made it back to the cabin, but "covered in blood and dirt" and "his left arm…broken" (235). Kurt pleads for his father not to enter the cellar, and Miller's response to his son's request remains one of the chief examples of *The Croning*'s ontological pessimism, specifically the question of free will and the puppet-like creatures it makes out of humanity: "I'm going down there because there's no choice. None at all" (235). This passage reveals that Don has become fully aware of his lack of free will and the sinister role Michelle has played with regards to that fact. He ignores his son's pleas and "venture[s] into the cellar" (238).

Upon entering the cellar, the voice of Bronson Ford proclaims to Miller that "time is a ring" (239). Don then sees "the dwarf…seated in Don's favorite wingback, orientated toward the fireplace so that this face was hidden" (239). This scene serves as a structural repetition of

the Spy's exchange with the Peddler in the prologue, and thus Bronson Ford is therefore referred to as "the dwarf." Bronson Ford continues, claiming that "we travel the ring, forward and backward, molding it like plastic. Your Michelle can do it too, to a minor degree" (239). Don repeatedly asks Bronson Ford who or what he really is, and, finally, he answers him with the following, simultaneously providing crucial diegetic information both to Miller and readers:

> One who is interested in your species. The bogeymen in your histories and legends. We are far older than you can imagine and have haunted you since you were protoplasmic slime blobbing on the tide line…Despite our superiority to you, we remain but a cog in the gears. We aren't gods, although the distinction is insignificant from your perspective. Whatever our discrepancies from one life form to another, you are certainly handy to keep around. From your babies we draw nourishment…From your adult population we are provided research and sport. A select few of your kind supply the raw materials to replenish our eternal line. These we decorticate and realign through agony and degradation unto an aesthetic pleasing to our traditions. These lucky few, the prime exemplars of humanity, are made immortal. (240-1)

The above passage captures the horror at the heart of Laird Barron's *The Croning*. Bronson Ford is an avatar for the Children of Old Leech, "a race that exists on the rim of the universe and spreads like a mold crawling across meats" (215). These amorphous entities—also referred to as "the Dark Ones"—worship Old Leech, what one character in the novel describes as "a deity that ate the fucking dinosaurs, several species of hominids and the Mayans" (216). These diegetic details denote a hierarchy in the cosmos of the novel, with the Children of Old Leech worshipping their eponymous and metaphorical patriarch, Old Leech.

As claimed throughout this analysis of *The Croning*, Old Leech can be read as Barron's rendition of Schopenhauer's will. The strongest evidence for this claim appears late in the novel during a scene in which Miller witnesses an image of the entity while under the influence of drugs given to him by members of a cult that worship the entity. In said condition, Don is forced to look through a cosmic portal located in a ziggurat, and the narrator's description of what he sees appears below:

> Something large obstructed the throat of the tunnel between the stars—a great, squat pillar the dimensions of an apartment building, or an aircraft conning tower, that quaked and quivered as only living flesh may do. The being uttered a sibilant cry that echoed for miles and scratched Don's mind, wheedling his name in an alien rebus of maggots and bones and a toothless maw drooling a slow waterfall of gore. The tongue of a colossal, putrefying worm murmured and cajoled and offered to enter his anus and lodge in his cerebral cortex, to inject him with a love greater than the Milky Way. It promised to raise the rotting corpse of Jesus or one of a hundred saints, and make them dance for his pleasure. It sang. (225)

Like the Spy in the prologue, in the passage above Don is forced to see a malevolent horror behind the cosmos, Old Leech. However, unlike the Spy, he actually sees the entity through a portal in the ziggurat, whereas the Spy views the image in his mind via "an instant of dark epiphany." Though undeniably intense, the Spy's epiphany reveals only the existence of Old Leech, while Miller's vision is much more violating.

To clarify, in Don's vision the entity seems to speak to him via some semblance of human language—"murmured and cajoled." Additionally, Old Leech communicates its violent desire to penetrate him literally—"enter his anus"—psychologically—"lodge in his cerebral

cortex,"—and cosmically—"inject him with a love greater than the Milky Way." Furthermore, it offers to perform feats of metaphysical power beyond comprehension—"raise the rotting corpse of Jesus or one of a hundred saints." Old Leech is thus quite different than Lovecraft's "blind idiot" Azathoth in "The Haunter of the Dark," which Blake views through the crystal as a "a stirring in vague blackness" that "told of the presence of consciousness and will. Before concluding this analysis of *The Croning* via a consideration of the implications of this difference, the hierarchical nature of the novel's malevolent cosmos and the human component therein requires elaboration.

Returning to Miller's final exchange with Bronson Ford's, the Children of Old Leech offer immortality to "a lucky few" humans in exchange for their infant children. According to Barry Rourke—who, along with Connor Wolverton, is a member of a cult that worships entities—"The Dark Ones don't procreate as we do" (220). That is to say, "their system of reproduction is via assimilation, absorption, transmogrification," and, "babies and toddlers are a delicacy" (220). Below appears more cosmic context for the details of the Children of Old Leech:

> The Children of Old Leech dwell inside the cores of a cluster of dead worlds. These worlds are encased in a blood clot of darkness. Their Diaspora is far from here, beyond an immeasurable gulf between galaxies. A starless abyss. Yet their technology is so advanced it permits small numbers of them to slither across time and space and punch into our lovely little blue sphere, and a thousand others like it. (223)

Here, then, are some key points for grasping *The Croning*'s ontological pessimism and its cosmic scope. Barron's cosmos is populated by the Children of Old Leech, and these entities, in the

words of Bronson Ford, "aren't gods" but rather "a cog in the gears." Therefore, as their title

indicates, they are subservient to Old Leech, a god-like entity "chief among the Dark Ones" and

analogous to but distinct from Azathoth in Lovecraft's "The Haunter of the Dark" (221). As

Rourke informs Miller, a cult "in this state [Washington] and across the world…serve the Great

Dark, each in his or her own way; some with enthusiasm, some with reluctance, but completely

and without mercy" (215). Rourke, Wolverton, and a handful of other secondary characters in

the novel worship these malevolent entities, but, as Don can never quite remember, it is Michelle

Miller, one of the "lucky few," who gets to become to be "made immortal" (241).

Accordingly, the croning of the text's title refers to the sadistic maiming that both the

woman in the temple/She from the prologue and Michelle in the novel proper undergo to please

the Children of Old Leech in exchange for eternal life, an event that Don cannot recall because

he is afflicted with amnesiac-like form of "permanent brain damage" (239). This condition

prevents him from remembering, along with many other sinister events, the mysterious

circumstances of Michelle's car accident in Siberia in the 1980s, which is when she underwent

the ritual and was left" with "a jagged" scar that "slashed from her left temple, across her breast

and arced to its terminus at her hip bone" (51). Don remembers "Rourke had once told him the

degradation of memory was a side-effect of exposure to the Dark," and facing the futility of his

farcical free will, he thinks that "the low-grade amnesia was also equal parts self-preservation"

(231-2). Don concludes that "his consciousness had evaluated the threat posed by these affronts

to sanity and decided to dim the lights and flip the sign to OUT OF SERVICE" (232). Instead of

facing the fact that Michelle "had lied" to him "since forever," that "there wasn't any damned

truck crash in Siberia" but rather a sinister cult "had carved her with stones knives" and "flayed

her alive," Don's consciousness cannot process the horror(s) of this revelation and what it means with regards to his sense of free will and therefore blocks it out (233).

Considering once more Bronson Ford and Miller's final exchange at the end of the novel, Don demands to know what Bronson Ford ultimately wants from him. In response, Bronson Ford reveals a vision of the horrific cosmos of *The Croning* and the fate of Earth in said context, and the striking passage is quoted at length below:

> Earth was cloaked in a poisonous crimson mist. The oceans were stagnant soup. Festering jungles of maroon and ochre covered one hemisphere; sterile volcanic deserts the other. Most cities were burned under shifting sand or rotting vegetation or had fallen into pits in the earth. Structures that remained intact were webbed in foliage, gummed in amber glaciations, and contorted into spicate towers that bore scant resemblance to their original shapes. Primates gathered in these marginally habitable regions, but as Bronson Ford's lens swooped to magnify them it became clear these hapless wretches were twisted out of plumb much as the skyscrapers were. The masses shuffled toward a ziggurat the size of the Empire State Building. The mighty ziggurat was constructed of flesh and bone from countless sentient corpses. A dripping black tunnel to Elsewhere opened at its heart. In clots, the approaching stick figures elevated and were sucked into the shuttering iris. They shrieked as flies shriek (241-2).

As readers might expect, Don is horrified by this vision, but Bronson Ford makes sure Don knows *exactly* what he just viewed, asking him "do you understand what awaits in the waning days of your civilization?" (242). Quickly and sadistically providing clarification, Bronson Ford claims

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that viscid hole in the altar doesn't lead to my home. Nay, little man; this is a

mouth of our father, Old Leech. That venerable worthy rouses every few epochs

and demands provender. Soft, screaming humanity is among the sweetest. What

you witness here is only the beginning of the end. The Great Dark will arrive and

cocoon your world as it cocoons ours. Terra will be hollowed and refined as we

hollow and refine sapient flesh, and the planet shall be added to the Diaspora,

dragged from its orbit of Sol, and taken away. This is what always happens. (242)

The above passages possess undeniable connotations that map onto the tenets of ontological

pessimism, and Don's response to Bronson Ford's vision of humanity's end holds precise

implications as well.

The final clause of the passage—"This is what always happens"—connotes a cosmic

inevitability, one that spells doom not just for the species but also for the planet as a whole. In

Heideggerian terms, humanity is always already the "provender" for Old Leech and its offspring.

The inevitability of the destruction wrought by "the Diaspora" of the Children of Old Leech also

suggests a constriction of humanity's free will (or lack thereof) at the level of the species. That is

to say, while, of course, on an individual scale, each human of a certain age possesses the

potential to commit suicide, —though Harris' neurological argument discussed earlier still

complicates things—generally speaking, the human species as a whole appears to be driven by

the same Schopenhauerian will to survive. Moreover, in the face of looming ecological collapse,

among a myriad of possible extinction-level events that loom over humanity's future, we

continue to look beyond Earth for possible salvation via the colonization of the moon, Mars, and,

in the distant future, other possibly inhabitable planets. In the context of mortality and life

expectancy, insightful questions continue to be asked regarding where what we call "life" ends

and begins, while modern medicine allows the population to grow on a basically unchecked level.

In the cosmos of *The Croning*, however, humanity receives no cosmic redemption. The only silver lining regarding the species' doomed destiny resides in the fact that, in the words of Don Miller, "lucky for" him, he will "be long dead," and "everyone" he "know[s] will be gone" before that horrific scenario comes to fruition (242). Unfortunately, Bronson Ford stipulates that he and his ilk can quite easily "make certain" that Don and his family members suffer and "bear witness firsthand" to the end of the species (242). In making this fact known to Don, Bronson Ford offers him a "trade" (243). The details of this final exchange provide a proper pivot point for moving to this chapter's next focus, Ligotti's *My Work Is Not Yet Done*.

In response to Don's conciliatory conclusion that he will be "long dead" before the Children of Old Leech and their eponymous patriarch destroy the planet and exterminate the species, Bronson Ford asks him: "wouldn't you rather be a beneficiary of the inevitable conquest rather than a victim?" (242). After some brief internal deliberation, Don tells Bronson Ford to "name your bargain" (243). Bronson Ford responds with the following:

> It's a small thing…The trade is painless, for you. I'll guarantee the scion of the
> Mocks maintains her current status as liaison and at the end of your natural life
> you'll be brought into our fold, forever reunited with her. In return, you'll grant
> me the precious little gift I traditionally accept as recompense. It has always been
> about the child. Give me the pound of flesh, so to speak, and we'll be even. (243)

Don is horrified at "the hideous choice" he must make because "the child" to which Bronson Ford refers is Don's recently born grandson, Jonathan, the son of Kurt and his wife Kaiwin. Dismayed and devastated by the decision he must make, Don begs "for dementia and oblivion,"

while "Bronson Ford merely grinned and waited for the old man to choose" (243). The scene

ends with the previous passage, and Don's choice happens off-screen as it were.

The Croning concludes with Miller "found…on the dirt floor of the cellar,

dehydrated…unconscious," and "physically sound," though "his mental acuity wasn't so intact"

(243). The narrator relates that Don's "family transferred him to a private room at a hospital in

town" wherein "a bland fellow in a smock kept referring to encephalitis[29] and vermiculate

perforation of the brain, and terminal," and, accordingly, "there were many tears" (244).

However, the narrator states that "lucidity smote Don like a lightning bolt one afternoon," and

"when it did, he realized he must be dying, although his senses were muffled in a gauze and it

was difficult to concentrate, much less evaluate his predicament" (244). Don recognizes his

"immediate family…at the foot of the bed—Kurt and Kaiwin and their baby boy; Michelle and

Holly to the opposite side," and he notices that "poor Holly had been in some kind of accident; a

wicked scar peeped from the vee of her blouse" that "was pink and raw" (244). Though not

explicitly stated, this "wicked scar" on Holly suggests that she, too, has undergone her own

croning and thus been granted the supernatural powers that her mother, Michelle, possesses.

Each of the family members leaves the room one-by-one, but before Kaiwin leaves, "Michelle

stopped [her] and convinced her to leave baby Jonathan with his grandma" (244). The novel

ends with the narrator telling readers that "that sight of the baby wriggling in Michelle's arms

paralyzed him [Don] with horror" and that "he couldn't remember why" (245).

The Croning's final image of a horrified Miller looking at his grandson in his wife's arms

epitomizes what makes Barron's engagement with ontological pessimism distinct from Lovecraft

in "The Haunter of the Dark." That is to say, Barron yokes the horrors of a malevolent cosmos

to a localized and intimate terror wrought by not knowing the Other, by a betrayal of faith in the

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[29] All emphasis Barron's

Other that leads to a destruction of the self. Langan accurately describes this relationship-based

dread that drives the narrative of Don and Michelle in *The Croning*, arguing that "if there is one

thing with which narratives of cosmic horror have had difficulty, it has been conveying a range

of emotions; *The Croning* is, among other things, a tortured love story, suggesting that the track

that leads to the pit might be carved by our deepest desire" (2012). Though generalizing to an

extent, Langan's diagnosis of "narratives of cosmic horror" often having "difficulty…conveying

a range of emotions" is sound, and we need not look further than the narrative content of "The

Haunter of the Dark" for evidence.

Other than characters referenced on the periphery of the story's narrative and the already

mentioned Lillibridge, Blake stands as the only character that encounters the story's titular

entity. Additionally, aside from his "visit to a strange old man as deeply given to occult and

forbidden lore as he" that "ended amidst death and flame" that precedes the events of the story,

none of his interpersonal relationships connect to the cosmic horror(s) he encounters in the text

(784). At most, there is a weak correlation only hinted at, one contingent on a shared interest in

"occult and forbidden lore," but the details of said lore and their respective association with

Blake and this anonymous "strange old man" remain ambiguous, and, again, there appears to be

no connection with those events and Blake's demise at the end of "The Haunter of the Dark."

No such ambiguity hangs over the marriage of Don and Michelle Miller in Laird Barron's *The

Croning*.

Barron's novel reinforces the notion that the universe itself is driven by a malevolent

entity known as Old Leech, and its proverbial offspring move from planet-to-planet, destroy

worlds, and provide "provender" for their eponymous master, meaning that this cosmic

arrangement requires a fundamentally human component for sustenance and reproduction. The

nameless "She" from the novel's prologue, Michelle, Holly, and, finally, Don are all granted

immortality, but a precise price must be paid in exchange for eternal life: along with the life of

Don and Michelle's grandson, Jonathan, each of them endures physical "agony and degradation"

in accordance with the "aesthetic traditions" of the Children of Old Leech. In sum, this

exchange-based human component of the malevolent cosmos of *The Croning* is what makes

Barron a unique author writing in Lovecraft's wake. On the one hand, he follows in Lovecraft's

footsteps in terms of his fictional engagement with the tenets of ontological pessimism outlined

at the beginning of this chapter. On the other, he evokes an unsettling horror that is arguably

more disturbing than Lovecraft's cosmic horror in "The Haunter of the Dark" via a depiction of

the destruction of the most intimate of relationships, of the horror that resides in what one human

is willing to do to another. With this fundamentally human component of the horror in Barron's

novel in mind, let's pivot, now, to an analysis of Thomas Ligotti's 2002 novella *My Work Is Not*

Yet Done and analyze Lovecraft's influence on the author and that text's blatantly

Schopenhauerian entity, The Great Black Swine.

"Pulled back into the flowing blackness"—Thomas Ligotti's *My Work Is Not Yet Done*

Thomas Ligotti's *My Work Is Not Yet Done* (2002) is a tale of what one could call weird

office horror. Divided into three roughly-equal-in-length parts, the novella recounts in first-

person the aftermath of Frank's Dominio's actions after he learns that his colleagues at the

noticeably nameless and highly ambiguous "company" where he works have rejected his "New

Product," a "special plan to increase the prosperity of the company" (5-7). The text is

bookended with the following lines of dialogue: "I had always been afraid" (5) and "I am not

afraid anymore" (138). These lines of narration are crucial because they indicate a change in

Dominio, one based on his encounter with what he calls the "Great Swine of Blackness" (137).

This entity is Ligotti's depiction of Schopenhauer's will, and the way in which it intervenes in Dominio's life relative to how characters interact with Old Leech in *The Croning* and Azathoth in "The Haunter of the Dark" makes Ligotti's novella an especially intriguing representation of ontological pessimism.

Franz Kafka undoubtedly influences *My Work Is Not Yet Done*. However, Kafka's doomed characters and the nightmarish bureaucratic institutions in which they find themselves ensnared possess a decidedly different tone of weirdness and horror than that of Ligotti's. Accordingly, we arrive again at Lovecraft. In *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, Ligotti claims that "Lovecraft was exhilarated by the idea of something pernicious that made a nightmare of our world, whether it was indifferent to us or quite partial to our devastation" (61). As claimed above, this pernicious something that makes a "nightmare of our world" is what Frank refers to throughout the novella as "The Great Black Swine," and the sequence of events that lead to Dominio encountering this entity relate to the interpersonal horror observed in Barron's *The Croning*.

As mentioned above, the novella's central conflict hinges on Dominio's belief that he "had been the victim of an ambush" because his colleagues rejected his "New Product" (13). More precisely, he feels that "whatever plan" he may have "brought to that meeting and laid upon that time-ravaged table would have died there" and, therefore, that none of his ideas "stood a chance" (13). After Dominio's failed proposal, his superior, Richard, visits his "cubicle" and tells him that, while not making himself "a signatory" to Frank's idea, he will send it "to New Product," another branch of the company, "and see what they make of it," which appeases Frank, though Richard does not follow through on this commitment (15).

The narrative then moves to Dominio's description of "several incidents over [a] three day period" that "supported, however subtly" his belief that he was the victim of a "seven-against-one" scenario (18). Dominio "list[s]…the main players involved in these vignettes" in "sequential order" (18). Though a certain absurdist comedic tone hovers over his misanthropic musings (and much of the novella as a whole,) this section of *My Work Is Not Yet Done* reads rather monotonously; however, the critical point remains that both this section and its structure—vignettes that describe Dominio's seven coworkers in sequential order with respective names provided above each vignette—are repeated in "Part II" and "Part III" of the novel (61). Moreover, there is a key difference between the first part and second and third parts of *My Work Is Not Yet Done* in terms of a precise change in Dominio that results from his encounter with the Great Swine of Blackness, which begs the question: what causes him to first encounter this entity? The one-word answer to this question is quite simple: revenge.

After rejecting Frank's proposal, Richard assigns Dominio "to head up a committee to come up with a proposal for the new restructuring of the company" (46). This assignment ultimately leads to Dominio's demotion, and he is moved to a small cubicle located at "a corner of the company far removed from where I had been just a few months before" (48). This demotion leads Dominio to ask the audience the following rhetorical question: "So why did I stand for such treatment?" (49). As Dominio opines, "even for a person of average emotional stability the lust for revenge can be quite a time-consuming affair," and, for Frank, "it was all-consuming" (49). He clarifies his feelings on revenge as follows:

> It shoved aside every other thought that got in its way, every fantasy and
>
> feeling…My nights and weekends were now taken over by a set of constantly

recycled scenarios…soaked in bathtubs of blood, a day of judgement overseen by

a never-setting sun that burned madly red against a black sky. (49)

As the passage above indicates, Dominio is fueled by a deep-seated desire for revenge against his

coworkers, and he plans to commit acts of murderous violence as a result. Given his homicidal

yearnings, Dominio visits a local gun shop, maxes out his credit car therein, and prepares to

leave what he calls the "Ultimate Statement" for his hated colleagues, concluding that "the

simple answer to everything I was about to do was that I felt myself trapped in a maze of pain"

and thus "the only course of action that presented itself to my mortal faculties was to shoot my

way out" (59). Dominio then tells readers that "all of this mental exercise came to a skidding

halt when I realized that, due to my state of distraction, I had left my goods" at the store (45). He

"began racing back toward" his "point of purchase," but "something happened that kept"

Dominio from "ever reaching that destination" (59).

This "something" that "happened" to the narrator of *My Work Is Not Yet Done* is where

we can clearly view Ligotti's engagement with ontological pessimism and how his version of the

concept differs from Lovecraft's and Barron's. First, note how Ligotti does not provide readers

with a crystal clear exposition as to what, *exactly*, happens to the text's narrator after this

unknown event at the end of "Part I" (3). Similar to Dominio, readers are thus left to try to

figure out the new nature of the narrator's existence in "Part II," for it is only in "Part III" that

any answers are provided regarding the "something" that "happened" to Frank at the end of "Part

I." For example, consider the opening passage of part "Part II":

There was only darkness. It flowed like a black river that had no bottom. And it

was unconfined by any shores, infinite and turbulent and moving without

direction, without any source or destination. There was only darkness flowing in

darkness. Then something felt itself struggling in this black and bottomless

infinite river, something unformed and embryonic swirling within the darkness. It

had no eyes, just as the darkness had none. It had no thoughts and no sensations,

only the darkness flowing through it and around it in a blind chaos of thrashing

agitation. It was something living, something restless and alive. (63)

The passage above possesses a distinctly Schopenhauerian feel, meaning that "the darkness" that

"flowed like a river that had no bottom" and existed in a state of "blind chaos" and "thrashing

agitation" reads remarkably similar to Schopenhauer's conception of the will as a blind force of

violent vitality. The "something" that "felt itself struggling in this black and bottomless infinite

river" represents not only Dominio's burgeoning consciousness, one predicated on the same

paradox discussed earlier, but also functions as a synecdoche for the notion of human

consciousness writ large within the vaster context of Schopenhauer's will. The resemblance

does not end there, as later in part "Part III," Dominio clearly references Schopenhauer's *The*

World as Will and Representation. Before discussing that passage, let's address what actually

happened to the narrator and what he does as a result of the radical change to the nature of his

existence.

Late in "Part III" of *My Work Is Not Yet Done*, Dominio tells readers that he is "finally

able to remember what happened" (135). Recollecting on the events before "something

happened," he recalls that "in a fraction of a second I became sick with the idea" of his soon-to-

be-committed acts of violence against his seven coworkers, deciding that "there was nothing in

such a statement except self-humiliation, self-ridicule, and self-indictment" and that "anyone

reading it would have thought, 'what a worthless piece of human wreckage'" (135).

Consequently, Dominio decides to commit vehicular suicide via what he describes "as salvation

speeding down the street in the form of a bus" (136). He surmises that "by killing myself I felt

that I would also be killing…every bad body on this earth," and, "at that moment, every swinish

one of us in this puppet show of a world would be done with when that bus made contact with

me" (136). Shockingly, he survives his suicide attempt and remains "comatose, but alive" in the

gruesome physical form of "a rather small heap of bandages…blood pouring through the gauze"

(131). The adjective "physical" possesses particular importance because readers learn that while

in said vegetative state, Dominio "become[s] the instrument of greater manipulations," that is, as

a metaphysical conduit for the Great Black Swine (136).

Indeed, at the beginning of "Part II," Dominio immediately deduces one certainty: that is,

he "did not inhabit the space around" himself "in the same way" that he used to as an ontic

being. He realizes immediately that he "could move throughout the rooms" of his apartment but

"did not use or need to use a human form to do so" (64). Later, near the beginning of "Part III,"

he concludes that he was

> caught in between…two worlds – caught in a place where I had made a rare
>
> connection with the Great Black Swine, that thrashing and vicious blackness
>
> which flowed like a river through every living thing, and possibly in the spaces
>
> around everything that lived, allowing me…to become one with this agitated
>
> force that was everywhere and inside everything, that moved and manipulated all
>
> the created life in this world and gave me the power to move and manipulate
>
> things according to my will (112).

The above passage sounds as if it came right out of Schopenhauer's writing(s), and the

connections to his conception of the will—an "agitated force that was everywhere and inside

everything"—are clear to see. Dominio likewise describes "The Great Black Swine" as a

"grunting, bestial force that animated, that *used*[30] our bodies to frolic in whatever mucky thing came its way, lasciviously agitating itself in that black river" (109). As mentioned above, he directly quotes Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, and that passage in particular possesses precise pessimistic connotations that need to be addressed.

In a scene shortly after the beginning of "Part III," Dominio describes a certain deflated feeling with regards to his attempts to destroy his hated coworkers. This dispirited emotion stems from his metaphysically possessing the consciousness of Lillian—the owner of the Metro Diner Dominio frequents—in order to eliminate Harry, one of his hated coworkers. As stated above, "Part II" and "Part III" of *My Work Is Not Yet Done* mirror "Part I" in terms of the sequentially provided vignettes. However, while in "Part I" these vignettes merely describe "several incidents over [a] three day period" that reveal, from Dominio's perspective, how his coworkers were conspiring against him, the repetition of this structure in "Part II" and "Part III" involves him violently using the powers of his new metaphysical existence to eliminate his coworkers in the same order as the events depicted in "Part I." Nevertheless, he realizes that his connection to The Great Black Swine and its powers does not come free, for in exchange he slowly loses connection to his physical self, thus realizing that "a limit had been placed on my labors" of revenge (110). Before this defeated feeling overtakes him entirely, Dominio, once more, informs readers that "something happened," specifically "right in the living room of" his apartment, "that served to reconcile me to this situation, or at least instill in my soul a sense of grim resignation" (110).

According to Dominio, this second momentous event "took the form of a cockroach scuttling across the carpet" (110). In response to this insect intruder, Dominio "jumped up from the sofa…and trapped the creature beneath my heavy black boot without killing it" (110). He

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[30] Ligotti's emphasis

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informs readers that "at this point I was merely in physical connection with" the bug, so he "established a deeper communion with this vermin" on a metaphysical level, "letting a little bit of myself flow into its body" (110). Consider the following description of Dominio's experiencing reality from the perspective of the cockroach:

> There was nothing especially 'roachy' inside the roach any more than there was anything of a distinct 'person' inside of Lillian – once the dark interior of each had been penetrated, there was only that buzz of swinish agitation and turbulent blackness. The Great Black Swine was thrashing about inside the cockroach just as it had within Lillian Hayes, the only difference being that any sense of delusion about being some kind of thing-in-the-world was missing from the insect…Was it simply a matter of degree? Between the cockroach and the proprietor of the Metro Diner there spread quite a spectrum of organic life…And inside of all of them – the thrashing agitation…This was the only Thing-in-the-World. The rest of it was only costumes and masks…that was the secret face of the living world, the shadow within all life, the thing that would live on and on as each one us died our deaths alone. Because whatever life we had was only *its*[31] life, and when our bodies…became too damaged to accommodate it…this blackness flowed away, leaving behind it a dead vine, a bug's crushed carapace, or a human corpse – things that had no life of their own, nothing real about them...We were kept alive in some form, any form, as long as we were viciously thrashing about, acting out our most intensely vital impulses, never allowed to become still and silent until every drop had been drained of the blackness flowing inside us. (110-12)

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[31] Ligotti's emphasis

There is much to discuss in this admittedly lengthy passage. It is quoted at such length in the name of discerning the ultimate stakes of Schopenhauer's influence on Ligotti, so let's consider them now.

As quoted earlier, in the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer posits that the will

> is the innermost essence…of every particular thing and also of the whole. It appears in every blindly acting force of nature, and also in the deliberate conduct of man, and the great difference between the two concerns only the degree of the manifestation, not the inner nature of what is manifested (110).

This passage is directly referenced in Ligotti's novella via an interrogative sentence, —"Was it simply a matter of degree?"—and, as we can see, Schopenhauer answers Dominio's question with a definitive yes. Schopenhauer's will propels not only all animated beings in existence but is responsible for the elemental forces contained within all inanimate objects. Therefore, to quote Schopenhauer directly, "the great difference between" the roach under Domino's boot and Lillian the diner owner "is merely in the degree of the manifestation, not in the nature of what manifests itself," that is, the will. In short, unquestionably influenced by Schopenhauer, Ligotti's *My Work Is Not Yet Done* depicts the horrific aftermath of Dominio's interaction with The Great Black Swine, which mirrors Schopenhauer's will, and the specificities of this human-and-entity relationship differentiates Ligotti's depiction of ontological pessimism from both Lovecraft and Barron.

Both in the context of ontological pessimism and compared to Lovecraft's "The Haunter of the Dark" or Barron's *The Croning*, Ligotti's human-and-entity relationship remains distinctive because of the nature of the connection between The Great Black Swine and

Dominio. As has been established, in "The Haunter of the Dark," Blake possesses no apparent

feelings of misanthropy, travels to the church on Federal Hill because the force(s) of Azathoth

pull him to that location, and dies at the story's end. Blake's encounter with the titular monster

does not necessitate the presence of any other individuals, and it appears to be not the result of

mere chance but the constriction of Blake's free will and autonomy via said entities located

within the church. In Barron's *The Croning*, human individuals such as Michelle Miller serve

the Children of Old Leech, as well as their eponymous metaphysical patriarch, and they not only

undergo extreme acts of physical pain to please their sadistic extraterrestrial masters—the

croning of the text's title—but they also deceive other humans—her husband, Don Miller—in

order to make them serve as oblivious pawns for their malevolent machinations.

Ligotti's novella leaves readers with a certain tension regarding the malevolent cosmos of

the text's diegesis and the human component (or lack thereof) within said context. On the one

hand, Dominio describes his encounter with The Great Black Swine in terms of being "caught in

between…two worlds – caught in a place where I had made a rare connection with the Great

Black Swine." This description reads as if Dominio could just have easily been any other near-

death individual. The adjectival usage of the past participle of catch, —"caught"—coupled with

the modifier "rare" to describe the noun phrase "connection with the Great Black Swine,"

indicate that Dominio did not attempt to make this connection. Rather, the Great Black Swine

took possession of him in an act of violence—getting hit by a bus—worse than the "instant of

dark epiphany" the Spy experiences when he first sees a vision of Old Leech in *The Croning*.

On the one hand, the Great Black Swine of *My Work Is Not Yet Done* appears to be a

rather blatant fictional representation of Schopenhauer's notion of the will, a fundamentally

impersonal entity with no intrinsically human connection that, to use Ligotti's language, thrashes

violently about inside not only every living being, human or otherwise, but in non-animated matter as well. Via what appears to be chance, Dominio finds himself caught between the world of self-conscious human beings and the world of the Great Black Swine, and his placement in said scenario seems random and predicated on nothing specific about him as an individual. On the other, from Dominio's perspective, this same entity uses him as an "instrument of greater manipulations and conspiracies" than his mere misanthropic mission of coworker annihilation (136). These "greater manipulations and conspiracies" denote Frank's writing of the novella itself, what he describes as his "real…Ultimate Statement," the thesis of which he describes as follows:

> People do not know, and cannot face…the excruciating paradox, the nightmarish obscenity of being something that does not know what it is and yet believes it does know, something that in fact is nothing but a tiny particle that forms the body of the Great Black Swine…that to us looks like sunrises and skyscrapers…like birthdays and funerals, like satellites and cell phones and rockets launched into space, likes nations and peoples, likes the laws of nature and the laws of humanity, like everything, including these words that I write (136-7).

In the passage above, Dominio again channels Schopenhauer, describing "the Great Black Swine" as that which is responsible for the existence and annihilation of literally "everything," including Frank's writing of his "Ultimate Statement." He also echoes Zapffe's claims regarding "the excruciating paradox" of human consciousness, of "being something that does not know what it is and yet believes it does know." Finally, we can see traces of Sigmund Freud and his argument in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) that the existence and functioning of society

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itself remains predicated on a disavowal, a denial of "the excruciating paradox" at the heart of human existence, that each of us remains merely "something that in fact is nothing but a tiny particle that forms the body of the Great Black Swine." This reference to Freud also connects to Dominio's misanthropy throughout *My Work Is Not Yet Done* and allows us to differentiate the novella further both from Lovecraft's "The Haunter of the Dark" and Barron's *The Croning*.

As claimed above, in Lovecraft's story no living human characters besides Blake interact with the force(s) of Azathoth, and his experience in the church stems from the fact that he was pulled there by outside forces that negate his free will. Furthermore, the possibility of Blake's death resulting from supernatural events remains just that, a possibility. Barron's novel features a similarly hierarchal cosmos as Lovecraft's story. However, his requires a human component wherein one spouse—aside from undergoing acts of sadistic cruelty wrought by carnivorous extraterrestrials that serve an entity known as Old Leech—manipulates another to the point of perpetual amnesia in exchange for eternal life provided by said aliens.

Ligotti's *My Work Is Not Yet Done* takes the necessary human component of *The Croning*'s malevolent cosmos and inverts it such that the malice resides in the former, the human, and not the latter, the cosmos. From the beginning of the text to the end, Dominio is depicted as a bordering-on-narcissistic misanthrope, and his connection to the Great Black Swine seems accidental, meaning that, while his suicide is intentional, his metaphysical rebirth appears coincidental. More than Azathoth or Old Leech, The Great Black Swine appears fundamentally impersonal. Therefore, Frank Dominio remains responsible for the wickedness he commits while merged with the entity, and evidence for this claim appears immediately after the cockroach encounter described above. After killing the insect under his boot, Dominio deduces that

if my life was all delusion, it was an inescapable delusion that I – and, alas, even

you – could not fail to follow wherever it might lead. And I still had four more

beings to blow away from this creepy existence. Until that was accomplished, my

work was not yet done, and my life (or non-life, as it were) seemed undeniably

worth living…I – and you – now understood: We were kept alive in some form,

any form, as long as we were viciously thrashing about, acting out our most

intensely vital impulses, never allowed to become still and silent until every drop

had been drained of the blackness flowing inside us. I – and you – now

understood: We would be pulled back into the flowing blackness only when we

had done all the damage we were allowed to do, only when our work was done.

The work of you against me…and me against you (112-3).

The above passage captures what makes Thomas Ligotti's *My Work Is Not Yet Done* a striking

example of ontological pessimism via contemporary weird fiction. Similar to Lovecraft's "The

Haunter of the Dark" and Barron's "The Croning," Ligotti's narrative combines the paradoxical

nature of human consciousness and the powerful forces of the will via a human-and-

metaphysical entity relationship and generates an unsettling affect that stems from the

horrifyingly humbling nature of this encounter. However, unlike those texts, the horror is further

amplified because a misanthropic and murderous malcontent, Dominio, narrates it. He uses the

abilities he gains from his becoming a conduit for the Great Black Swine—which, again,

possesses no particular interest in the human species but rather animates it with a "thrashing

agitation" in the same it does literally everything else in the universe—for violent revenge

against his hated coworkers. *My Work Is Not Yet Done* thus ultimately suggests that ontological

pessimism is not a philosophical perspective that generates compassion—which, as we should

recall, is what Schopenhauer argues we each owe to one another—and, analogous to *The Croning*, the text implies that the horror of such a worldview resides not in the cosmos and the potential malevolence therein but rather in the human and its ability to annihilate the Other merely for petty vengeance in "the work of you against me…and me against you."

Chapter 2: Ecological Pessimism—Jeff VanderMeer

This second chapter analyzes ecological pessimism, and the concept is defined in two ways: literally and philosophically. The Lovecraftian text examined in this chapter is the short story "The Colour Out of Space," published in *Amazing Stories* in 1927, and the contemporary weird novels examined are Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*, which includes *Annihilation, Authority*, and *Acceptance*, all published in quick succession in 2014. While a "literal definition" is usually contrasted with a "figurative definition," the modifier "philosophical" offers a more apt adjective to describe the type of questions that the fictional texts analyzed in this chapter raise and the critical lenses used to answer them. On the one hand, ecological pessimism denotes exactly what the term sounds like: a pessimism of ecology, a bleak assessment of the various relationships between terrestrial beings and their physical environments on a planet doomed for inevitable solar extinction, a scenario made all the grimmer when considering the incomprehensibly destructive human component in said context. The first part of this chapter considers multiple works of criticism that engage with ecological pessimism defined literally.

On the other, ecological pessimism can be defined philosophically through the second and third stages of Friedrich Nietzsche's writings, particularly in passages from *The Gay Science* (1887).[32] Throughout much of his philosophy, Nietzsche argues for a Dionysian pessimistic embrace of existence, warts and all. This abandoned engagement with life and all of its pain, misery, and suffering is not done in the name of masochism, though did Nietzsche champion

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[32] According to philosopher Gianni Vattimo in his expansive study of Nietzsche's philosophy, *Nietzsche: An Introduction* (2002), "Nietzsche's works are commonly divided into three periods: a) the early works; b) the genealogical and deconstructive though from *Human, All Too Human* to *The Gay Science*; c) the philosophy of *Eternal Recurrence* that begins with *Zarathustra*" (87). However, as Vattimo also notes, "this division is, of course, only schematic and should therefore not be given undue weight," though "it is nevertheless largely accepted, implicitly or explicitly, in the secondary literature" (87).

pain as an essential necessity for one's growth. Rather, Nietzsche's Dionysian pessimism remains predicated on what he calls in book five of *The Gay Science* "*destruction*, change, and becoming…an overflowing energy that is pregnant with future" (329).[33] Via a review of (somewhat) ecologically tinged readings of Nietzsche's philosophy from Georges Bataille and Gianni Vattimo, this chapter argues that in both Lovecraft's "The Color Out of Space" and VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*, characters confront a Dionysian summit, a measureless excess of forces that violates the very integrity of individual beings. Ultimately, the characters' response to this confrontation in each respective text reveals a shift in humanity's response to an unknowable form of absolute alterity.

Ecological Pessimism Defined Literally—"We're fucked."

In the introduction to her *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chtulucene* (2016), scholar Donna Harraway observes that "we—all of us on Terra—live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times" (1). Pessimistically positing that we are currently living "in the midst of the sixth great extinction event and in the midst of engulfing wars, extractions, and immiserations of billions of people and other critters for something called 'profit' or 'power'— or, for that matter, called 'God,'" she concludes that humanity should stay with the trouble, which means learning to live with "each other"—all sentient beings, big and small—"in unexpected collaborations and combinations" (4). Her dire deduction of our seemingly doomed existence does not denote an accepting acquiescence or delusional denial in the face of looming ecological collapse. Rather, for Harraway, "neither despair nor hope" offers itself as a "sensible attitude," which she defines quite literally as a necessarily empirical experience of what she calls "co-presence" (4).

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[33] Nietzsche's emphasis

Harraway's argument for making inter-species kin stands as but one of many studies written from a literary-philosophical perspective engaged with questions of ecological pessimism defined literally. While Harraway suggests that both hope and despair are not productive and thus attempts to walk "a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair," the very title of her book, *Staying with the Trouble,* says otherwise (2). In short, Harraway's monograph suggests that the trouble was always already here (to stay) and that it's rather a matter of adjusting our empirical coordinates as a species in such a way as to encounter other sentient beings in a more ethical manner in our shared and short time on this planet.

Another important example of literary-philosophical scholarship that engages with ecological pessimism is acclaimed author Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). Ghosh's examines how "most forms of art and literature" published in the historical era of climate change's are "drawn into the modes of concealment that prevent[ed] people from recognizing the realities of their plight" (11). He views humanity in the Anthropocene—defined by the National Geographic Society as "an unofficial unit of geologic time, used to describe the most recent period in Earth's history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems"—through a highly diagnostic and arguably prescriptive lens (2021). He elaborates on his pathologizing multiple generations of humanity for their perceived "derangement" in terms of not facing the obvious realties of the forces of climate change, claiming that "at exactly the time when it has become clear that global warming is in every sense a collective predicament, humanity finds itself in the thrall of a dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics, and literature alike" (80). Concluding that the "essence" of the Anthropocene "consists of

phenomena that were long ago expelled from the territory of the novel—forces of unthinkable magnitude that create unbearably intimate connections over vast gaps in space and time," Ghosh provides an insightful study of the psycho-social implications of climate change, suggesting that climate fiction (cli-fi) highlights a "renewed awareness of the elements of agency and consciousness that humans share with many other beings, and perhaps even the planet itself" (63).

In another noteworthy study of ecological pessimism, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (2015), literary scholar Roy Scranton quite crudely but nevertheless accurately posits that "we're fucked," and "the only questions are how soon and how badly" (16). Scranton's monograph is, indeed, written from an undeniably pessimistic perspective, and his argument that "a radically changing climate causing widespread upheaval…is not the latest version of a hoary fable of annihilation" but a grim certainty is both insightful and convincing (17). He continues:

> Global warming is not hysteria. It is a fact. And we have likely already passed the point where we could have done anything about it. Form the perspective of many policy experts, climate scientists, and national security officials, the concern is not whether global warming exists or how we might prevent it, but how we are going to adapt to life in the hot, volatile world we've created. (17)

For Scranton, the possible solution to this seemingly far-beyond-salvageable scenario is "a new humanism," more precisely, "a newly philosophical humanism, undergirded by renewed attention to the humanities" (19). This hypothesis is intriguing, but there are issues in Scranton's "new humanism" to discuss.

For example, consider his claim that "the conceptual and existential problems that the Anthropocene poses are precisely those that have always been at the heart of humanistic inquiry" (20). Such questions include (but are not limited to):

> What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to live? What is truth?   What is good...What does my life mean in the face of death...What does consumer choice mean compared against 100,000 years of ecological catastrophe? What does my life mean in the face of mass death or the collapse of global civilization?
>
> How do we make meaningful decisions in the shadow of our inevitable end? (20)

Scranton states that "these questions have no logical or empirical answers" and thus "cannot be graphed or quantified," meaning that "they are philosophical problems *par excellence*" (20). However, let's note the internal tension in Scranton's argument (20).

On the one hand, he champions "a newly philosophical humanism," but, on the other, he seems to bemoan the fact that the questions said humanism asks "have no logical or empirical answers" and thus, sadly for Scranton, "cannot be graphed or quantified" (20). This language implies an "if only" form of logic that suggests an implicit valuation of logical positivist[34] science. To quote (and paraphrase) Scranton once more, if only "thinking about Kant or Frantz Fanon" could "help us trap carbon dioxide," then we could objectify the intrinsic value of this seemingly useless philosophy (19). Alas, Scranton's ideal scenario is not the case, so he instead endorses a rather flimsily constructed ecological pessimism in the guise of an innovative "philosophical humanism" that demands from each of us an unconditional surrender to yet

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[34] According to Richard Creath of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, logical positivism "has no…precise boundaries and still less that distinguishes it from" logical empiricism (2011). For the purposes of this chapter, I prefer the noun "positivism" instead of "empiricism" because of the implication that some kernel of knowledge is gained via the positing of certain claims and testing them via experimentation. Regardless of the term one chooses to employ, each refers to a philosophical framework pioneered by Auguste Comte that shares "a common concern for scientific methodology and the important role that science could play in reshaping society" (2011).

another conditional claim: "If we want to learn to live in the Anthropocene, we must first learn how to die" (27).

Let's note that, from a Nietzschean philosophical perspective, humanism is nothing more than a thinly veiled manifestation of nihilism, another stage in the weakening of (various forms of) metaphysics[35] that have held socio-political sway since the writings of the ancient Greeks. This manifestation of nihilism, like the others, removes each of us further and further away from one's unique artistic capability to engage with the ever-fading present and its multitude of moments and confront our own mortality in said continuum, a relationship that remains predicated on our will to power.[36] Before digging into Nietzsche's writing and how it functions as the framework for my philosophical definition of ecological pessimism, as well as the crucial studies of his work by Bataille and Vattimo, let's examine one more example of ecological pessimism written from a literary-philosophical perspective that provides a more cohesive segue into that discussion, Jean François Lyotard's *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1991).

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[35] Nihilism and metaphysics are much debated terms, to say the very least, but, for the purposes of this chapter, each term can be understood as follows. Regarding the latter, to quote Gianni Vattimo yet again—this time from *The Transparent Society* (1992)—"metaphysics is a violent response to a situation that is itself fraught with danger and violence" because of the way it posits unstable ontological foundations that "seek[s] to master reality at a stroke, grasping (or so it thinks) the first principle on which all things depend (and thus giving itself an empty guarantee of power over events)" (8). As for the former, I refer primarily to Friedrich Nietzsche's definition of nihilism in his posthumously published *The Will to Power* (1910). In that text, he describes nihilism as a state of existence wherein "the highest values devaluate themselves" (9). Starting with the metaphorical death of the gods of ancient Greece and continuing through to the proverbial passing of the Judeo-Christian God that Nietzsche wrote about so frequently throughout his philosophical corpus, the fundamentally foundational and therefore powerful ideas regarding the "truth(s)" of humanity's existence have continued to be questioned (and even killed) for their intrinsic hollowness in a process of critique that catalyzes a cascading domino effect wherein literally nothing is sacred.

[36] Similar to nihilism and metaphysics discussed in footnote six, the will to power is a highly debated term in the context of Nietzsche's philosophy. Rather than reciting the history of such debates and taking a respective side, I instead quote Nietzsche from *The Gay Science*, wherein he first describes the will to power in Schopenhauerian terms, claiming it is "really a fundamental instinct of life which aims at the expansion of power and, wishing for that, frequently risks and even sacrifices self-preservation," concluding that "the great and small struggle always revolves around superiority, around growth and expansion, around power—in accordance with the will to power which is the will to life" (292).

That text warrants examination because of its focus on solar catastrophe, what Lyotard calls, "the death of the sun," which he argues simultaneously constitutes "the death of the mind" (10). Lyotard's rhetorical logic captures perhaps the bleakest of all forms of ecological pessimism discussed in this dissertation in terms of the way he moves beyond "a biological" focus on terrestrial beings and their planetary environment to that of "a cosmic order," wherein the death of the sun denotes the death of thought as such; or, as Lyotard phrases it, "after the sun's death there won't be a thought to know that its death took place" (7-9). In short, Lyotard's ecological pessimism operates on a precisely cosmic scale predicated on solar death. But how is this grim scenario a proper segue into a discussion of Nietzsche's Dionysian pessimism?

The answer to that question is, per usual, in Nietzsche's response to such a scenario. For Nietzsche, the extinguishment of human thought via solar annihilation would denote the literal enlightenment of the human species (and all other beings on the planet). This claim does not imply, however, that Nietzsche would therefore put his faith in any form of positivist science, even one that claims to know definitively when the sun will expire and therefore predicts the event with an unflinching certitude. Instead, if the looming solar catastrophe—what Lyotard claims is "the sole serious question to face humanity today" because "in comparison everything else seems insignificant" and "futile"—is to come, then Nietzsche would meet it with a welcoming laughter (9).

We should note, though, that this laughter is released in the face of a looming abyss, which, similar to the ecological pessimism discussed above, can be defined both literally—the death of the sun—and philosophically—eternal return. On the one hand, as Lyotard claims, the extinguishment of human thought via solar annihilation denotes a literal abyss, the reclamation of the planet by a primal and formless chaos that, in Hegelian and Freudian terms, cannot be

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subl(im)ated[37], and, in Heideggerian terms, forces us to face the primordial horrors of the

Nothing, the ultimate anxiety trigger.[38] On the other, the abyss wrought by solar annihilation can

be interpreted through the philosophical lens of Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence,

specifically as discussed by Vattimo and Bataille. In short, the philosophical conception of

ecological pessimism that theoretically grounds this chapter's readings of Lovecraft's "The

Color Out of Space" and VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* must be grasped through a

precise interpretation of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence.

Ecological Pessimism Defined Philosophically—The Dionysian Summit

Nietzsche's conception of eternal recurrence is perhaps most clearly articulated in book

four of *The Gay Science*. In the name of clarity and discussion, the passage appears below in its

entirety:

> *The greatest weight*: What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you
>
> into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and
>
> have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and
>
> there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought
>
> and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return

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[37] In his insightful *Ten Lessons in Theory: An Introduction to Theoretical Writing* (2013), literary scholar Calvin Thomas provides a chapter-length discussion on the significance of G.W.F. Hegel's writings in the context of literary theory, and he defines "sublation"—or, in German, *Aufhebung—*"to cancel *and equally* to preserve" (128). As for "sublimation," in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Sigmund Freud defines sublimation as "the diversion of sexual instinctual forces and their direction to new ones" (261-2).

[38] In his *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (2001), philosopher Simon Critchley considers the Heideggerian notion of "the Nothing," or *das Nichts*. Critchley posits that "the sciences deal with their particular realms of things, and besides that they are concerned with nothing," which implies that "science wants to know everything about things or beings and besides that nothing" (97). Critchley recounts that "Heidegger then asks, perversely, 'what about this nothing,'" suggesting that Heidegger's ultimate claim is that "science wants to know nothing about this nothing" (97). According to Critchley, via the notion of the Nothing, Heidegger wants us to consider the possibility that "prior to the theoretical disclosure of things, there is an affective or emotional disclosure that takes place in what Heidegger calls 'moods,'" and the mood that corresponds with or "reveals the nothing" is anxiety (98). In sum, for Heidegger, "the nothing that opens in the experience of anxiety leads one to pose the metaphysical question as to the meaning of being" (98).

to you, and in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine!" If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently*[39] than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (273-4)

In his *Nietzsche: An Introduction* (1985), Vattimo posits that "a tension which ultimately remains unresolved" haunts Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence (96). This tension exists between "the element of 'decision'" and "the element of the subject's disintegration" (96). Put differently, in Vattimo's reading of Nietzsche, at a precisely individual level, each of us remains torn between, on the one hand, a resolute obligation to take aesthetic ownership of the multitude of moments that make up our mortal lives—which requires a reconfiguration of the way we think about and experience linear time—and, on the other, an absolute annihilation of any sense of autonomy or agency when confronted by the acknowledgement of eternal recurrence. Vattimo is by no means alone in analyzing this unresolved tension in Nietzsche's philosophy of eternal

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[39] Nietzsche's emphasis

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recurrence, but it is Georges Bataille that pushes this tension further, compellingly interpreting the concept through the lens of morality and motive.

In the preface to his *On Nietzsche* (2004), Bataille claims that our view of eternal recurrence "should be reversed," which implies that his reading runs counter to a more generally accepted interpretation of the concept (xxxiii).[40] He holds that eternal recurrence is "not a promise of infinite and lacerating repetitions" that one must, to quote Nietzsche, "*crave...fervently*[41]" (xxxiii). Rather, his interpretation of eternal recurrence hinges on the idea that "every moral system proclaims that 'each moment of life ought to be *motivated*,'" and, therefore, eternal recurrence "*unmotivates* the moment and frees life of ends[42]" (xxxiii).

This interpretation has profound implications in terms of reconfiguring how we think about eternal recurrence. For Bataille, eternal recurrence is not a litmus test of one's ability to take aesthetic ownership of individual existence such that the scenario would be, in Nietzsche's words, "divine." Rather, it denotes a diminution of decision-making predicated on the eradication of motive(s) in the name of living in "a human desert wherein each moment is unmotivated," which Bataille argues denotes actual freedom (xxxiii). In sum, Bataille thinks eternal recurrence offers a motiveless state of immorally individualistic existence wherein one is forever removed from the obligation "to go beyond...or give...some kind of meaning through action" (xxx). But what does Bataille's view of eternal recurrence have to do with ecological pessimism in the context of Lovecraft's "The Color Out of Space" and VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*? The answer to that question lies in Bataille's notion of "the summit" (17).

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[40] For example, in what Vattimo claims is one of the three "great Nietzsche interpretations of the thirties," Karl Jaspers argues that the ultimate "goal" of eternal recurrence "is neither God nor the world but instead the ceaseless opening-up of possibilities," meaning that the circular nature of time denotes an exciting catalyst for one's aesthetic engagement with the world writ large (178-9).

[41] All emphasis Bataille's

[42] All emphasis Bataille's

While acknowledging both the moral and theological context(s) of Bataille's use of "summit," let's consider how he defines the term in *On Nietzsche* and then consider what it offers when examining Lovecraft and Vandermeer's fiction.[43] Bataille claims that the summit "corresponds to excess, to an exuberance of forces," as "it brings about a maximum of tragic intensity" and "relates to measureless expenditures of energy and is a violation of the integrity of individual beings" (17). Later in the text, he elaborates on this definition via simile, claiming that "like Kafka's castle, in the final analysis, the summit is simply whatever is inaccessible" because "it slips away from us, at least until we stop being human" (39). Bataille further suggests that "essentially, the summit is where life is pushed to an impossible limit" (39). Here, then, is where a precise connection can be made between a philosophical conception of ecological pessimism and the texts examined in this chapter. In both Lovecraft's "The Color Out of Space" and VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*, an entity from outer space and/or another dimension arrives on Earth, one that transcends human conceptions of "life" by violating "impossible limit[s]" and defying attempts at comprehension that remain, in the last instance, all too human. In each text the respective entity changes the local environment in radical ways, creating monstrous lifeforms that defy linguistic categorization and hover between horrifying hybridity and stunning sublimity. Consequently, the characters in both works confront a Dionysian summit, a measureless excess of forces that violates the very integrity of individual (human) beings and yet remains forever out of reach, impossible to know in a way that does not result in the annihilation of the self.

The critical detail lies in how characters respond to these encounter(s) with the Dionysian summit. As will be seen shortly, both the doomed Gardner family of "The Colour Out of Space"

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[43] In *On Nietzsche*, Bataille analyzes "the killing of Jesus Christ" in detail and "contrast[s]" what he calls the "moral summit" with "decline" in order to elucidate a "fundamental principle" regarding the risky nature of "'communication'" and how it "requires individuals…placed at the limit of death and nothingness" (17-19).

and the local college professors who study the strange meteorite that crashed into the Gardner's farm react to the situation in a fundamentally motivated way. Vocational circumstance motivates the Gardners, and they therefore view the cosmic invasion of their farm first and foremost as a catastrophe for their crops, critters, and family members. The result-driven rationality of logical positive science motivates the skeptical scientists who scoff at Nahum's superstitious surmising, but only after the meteorite resists their attempts at objective analysis.

For the principal characters of VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*, the arrival of an extraterrestrial entity on the Southeastern coast of the United States generates an ethereal border that creates hybrid lifeforms that initially catalyzes the very same impulses of logical positive science. However, over the course of the trilogy, the principal characters ultimately come to accept the changes wrought by the otherworldly visitor(s) in a way that must be read through the lens of Dionysian pessimism and eternal recurrence, as characters in each text literally lean and/or leap into an unmotivated form of existence. Before digging deeper into Lovecraft and VanderMeer's fiction(s), let's briefly recap the meanings of ecological pessimism defined literally and philosophically in the name of highlighting both their appearance and significance in the readings that follow.

Once more, ecological pessimism defined literally denotes a dreary assessment of the various relationships between terrestrial beings and their physical environments on a planet doomed for inevitable solar extinction, with significant terms such as "global warming," "climate change," and "the Anthropocene" applied to the scenario in order to contextualize the incomprehensibly destructive human component in said context. As Scranton crudely but accurately phrases it, "we're fucked," and "the only questions are how soon and how badly." Along with Harraway, Ghosh, and Lyotard, Scranton argues that this raw deal requires a

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response predicated on a renewed and revised recognition of humanism as that which will allow us, at minimum, to bear witness to the end of the world as we know it (Lyotard), and, at maximum, to create hybrid forms of literature and reading (Ghosh) that will help us not only to become better kin to the sentient beings with which we share the planet (Harraway) but, in so doing, teach us how to die together as well.

Ecological pessimism defined philosophically denotes a distinctly Nietzschean perspective of humanity's moral-predicated and therefore motivated existence. Humanity finds itself always already facing a primordial disconnect between itself and its non-human Other(s), existing together in a fundamentally alien environment. We use a forever-inherited language to provide flimsy meaning(s) and faulty motive(s) for the world and the other beings therein, which removes us further from our original animal existence, forcing us to live our lives as rational and therefore morally motivated beings. Bataille's interpretation of eternal recurrence and his notion of the summit provide a productive way to think through this philosophical dilemma, and, more importantly, they offer a fascinating frame for both the motivated actions of the characters from Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space" and the (eventually) unmotivated characters of VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*. Let's turn, now, to a discussion of the former in the context of the two types of ecological pessimism outlined above.

"The Colour Out of Space"—"a frightful messenger"

Published in a 1927 issue of *Amazing Stories*, Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space" stands as one of the author's more well known and highly regarded works. According to acclaimed author Michel Houellebecq's noteworthy study of Lovecraft, *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (2005), the story constitutes one of Lovecraft's "great texts" (51).[44]

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[44] Houellebecq argues that Lovecraft's writings can be divided into four "concentric circles" that include, first, "the correspondence and poems;" second, "those stories Lovecraft participated in…as a collaboration;" third, "the stories

Nevertheless, little to no noteworthy scholarship[45] has been published on the story, and, similar

to this dissertation's first chapter, the analysis of "The Colour Out of Space" that follows seeks

to address this lacuna.

Set in an unspecified time in the 1930s, "The Colour Out of Space" depicts the

destruction of the aforementioned Gardner family and their farm in Arkham, Massachusetts—a

fictitious setting for many of Lovecraft's works— at the end of the nineteenth century as a result

of a "weird visitor from unknown stellar space" (344). Narrated by a nameless individual that

"went into the hills and vales to survey for the new reservoir," the story is comprised mostly of

the recollections of one Ammi Pierce, an elderly male citizen of Arkham known in the

community for his "crazy tales," who recounts the downfall of the Gardner family to the narrator

(342). The story begins with the narrator describing his unsettling arrival in Arkham. He first

mentions "the hills" that lie "west of Arkham" and the fact that "there are valleys with deep

woods" in said hills "that no axe has ever cut" (340). This description is an intriguing way for

the narrator to start the story in that he describes a distinct (fictional) locale—the hills west of

Arkham—and its fundamental inhumanness[46] through the lens of what he calls a "returning

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that were actually written by Howard Phillips Lovecraft;" and, finally, fourth, "the absolute heart of HPL's myth, which contains what most rabid Lovecraftians continue to call…the 'great texts'" (51-52).

[45] To date, the only extant scholarly article-length piece on the story is the recently released "'The Colour Out of Space': Lovecraft on Induction" by Kieran Setiya, which was published in the April 2021 issue of *Philosophy and Literature*. As its title suggests, the articles focuses on what Setiya dubs "the skeptical problem of induction" and its roots in the thoughts of David Hume (39). More precisely, Setiya examines what he calls the "inductive failure" that occurred on the Gardner farm through the lens of philosopher and contemporary of Lovecraft George Santayana and his *Skepticism and Animal Faith: Introduction to a System of Philosophy* (1923). Setiya ultimately concludes that "'The Colour Out of Space' elicits an inductive vertigo that is the flip side of curiosity, the desire for an impossible assurance, for a cosmic, not merely social, peace" (52).

[46] In the introduction to a special issue of *Modernism/modernity*, Aaron Jaffe claims that "inhumanism" or "the inhuman" always already finds itself in "an unsettled antagonism tangled up within humanism" and thus denotes that which "distends out, opening a yawning Promethean gap…between agency and imagination, a dead zone between product and praxis" (500-01).

wilderness," one that will eventually "be one with...all the mysteries of primal earth" (340).

However, this "returning wilderness" possesses a certain pessimistic tinge, since it will be

"flooded" and "the dark woods will be cut down" when the new reservoir is constructed, which

is what brings the narrator to Arkham in the first place (340). Note, then, how "The Colour Out

of Space" already reveals its engagement with the literal definition of ecological pessimism. That

is to say, Lovecraft's "returning wilderness" offers only a temporary return, not an eternal one,

because the human species and its destruction of the natural environment—the construction of a

reservoir—has nipped it, the returning wilderness, in the proverbial bud. Or has it?

As scholars Scott Michaelsen and Scott Cutler Shershow posit in their *The Love of Ruins:*

Letters on Lovecraft (2017), "often the keenest moments of horror and menace in Lovecraft's

tales involve someone or something that *waits*, someone or something *which is not yet finished*:[47]

a fatal trace, remnant, or dormant threat that lurks in the ruins or sleeps beneath the waves or

hides in some undiscovered corner of time or space" (150). This claim holds true when

considering "The Colour Out of Space," as Michaelsen and Shershow aptly note. For example,

consider how the narrator describes "the open fields and the travelled roads around Arkham,"

which hints at "something which is not yet finished" in the landscape:

> There was once a road over the hills and through the valleys, that ran straight
>
> where the blasted heath is now; but people ceased to use it and a new road was
>
> laid curving far toward the south. Traces of the old one can still be found amidst
>
> the weeds of a returning wilderness, and some of them will doubtless linger even
>
> when half the hollows are flooded for the new reservoir. Then the dark woods
>
> will be cut down and the blasted heath will slumber far below blue waters whose
>
> surface will mirror the sky and ripple in the sun. And the secrets of the strange

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[47] Cutler Shershow and Michaelsen's emphasis

days will be one with the deep's secrets; one with the hidden lore of old ocean,

and all the mystery of primal earth. (340)

Before digging into "the blasted heath" and its significance in the story, note the ambiguity in the passage above, specifically in terms of what, exactly, "linger[s]" in the "returning wilderness." While "the old one" refers to the "road" that used to run "over the hills and through the valley," the pronoun "them" in the compound sentence's second clause is ambiguous. Does it refer to "the traces" of "the road," or "the weeds"?

The passage lacks the necessary information to answer this question with surety, but the critical point remains that, in either case, something lingers. The narrator's usage of the pronoun "them" remains indefinite in terms of its antecedent(s). On the one hand, it serves as evidence of the story's engagement with the literal definition of ecological pessimism, meaning that the construction of the reservoir denotes the destruction of not only the natural environment to create an artificial one but also a cycle of infrastructural neglect and communal recommitment— "people ceased to use it and a new road was laid." On the other, it reveals an early example of ecological pessimism defined philosophically in the story. In other words, prior to the strange meteorite crashing into the Gardner farm, the hills of Arkham previously possess(ed) lingering "secrets" connected to "the mystery of primal earth." The construction of the reservoir thus serves as an(other) example of a motivated manipulation and nihilistic narrowing of perspective regarding both the forces and force-relations that comprise our experience(s) of reality and what we broadly call "nature."

Regarding "the blasted heath," the narrator tells us that "the name 'blasted heath' seemed to me very odd and theatrical," but then he saw for himself "that dark westward tangle of glens

and slopes…and ceased to wonder at anything besides its own elder mystery" (341). He

describes the phenomenon as follows:

> I knew it the moment I came upon it at the bottom of a spacious valley; for no
>
> other name could fit such a thing, or any other thing fit such a name…It must, I
>
> thought as I viewed it, be the outcome of a fire; but why had nothing new ever
>
> grown over those five acres of grey desolation that sprawled open to the sky like a
>
> great spot eaten by acid in the woods and fields…There was no vegetation of any
>
> kind on that broad expanse, but only a fine grey dust or ash which now wind
>
> seemed ever to blow about. The trees near it were sickly and stunted, and many
>
> dead trunks stood or lay rotting at the rim. (341)

Note the way that the narrator views the blasted heath through the lens of ecological pessimism

defined literally, claiming that "it must, I thought as I viewed it, be the outcome of a fire."

However, the syntax used to make this assertion—an appositive clause that provides direct but

non-essential first-person discourse—adds a layer of uncertainty via what literary scholar Kevin

Ohi calls a "a dynamic of expropriation" (65).

In his *Henry James: The Queerness of Style* (2011), Ohi observes that Henry James' later

novels consistently feature "a particular syntactical structure, a form of apposition or quasi-

'extraposition'" (63). He elaborates on the significance of this style of narration as follows:

> Typically, a verb intervenes between the pronoun and the noun phrase in
>
> apposition, which foregrounds both the reflection in the renaming and the
>
> interruption of that reflection. The delayed resolution of syntactical inversions or
>
> suspensions often makes such structures of apposition even more conspicuous…
>
> On the level of character, these syntactical structures suggest…a distancing, for

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instance, of a proper name or a descriptive noun phrase from the pronoun and

verb that express their action in a given sentence… In the most general terms, the

novel's syntax is marked by a doubling of the subject, a renaming by pronoun or

appositive that has the effect of a reflection—or a stutter. (63-65)

In "The Colour Out of Space," viewing the blasted heath, the narrator states, "It must, I thought

as I viewed it, be the outcome of a fire." Rather than a human character standing as the subject

of the sentence—for example, "*she* waited, Kate Croy"—in Lovecraft's narration, "*it*"—the

blasted heath—serves as the subject. "It" is conditioned by the modal "must" but is expropriated

from its predicate—"be the outcome of a fire." The appositive clause—"I thought to myself"—

literally interrupts the narrator's assumptions, causing him to reflect, as it were, on his memories

of the event(s) with a sense of reassuring security.

This inversion communicates that the narrator already possesses a certain bias for

ecological pessimism defined literally because, at the very least, it provides a positive scientific

framework wherein any and all anomalies are cause-effect-contingent and therefore solved

through a motivated way of thinking. The narrator observes the blasted heath and hypothesizes

its origins as undoubtedly—"It must be"—stemming from a more-than-likely manmade cause—

"the outcome of a fire." Nevertheless, something lingers over the blasted heath that troubles the

narrator's thoughts, and Lovecraft's use of a semicolon to separate this line of narration from the

one that follows is therefore crucial.

After he provides his initial thoughts on the blasted heath—"It must, I thought as I

viewed it, be the outcome of a fire"—the narrator contradicts his initial assumptions by

questioning—"but why"—how a fire would damage the surrounding landscape such that plant

life would permanently cease to exist—"nothing new [had] ever grown over those five acres of

grey desolation" (341).   Rather than having these two clauses in which the narrator first assumes—"it must"—but subsequently questions—"but why"—his knowledge of the blasted heath stand as separate sentences, implying at least some difference in terms of the thought completed, Lovecraft joins them with a semicolon, connoting a certain relation. In sum, this piece of punctuation possesses significance because of, as we should expect, what lingers; here, it is the narrator's recognition of the undeniable strangeness of the lifeless terrain in the aftermath of what he initially assumes was its destruction via natural causes.

Unsettled by but curious about the blasted heath and its origins, the narrator questions "old people in Arkham," attempting to find an explanation for what many of the townsfolk referred to as the "'strange days'" (342). His investigation leads him to one Ammi Pierce, an elderly male resident of Arkham and an individual the narrator describes as "not like other rustics I had known in the sections where reservoirs were to be," meaning that "he was far brighter and more educated than I had been led to think" (343). As stated above, Pierce recounts the Gardner's family demise to the narrator, which makes up the bulk of "The Colour Out of Space."

Lovecraft's narrational "dynamic of expropriation" continues when Pierce starts his story. The narrator tells readers that "it all began, old Ammi said, with the meteorite" (343). Note how the same kind of sentence structure appears in this passage as that discussed above: an ambiguous pronoun serving as the subject of the sentence—"it"—followed by a non-essential appositive clause—"old Ammi said"—and concluding with details in a prepositional phrase about who or what is responsible for this nameless "it"—"the meteorite." This inversion communicates a similar idea to the one examined earlier, providing a sense of security for the story's narrator; however, it also possesses a notable difference.

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To elaborate, in the first example, viewing the blasted heath, the narrator states the following: "It must, I thought as I viewed it, be the outcome of a fire." In the second, describing Pierce's recollection of the strange meteorite that crashed into the Gardner family farm, the narrator relates the following: "it all began, old Ammi said, with the meteorite." In the former, the appositive provides first-person reassurance; in the latter, it communicates a lingering skepticism on behalf of the narrator regarding Pierce's memories of the events that transpired.

These grammatical details regarding "The Colour Out of Space" and its multilayered, Jamesian-esque narration reveal an undeniable undercurrent of ecological pessimism defined both literally and philosophically, one that runs throughout the text and lingers in the story's closing pages, as we will see shortly. That is to say, in the last instance, the story's narrator remains an anonymous investigative agent working for and in the name of unknown forces of a sinister-feeling modernity that seeks to dominate the natural environment for profit. In short, the narrator requires information about the natural landscape of Arkham in order to manipulate its water supply for profit.

Indeed, readers only learn a few details about the narrator over the course of the story. For example, we know that he came to Arkham "to survey for the new reservoir" and that his enterprise(s) he vaguely describes as "my business" forced him to encounter the blasted heath (341). Additionally, we know that he worked in the past for an unknown period of time to survey for other reservoir construction projects to the degree that he can compare and contrast Pierce to "other rustics I [the narrator] had known in the sections where reservoirs were to be" and therefore can deduce that Pierce was decidedly different (342). Arguably the most critical detail we learn about the narrator is that he quits his job after listening to Pierce's tale and, ultimately, that he wants never to drink the Arkham water after the completion of the new

reservoir:

> When he [Pierce] was done I did not wonder that his mind had snapped a trifle, or
> that the folk of Arkham would not speak much of the blasted heath. I hurried back
> before sunset to my hotel, unwilling to have the stars come out above me in the
> open; and the next day returned to Boston to give up my position. I could not go
> into that dim chaos of old forest and slope again, or face another time that grey
> blasted heath where the black well yawned deep beside the tumbled bricks and
> stones. The reservoir will soon be built now, and all those elder secrets will be
> safe forever under watery fathoms. But even then I do not believe I would like to
> visit that country by night—at least not when the sinister stars are out; and
> nothing could bribe me to drink the new city water of Arkham. (343)

This last detail stands out because it highlights yet another tension running through "The Colour
Out of Space." On the one hand, the narrator functions as a harbinger of ecological pessimism
defined literally, surveying the natural landscape in the name of creating an artificial water
source to accrue capital. On the other, he quits this very same job as a surveyor because he is so
disturbed by what happened to the Gardners and their farm as a result of the meteorite. The
narrator cannot handle the Dionysian summit that the meteorite represents and of which the
blasted heath exists only as a Derridean trace, a palimpsest that marks the presence of forces
beyond human comprehension, motives, and morals.

Pierce relates to the narrator that the day the meteorite fell in 1882 "there had come that
white noontide cloud, that string of explosions in the air, and that pillar of smoke from the valley
far in the wood," which all led to "the great rock that fell out of the sky and bedded itself in the
ground beside the well at the Nahum Gardner place" (343). The next day, Pierce recalls,

"Nahum had come to town to tell people about the stone," and Pierce "and his wife" went to visit the Gardner farm "with the three professors from Miskatonic University…to see the weird visitor from unknown stellar space" (344). Upon inspection, both the professors and the Pierces "wondered why Nahum had called it [the meteorite] so large the day before," with Nahum concluding that "it had shrunk" and the professors answering "that stones do not shrink" (344).

This last passage reveals an educational class conflict between Nahum and the three professors from Miskatonic University. Once the professors realize the object resists any and all scientific interpretation or rational contextualization, they approach the entire event with a contemptuous skepticism (344). To clarify, Pierce claims that the three professors told him that the meteorite initially "had the college in a state of real excitement" and that the sample "acted quite unbelievably in that well-ordered laboratory" (344). According to the professors, the meteorite's most astonishing feature is how "it displayed shining bands unlike any known colours of the normal spectrum," a description which directly connects to the story's title (344). Facing an entity that defies their logic-predicated and motivated way of thinking, the professors engage in "breathless talk of new elements, bizzare optical properties, and other things which puzzled men of science are wont to say when faced by the unknown" (345). While the meteorite's inability to be classified in terms of any consistent scientific taxonomy originally provides a feeling of exhilaration for the scientists, the fact that the object ultimately "presented no identifying features whatsoever" becomes a frustrating burden (346).

For example, note the following passage wherein the narrator describes how the professors are forced to confront their failure to describe the object:

> At the end of the tests the college scientists were forced to own that they could not place it. It was nothing of this earth, but a piece of the great outside; and as such

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dowered with outside properties and obedient to outside laws...The failure was

total; so that nothing was left to do but go back to the laboratory and test

again…at the end of which nothing of value had been learned…in time the

professors felt scarcely sure they had indeed seen with waking eyes that cryptic

vestige of the fathomless gulfs outside; that lone, weird message from other

universes and other realms of matter, force, and entity. (346)

Before analyzing this notion of "the great outside" in more detail, let's note that, in the passage

above, the language is intriguingly evocative of aspects of capitalistic exchange. The professors

are "forced to own" the "total" nature of their "failure," realizing that "nothing of value" could

be discerned from their investigation(s) into the meteorite. This evocation connotes a decidedly

motivated way of interacting with the meteorite on behalf of the professors, one negated at every

step by the relentless opacity of the otherworldly object.

That is to say, the professors want to learn something of value about the meteorite if and

only if such knowledge falls into their preordained parameters of measuring, counting, and

calculating to which they subscribe with a religious fervor. Furthermore, such knowledge does

not seem to be desired in the name of the betterment of humanity or some other altruistic reason

but rather for personal and/or economic gain, as well as institutional acclaim on behalf of the

professors. When these goals become unattainable, they "stayed away in contempt" (349).

Finally, after a series of strange events occur on the Gardner farm—including but not limited to

the family members suffering from "poorer health and a feeling of vague disquiet," unusual

animal footprints in the snow around the property, and the growth of monstrous crops, as "the

snow melted faster around Nahum's than it did anyone else's"—the professors return to

Nahum's home (348). However, according to Pierce, "having no love of wild tales and

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folklore," they "were very conservative in what they inferred" (349). Motivated by an

intellectually elitist "contempt," the professors claim that the weird occurrences on the Gardner

farm constitute "merely country talk" because "there was really nothing for serious men to do in

cases of wild gossip, for superstitious rustics will say and believe anything" (349).

Let's return to this notion of "the great outside" quoted earlier. The narrator states that

"It [the meteorite] was nothing of this earth, but a piece of the great outside" (346). This

reference to "the great outside" connects to philosopher Nick Land's insightful argument

regarding the "paradoxical nature" of "'enlightenment'" in his essay "Kant, Capital, and the

Prohibition of Incest" (63). According to Land,

> An enlightenment society wants both to learn and to legislate for all time, to open
>
> itself to the other and to consolidate itself from within, to expand indefinitely,
>
> whilst reproducing itself at the same time. Its ultimate dream is to grow whilst
>
> remaining identical to what it was, to touch the other without vulnerability…It
>
> lives a profound but uneasy relation *to an outside*[48] that both attracts and repels it,
>
> a relation that it precariously resolves within itself on the basis of exploitation, or
>
> interaction from a position of unilateral mastery…The paradox of the
>
> enlightenment, then, is an attempt to fix a stable relation with what is radically
>
> other, since insofar as the other is rigidly positioned within a relation it is no
>
> longer fully other. If before encountering otherness we already know what its
>
> relation to us will be, we have obliterated it in advance. (63-64)

Land describes quite cogently the violent nature of humanity's subjectively negating reason.

More precisely, he articulates how any and all forms of alterity are always already violently

placed within larger knowledge structures and social contexts, which allow for the perpetual

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[48] Emphasis added

construction of our individualized yet shared world(s). In Nietzsche's language, Lovecraft's "piece of the great outside" has arrived "too early" (182 *The Gay Science*). Along with the narrator, the professors, and Pierce, the Gardners find themselves in an "uneasy relation *to an outside*," but, to quote Nietzsche once more, its "time is not yet" (182 *The Gay Science*).

In book three of *The Gay Science*, the eponymous character from the parable of "The madman" concludes that he has "come too early" with his message of the death of God, which means that "this tremendous event [the death of God] is still on its way, still wandering" and thus "more distant…than the most distant stars" (182). Once more, Nietzsche's language possesses particular significance because it describes the primordial power of the Dionysian summit in a specifically cosmic context—"more distant…than the most distant stars"—that we can connect to Lovecraft's story. In sum, the meteorite of "The Colour Out of Space" is analogous to Nietzsche's madman, each a harbinger "come to early" that signals a Dionysian summit and its radical rupturing of reality as humanity alone defines it.

The meteorite can be said to have "come to early" a la Nietzsche's madman because the characters of Lovecraft's story are motivated by conquering, or, in the last instance, retreating in contempt from the interpretation-resistant radical alterity the entity represents. Like Nietzsche's madman, who throws "his lantern on the ground" and shatters it "into pieces" and later "force[s] his way into several churches" after his message wasn't heard, the meteor responds with its own form(s) of violence, first mutating the fauna around where it landed and, finally, killing the entirety of the Gardner family (*The Gay Science* 182). This reading suggests then, that, from a Nietzschean perspective, along with the professors, Pierce, and even the narrator, the Gardners misinterpret their encounter(s) with the meteorite. That is to say, they each remain motivated by specific ends—survival, knowledge, fame, and wealth—rather than experiencing the Dionysian

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summit for the singularity that it is and all of its aesthetic sublimity, even if it destroys the self.

Consider Nahum's final words before his "grey, twisted, brittle monstrosity" of a skull "completely caved in," which Pierce witnessed and recounts to the narrator (359). His body in the midst of a grotesque "disintegration," Nahum utters the following words before dying:

> "Nothin'…nothin'…the colour…it burns…cold an' wet…but it
>
> burns...everything alive… suckin' the life out of everything…don't know what it
>
> wants…it beats down your mind an' then gits ye…burns ye up…can't git
>
> away…draws ye….ye know summa's commin', but 'tain't no use…jest a
>
> colour…an' it burns an' sucks…it comes from some place what things
>
> ain't as they is here." (358-9)

Nahum claims that he doesn't "know what it wants" and that "it beats down your mind." This language implies that, if only he knew what the entity wanted, then it would leave his family alone. The fact that he cannot figure its motives out "beats down" his mind and, finally, destroys him, both psychologically and physically. Moreover, Nahum says that "ye know summa's comin', but 'tain't no use…jest a colour," which communicates both a fatalistic inevitability that maps onto the literal definition of ecological pessimism outlined as well as a limited and inaccurate interpretation of the entity, meaning that Nahum, finally, views it as "jest a colour," an optical sensation resulting from light reflection, and nothing more.

Now, let's contrast Nahum's response to the meteorite and its destruction of his family with the narrator's final thoughts regarding "the strange days" that plagued Arkham at the end of the nineteenth century. After finishing his narration of Pierce's recollection(s), the narrator provides the following commentary on the events recounted:

> Do not ask me for my opinion. I do not know – that is all…What it is, only God

knows. In terms of matter I suppose the thing Ammi described would be called a

gas, but this gas obeyed laws that are not of our cosmos. This was no fruit of

such worlds and suns as shine on the telescopes and photographic plates of our

observatories. This was no breath from the skies whose motions and dimensions

our astronomers measure or deem to vast measure. It was just a colour out of

space – a frightful messenger from the unformed realms of infinity beyond all

Nature as we know it; from realms whose mere existence stuns the brain and

numbs us with the black extra-cosmic gulfs it throws open before our frenzied

eyes. (368)

Note the tension in the narrator's concluding lines here. First, he commands readers not to ask

his final thoughts on the matter—"Do not ask me my opinion"—before ironically giving his

opinion, even if an uncertain and ambiguous one—"I do not know." The narrator refers to the

omnipotence of a deity and its ultimate ability to understand the entity—"What it is, only God

knows"—which further heightens the irony because this utterance also functions at an idiomatic

level, usually communicating an often comedic frustration, rather than divine providence.

This ironic tension builds throughout the passage. For example, consider the structure of

the following sentences: "This was no fruit of such worlds and suns as shine on the telescopes

and photographic plates of our observatories. This was no breath from the skies whose motions

and dimensions our astronomers measure or deem to vast measure." In each, the entity is first

referred to as a vague pronoun and then defined via apophasis, that is, via what it is not—"*This

was no* fruit…*This was no* breath." Finally, in the exact same language as Nahum, the narrator

concludes that "it was just a colour," but, unlike Nahum, he attempts to contextualize this colour

in some sort of larger context—"out of space"—even if said context remains disturbingly

indecipherable in the last instance. However, the narrator knows at least one point to be true: the entity is a "messenger." While it may appear "frightful," and though its origins may be "from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it," the entity, nevertheless, remains a messenger, one whose information "stuns the brain and numbs us [humanity] with the black extra-cosmic gulfs it throws open before our frenzied eyes."

The arguably tragic message of "The Colour Out of Space," then, is not, as the narrator somberly concludes, that "something terrible came to the hills and valleys on that meteor," or, for that matter, that "something terrible…still remains" (368). Rather, something radically alien did indeed come to the hills of "West of Arkham," but the tragedy stems from the Gardners, along with the professors and Pierce, trying to know it through the moralistic and motivated lenses of positive science and objective humanism. Accordingly, they limit the scope of their engagement(s) and experience(s) with the entity and thus ensure their own destruction, and possibly the entity's, though, as noted above, the narrator thinks "something terrible still remains." We should also note that a certain sinister tone haunts the narrator's hopes for the reservoir's future completion, despite quitting his job on the construction project: "I shall be glad to see the water come" (368-9). Even though he is no longer employed by the "the reservoir gang" and their "chief engineer," he still hopes for the project's completion in the name of literally washing away whatever "something terrible still remains" in the hills of West Arkham (369).

In summation, Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space" engages with ecological pessimism defined both literally and philosophically in multiple ways that offer much for critical analysis. While the examples of literal ecological pessimism hinge on the construction of the reservoir and its destruction of the natural environment, as well as the role of the anonymous

narrator therein, the examples of philosophical ecological pessimism provide perhaps an even more intriguing lens through which to examine Lovecraft's story. The otherworldly entity that crashed into the Gardner farm via meteorite is analogous to Nietzsche's madman described in *The Gay Science*, each "a frightful messenger" that has "come too early" and offering a vision of reality "beyond all Nature as we know it." Unfortunately, the Gardners, along with the professors from Miskatonic University, and Pierce, confront the entity through the motivated and moralistic lenses of positive science and objective humanism, misinterpreting the sublime aesthetic experience it offers. The story thus concludes on a somber tragic note, with the anonymous narrator, finally and ironically, craving the forces of literal ecological pessimism as a means of washing away the trauma of Pierce's narrative and how it "persists more and more in troubling" his sleep (369).

On VanderMeer's *The Southern Reach Trilogy*

Comprised of *Annihilation* (2014), *Authority* (2014), and *Acceptance* (2014), Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* stands as one of the most critically acclaimed and well known works of weird fiction published in the twenty-first century. Over the course of the three novels, the trilogy tells the story of the arrival of an interstellar and/or interdimensional entity that arrives or perhaps was summoned off the shores of the Forgotten Coast, a small stretch of shoreline in the central panhandle of Florida. The novels also narrate the governmental response(s) to the entity, primarily from the titular Southern Reach Agency, and the strange and expanding border dubbed "Area X" that the entity created upon arrival, which radically changes the local landscape and its various lifeforms. Relative to Lovecraft's short story, VanderMeer's trilogy has received a decent amount of scholarly attention, especially given its somewhat recent publication. Before examining each of the texts of the trilogy in detail, a brief literature review

of said scholarship is provided in the name of highlighting how the readings that follow

contribute to discussions of VanderMeer and his growing stature in not only weird fiction but, as

scholar Finola Anne Prendergast posits in her "Revising Nonhuman Ethics in Jeff VanderMeer's

Annihilation," contemporary literature writ large.[49]

One monograph has been published to date that focuses entirely on VanderMeer's fiction,

scholar Benjamin J. Robertson's *None of This Is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer*

(2018). In that text, Robertson makes the compelling argument that, throughout VanderMeer's

writing(s), the author "creates modes of thought that help us to interrupt and overcome received

wisdom and the entrenched modes of thought that produce this wisdom" (3). In the context of

The Southern Reach Trilogy, Robertson ultimately suggests that "Area X fantasizes a world in

which humanity must negotiate and establish its position and meaning according to logics at

odds with inherited knowledge practices and the modes of being they afford, and at odds with its

preestablished understandings of materiality and the truths its conditions" (116). Other

noteworthy readings of the trilogy include Jeffery Clapp's "Jeff VanderMeer, or the Novel

Trapped in the Open World," published in a 2021 issue of *Critique: Studies in Contemporary

Fiction*, and Andrew Strombeck's "Inhuman Writing in Jeff Vandermeer's Southern Reach

Trilogy," published in a 2020 issue of *Textual Practice*. In the former, Clapp holds that "the

genuinely fundamental influence on VanderMeer's work is not a genre at all, but rather a

medium: the open world digital video game," which, though a bit of a stretch, still provides a

fascinating interdisciplinary reading of not only the trilogy but also VanderMeer's more recently

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[49] Prendergast posits that, with the publication of The Southern Reach Trilogy in 2014, "the narrative surrounding his [VanderMeer's] work changed," with the author now no longer viewed as merely a writer of "genre fiction" (333). As Prendergast aptly notes that "the rebranding and mainstream adoption of *Annihilation* and its sequels exemplify important trends in contemporary U.S. literature," the most important of which is the fact that "the division between literature and genre fiction is crumbling, in the marketplace, popular criticism, and academic discourse" (334).

released *Borne* (2017) and *Dead Astronauts* (2019). In the latter, Strombeck attempts to take both the ecological disaster that Area X represents and "VanderMeer seriously," and he thus attempts to "imagine the Southern Reach trilogy as written by Area X, an ecological phenomenon not unlike the Deepwater Horizon Spill," the real-world ecological disaster Strombeck refers to repeatedly throughout his reading (1366).

While each of these readings adds to the growing discussion(s) surrounding VanderMeer's writing and how it should be interpreted, they do not account for the novels' engagement with pessimism. More precisely, they do not discuss how, at the end of each of the three texts, one or more of the principal characters leaps into an unmotivated state of existence, leaving behind their human selves and letting the Dionysian summit that Area X represents wash over them as they become smaller parts of the larger environment. This response to the entity differs from those of the major players in Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space." As discussed above, in that story, characters approach the meteorite-traveling entity through the fundamentally motivated lens of logical positive science and the essentially moralistic lens of objective humanism, and, as a result, they learn nothing about the entity that aligns with their always already reified notions of knowledge and deeply ingrained conceptions of truth. However, this claim is not to say that the characters in the Southern Reach Trilogy approach the entity through a Nietzschean perspective from the get-go, far from it. Rather, as will be seen, from *Annihilation* through at least the conclusion of *Authority*, the Southern Reach agency commences their encounter(s) with Area X by throwing every possible form of positivistic scientific analysis at it, learning only one constant about the entity over the course of roughly thirty years: "the border is advancing" (87).

"I can no longer say with conviction that this is a bad thing"—*Annihilation*

  Annihilation is the first-person epistolary narrative of a female character known only as the biologist, who, along with three other female characters also known only by their occupation—the anthropologist, the surveyor, and the psychologist, who is the leader of their team—goes on a mission into Area X to learn whatever possible about the entity (or entities) that caused the border to form, the twelfth such expedition sent on behalf of the Southern Reach. The text is comprised of her recollections of the events that transpired on her journey, as well as what motivated her to join the mission in the first place: the fact that her husband—who also goes unnamed throughout the novel—served on the previous expedition "as a medic" (37). However, he returned deeply changed and six months after his return died from an incurable and aggressive form of cancer. She describes his condition as follows:

> He did not remember how he had left Area X, did not remember the journey home at all. He had only the vaguest recollection of the expedition itself. There was an odd calm about him, punctured only by moments of remote panic when, in asking him what had happened, he recognized that amnesia was unnatural…Even the day I was told he had been diagnosed with inoperable, systemic cancer, my husband stared at me with a slightly puzzled expression on his face. He died six months later. During all that time, I could never get beyond the mask, could never find the man I had known inside of him…Whatever had happened in Area X, he had not come back. Not really. (38)

The biologist's assessment of her late husband is correct, as readers learn later in *Annihilation* that Area X creates doppelgängers of the human individuals that cross its border, and her returned spouse constitutes one of these impostors. Driven by the tragic strangeness of her

husband's abrupt return and sudden death, the biologist volunteered for a mission, and we follow

her on a weird journey through Area X.

Before exploring the biologist's (mis)adventures in Area X, let's note the examples of

literal ecological pessimism that appear throughout *Annihilation*. For example, consider the way

that the biologist describes the air quality of Area X just after crossing its border, and note how

she contrasts it with "the world back beyond the border" (20). She states "the air was so clean, so

fresh, while the world back beyond the border was what it had always been during the modern

era: dirty, tired, imperfect, winding down, at war with itself," concluding that "back there, I had

always felt as if my work amounted to a futile attempt to save us from who we are" (20). An

undeniable literal ecological pessimism haunts the narrator's thoughts here. She views her

motive-predicated profession as pointless in the face of an intrinsically destructive human

species and its perpetual ravaging of the natural environment.

Later in the novel, she describes both the governmental and public response to Area X in

strikingly pessimistic terms that communicate a larger societal exhaustion from "the general

daily noise of media oversaturation about ongoing ecological devastation" (62). Her

conclusion(s) possess a haunting tone with regards to the myriad of crises we face in our current

moment:

> The government's version of events emphasized a localized environmental
>
> catastrophe stemming from experimental military research. This story leaked into
>
> the public sphere over a period of several months so that, like the proverbial frog
>
> in a hot pot, people found the news entering their consciousness...Within a year or
>
> two, it had become the province of conspiracy theorists and other fringe
>
> elements…the idea of an "Area X" lingered in many people's minds like a dark

fairy tale, something they did not want to think about too closely. If

they thought about it at all. We had so many other problems. (62)

These last three lines capture not only the weirdness of Area X—"like a dark fairy tale"—but

also the bleakness of the world beyond the border, meaning that "so many other problems"

bombard us that thinking about Area X "too closely" becomes a masochistic exercise in fatalism.

Much of *Annihilation*'s narrative focuses on the expedition's discovery of a tower that

"tunneled into the ground" that does not appear on any of the member's provided maps of Area

X (5). The group decides to enter the tower/tunnel, and they discover what the biologist "first

took to be dimly sparkling green vines" but then "saw that they were words, in cursive, the

letters raised about six inches off the wall" (16). Curious about the make up of these words and

how they came to be formed on the wall, the biologist "stepped closer," and her encounter

appears below:

> I saw that the letters, connected by their cursive script, were made from what
>
> would have looked to the layperson like rich green fernlike moss but in fact was
>
> probably a type of fungi or other eukaryotic organism…A loamy smell came
>
> from the words along with an underlying hint of rotting honey…I leaned in closer,
>
> like a fool, like someone who had not had months of survival training or ever
>
> studied biology. Someone tricked into thinking that words should be read. I was
>
> unlucky—or was I lucky? Triggered by a disturbance in the flow of air, a nodule
>
> in the W chose that moment to burst open and a tiny spray of golden spores
>
> spewed out. I pulled back, but I thought I had felt something enter my nose,
>
> experienced a pinprick of escalation in the smell of rotting honey. (17)

The above passage comprises one of the most significant scenes in not only *Annihilation* but also

the trilogy as a whole. We see two major events occur that have ramifications for the respective narratives of both *Authority* and *Acceptance*. The first is that the biologist learn that Area X possesses, at the very least, some sort of strange mimicking ability that works at the level of not only human doppelgängers but also in terms of written language. As we will see, Area X soon transcends this linguistic mimicking and begins making its own original hybrid creations out of some the trilogy's principal characters, a change that the characters come to accept with a Dionysian openness. The second relates to this notion of a Dionysian openness and how the biologist "leaned in closer, like a fool, like someone who had not had months of survival training or ever studied biology." Note how she first describes her actions in a critical light, equating herself to "a fool" who had "not…ever studied biology." In the moment, she derides herself for forgetting her scientific training and thus exposing herself to a possibly hostile entity during a situation in which she should know better.

Her tone changes, though, as she implies that the error lies not in her momentary lapse in judgement but rather in her erroneous "thinking that words should be read," which she claims "Someone tricked" her into believing was the case. The language she uses possesses an ironic tone regarding both the acts of reading and writing because most written words are meant to be read by at least someone at some time. Even if said someone is the person writing the words, this individual must still know when one word ends and another begins, which requires some level of comprehension on the writer's part. However, let's also recall that the biologist composes the entirety of *Annihilation*'s narrative in the past tense, thus denoting events that already happened, which means she sees through the fundamentally biased view of a selective subjectivity, a point she acknowledges multiple times late in the novel:

It may be clear now that I am not always good at telling people things they feel

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they have a right to know, and in this account thus far I have neglected to mention

some detail about the brightness. My reason for this is, again, the hope that any

reader's opinion in judging my objectivity might not be influenced by these

details. I have tried to compensate by revealing more personal information than I

would otherwise, in part because of its relevance to the nature of Area X…There

is nothing much left to tell you, though I haven't quite told it right. But I am done

trying anyway…I have spent four long days perfecting this account you are

reading, for all its faults. (100, 127)

The "brightness" that the biologist refers to in the above passage denotes the self-perceived after

effects of the "tiny spray of golden spores" released by the living words on the tower/tunnel's

wall that entered her nose. This "brightness" causes the biologist to experience a series of

multisensory and physical changes, which she describes as "a kind of prickling energy and

anticipation" that continues to grow inside her as the novel progresses (55-56).

Returning to the biologist's claim that she was tricked into "thinking that words should be

read," her narration reveals a fundamental shift in motive in terms of her approach to Area X.

This change should be attributed to her growing "brightness" and its effects. That is to say,

writing her account after Area X has already infected her, the biologist realizes the possibility of

an unmotivated engagement with written language wherein words, first and foremost, constitute

something not to be read. Indeed, she makes this point quite clear later in the novel.

For example, toward the end of *Annihilation*, after a series of crises and conflicts

decimates the team, the biologist travels alone to the lighthouse in Area X. On the top floor of

said structure, she discovers a trapdoor "that opened onto a space about fifteen feet deep and

thirty feet wide" (70). She discovers "a pile of papers with hundreds of journals on top of

it…each, as it turned out, filled with writing" and "many, many more than could possibly have been filed by only twelve expeditions" (70). As she recollects on this discovery, she addresses the reader directly: "Can you really imagine what it was like in those first moments, peering down into that dark space, and *seeing that*?[50] Perhaps you can. Perhaps you're staring at it now" (70). At a literal level, her question is directed to another member of a future expedition into Area X, and thus her writings will be added to "the pile of papers." On a philosophical level, this question constitutes a cautionary recommendation to readers, not one that tells of danger ahead, but rather one that wants us to stop misreading the biologist's writing as words in the same way that she, precisely in retrospect, misread the organisms on the wall of the tower/tunnel and was therefore infected with the brightness.

This interpretation does not imply, however, that the biologist failed to read any of the journals she discovered. As we know, the brightness still grows within in her at this point in the narrative but remains in a rather latent state, compared to its effects as described in *Acceptance*, which will be addressed later in this chapter. We must also recall that she remains motivated by her husband's death and what possibly transpired on his prior expedition. Nevertheless, after reading through some of the of journals, she stops, pessimistically concluding the following:

> At a certain point, I discovered I was so overwhelmed I could not continue, could not even go through the motions. It was too much data, served up in too anecdotal a form. I could search those pages for years and perhaps never uncover the right secrets, while caught in a loop of wondering how long this place had existed, who had first left their journals here, why others had followed suit until it had become as inexorable as a long-ingrained ritual. By what impulse, what shared fatalism? All I really thought I knew was that the journals from certain

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[50] VanderMeer's emphasis

expeditions and certain individual expeditions members were missing, that the

record was incomplete. (77)

While the above passage possesses undeniable echoes of a postmodern approach to

historiography—for example, as seen in the archivist characters of Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of

the Woods* (1994) and Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), who each work to (re)construct a historical

record that refuses to cohere—the biologist is dismayed not by the lack of narrative order to the

journals but what she calls the "shared fatalism" that their placement in a large pile

communicates. This detail raises a question in terms of a tension in the biologist's description of

the pile of journals. In others words, is the placement of the journals actually "fatalistic" if she

equates it to "a long-ingrained ritual?

To clarify, the term "a long-ingrained ritual" connotes not only a muscle-memory-based

act but also one which requires at least some level of voluntary action and, moreover, may

possess elements of the sacred and/or mystical. Additionally, let's recall that she earlier

identified herself to readers as "someone tricked into thinking that words should be read." We

should therefore view the pile of journals as evidence of a "long-ingrained ritual" in which it

serves as a votive offering given by those from "the world back beyond the border" as a tribute

to the Dionysian summit that is Area X, that which resists all interpretations and, in Bataille's

words, "slips away from us, at least until we stop being human," which is exactly the case not

just for the biologist but all of the characters in the trilogy that confront Area X as well. This

claim raises multiple questions: if we accept that members of previous expeditions left the

journals at the top of the lighthouse as some sort of ritualistic votive offering to Area X, then

who or what created the words on the tower/tunnel's walls? The answer to that question is a

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creature the biologist dubs "the *Crawler*[51]" (60).

Late in *Annihilation*, the biologist encounters the Crawler, the creature responsible for the living words on the tower/tunnel's walls. In *Acceptance*, the last novel of the trilogy, readers learn that this Crawler was once human. A character we meet early in that novel, Saul Evans, a local lighthouse keeper on the Forgotten Coast, is changed into this crawler by a some sort interstellar or interdimensional entity that he views as a "delicate beyond measure…tiny shifting spiral of light" (376). Consider how the biologist describes the Crawler upon her confrontation with it just before the conclusion of *Authority*:

> this moment of an encounter with the most beautiful, the most terrible thing I might ever experience—was beyond me. What inadequate recording equipment I had brought with me and what an inadequate name I had chosen for it—the Crawler…It's not that I became used to the Crawler's presence but that I reached a point—a single infinitesimal moment—when I once again recognized that the Crawler was an organism. A complex, unique, intricate, awe-inspiring, dangerous organism. It might be inexplicable. It might be beyond the limits of my senses to capture—or my science or my intellect—but I still believed I was in the presence of some kind of living creature, one that practiced mimicry using my own thoughts. (118)

In the above passage, the biologist describes the Crawler as simultaneously "the most beautiful" and "the most terrible," which sounds akin to the conception of the weird discussed in this dissertation's introduction. She acknowledges the limits of technology to engage with the entity, —"What inadequate recording equipment I had brought with me"—as well as language to describe the strangeness of the being before her, —"what an inadequate name I had chosen for

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[51] VanderMeer's emphasis

it"—but there is a precise pivot point in the passage.

The pivot occurs when the biologist describes "a single infinitesimal moment" wherein she "recognized that the Crawler was an organism." In this precise instant of time, she falls back on the security of logical positive science and the seeming objectivity it provides. Nevertheless, as Nietzsche would phrase things, it was still only a "moment." In other words, right after this description, the biologist states that she "managed to turn my back on the Crawler" (119). The Crawler suddenly attempts to assimilate her, meaning that it tries to mold her in the image of Area X, an excruciatingly painful and incomprehensibly invasive experience that she describes as follows; the similarities to Bataille's notion of the Dionysian summit and its "exuberance of forces" that "violates the very integrity of beings" are readily apparent:

> A raging waterfall crashed down on my mind, but the water was comprised of fingers, a hundred fingers, probing and pressing down into the skin of my neck, and then punching up through the bone of the back of my skull and into my brain…and then the pressure eased even though the impression of unlimited force did not let up…I smelled a burning inside my own head and there came a moment when I screamed, my skull crushed to dust and reassembled, mote by mote….It was the most agony I have ever been in. (120)

In the passage above, the biologist is confronted by the Dionysian summit that is Area X, and the Crawler serves as both a medium for this summit and the nightmarish composer of the living words on the tower/tunnel's walls. She equates the feeling to "A raging waterfall" that "crashed down on her mind," but one weirdly and disturbingly "comprised of fingers, a hundred fingers." These seemingly demonic digits penetrate the biologist's being "through the bone of the back of my skull and into my brain," thus fundamentally altering her experience of Being such that she

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was first "crushed to dust" but then "reassembled, mote by mote" into something new.

Continuing her narration of her confrontation with the Crawler, the biologist states that "there came a push, and the Crawler tossed me aside" (120). She concludes "apparently, I was recognizable to the Crawler now," implying that "I was words it could understand" (120). This passage suggests that the Crawler remains responsible both for the creation of new hybrid beings written in the code of Area X and the expansion of the border. That is to say, the Crawler is programmed by the entity or entities that first infected Saul Evans, and this programming instructs the Crawler to confront other beings and to assimilate them into Area X via rewriting their biological makeup such that they become "recognizable" as "words it [the Crawler/Area X] could understand." While terms such as "programming" and "instructs" may connote possible objective frameworks through which to explain the motives and actions of the Crawler, these words remain admittedly inadequate to describe the radical alterity of the creature; they are thus used provisionally and schematically. Though the lifeforms it leaves on the tower/tunnel's wall may appear decipherable as language to the human individuals that perceive it, the Crawler writes in a linguistic code beyond human comprehension as such. This alien language rewrites the biological makeup of the beings it encounters, assimilating them into the ever-growing empire of Dionysian summit that is Area X.

Before moving to an analysis of *Authority*, the biologist's final conclusions recorded in *Annihilation*, which include her decision to stay in Area X, warrant consideration. After her encounter with the Crawler, the biologist returns to the lighthouse and leaves her journals with the others, and she ultimately decides to stay in Area X. Consider her pessimistic conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the many expeditions and the possibility that the border's expansion may not be such a dreadful scenario:

The terrible thing, the thought I cannot dislodge after all I have seen, is that I can

no longer say with conviction that this is a bad thing. Not when looking at the

pristine nature of Area X and then the world beyond, which have altered so

much…I am aware that all of this speculation is incomplete, inexact, inaccurate,

useless. If I don't have real answers, it is because we still don't know what

questions to ask. Our instruments are useless, our methodology broken, our

motivation selfish (127).

This passage captures both the ecological pessimism at the heart of *Annihilation* and the ironic

tone that hangs over it at the novel's conclusion. The biologist simultaneously laments the

failure of human knowledge in the face of radical alterity—"this speculation is incomplete,

inexact, inaccurate, useless" because "we still don't know what questions to ask"—and

acknowledges that the expansion of Area X and its "pristine wilderness" may not denote "a bad

thing." The vague nature of this designation—"a bad thing"— suggests the biologist experiences

an ironic interior indeterminacy, one that hinges on a conflict between her remaining humanity

and the "the brightness" that continues to grow inside her. This brightness will eventually

subsume her completely, writing over her human biological code such that she becomes a

singular and readable part of the larger script of Area X. In sum, at this final moment in the

novel, the biologist welcomes this change not only of herself but also the world writ large, and

she thus willfully gives herself over to the Dionysian summit that is Area X.

Though this final passage in *Annihilation* ultimately relates the biologist's decision "to

continue on into Area X," it is not the last time readers encounter her. Rather, this final scene in

Annihilation denotes her last appearance as a human being in the trilogy. As will be seen, in

Authority, readers meet Ghost Bird, a doppelgänger of the biologist created by Area X who is

interrogated throughout much of the second novel in the trilogy by John "Control" Rodriguez, the recently promoted new director of the Southern Reach Agency. Additionally, late in *Acceptance*, the biologist reappears, but this time in the form of a giant amphibious monster that appears to be made of the landscape itself. For now, let's turn to a reading of *Authority* and examine the ways in which second novel in the *Southern Reach Trilogy* engages with ecological pessimism.

"All of the history here, everything encoded, rendered meaningless"—*Authority*

The first notable difference between *Annihilation* and *Authority* can be seen at the level of narration. While the biologist narrates the former in the first person via her journal, the latter is narrated in third person, with periodic dips into the consciousness of the novel's principal character, the aforementioned John "Control" Rodriguez. This change is not without consequence because, at a formal level, it reestablishes control and/or authority—hence both the character name and title of the novel—of the narrative(s) of Area X. That is to say, the biologist's account in *Annihilation* must be questioned on some level because of her growing brightness and how this change alters not only her opinions on Area X but also her reliability as a narrator. The third person narration of *Authority* therefore attempts to (re)establish some semblance of reliability in terms of the stories that the human characters tell themselves about what they can know about Area X and how, precisely, they can know it. However, this reliability is flimsy at best, and, by the novel's end, Area X becomes a singular monolith of (in)consistency, albeit one that defies any attempts to comprehend its utterly alien nature.

For example, consider the following passage that appears early in *Authority* wherein the anonymous narrator describes the "simple quality" of "the truth" behind the appearance of Area X:

But the truth did have a simple quality to it: About thirty-two years ago, along a remote southern stretch known by some as the "forgotten coast," an Event had occurred that began to transform the landscape and simultaneously caused an invisible border or wall to appear. A kind of ghost or "permeable pre-border manifestation" as the files put it—light as fog, almost invisible except for a flickering quality—had quickly emanated out in all directions from an unknown epicenter and then suddenly stopped at its current impenetrable limits. Since then, the Southern Reach had been established and sought to investigate what had occurred, with little success and much sacrifice of lives via the expeditions…Yet that loss of life was trifling compared to the possibility of some break in containment across a border that the scientists were still studying and trying to understand. (154)

The narrator's description of the "simple quality" of "the truth" of Area X here possesses an undeniable air of ecological pessimism, both literal and philosophical. On the one hand, the ambiguity of the term "Event" leaves open the possibility that whatever catalyzed the formation of Area X could be framed as something to be blamed on human error and then rectified via positive science. The "Event" to which the narrator refers could connote a literal ecological catastrophe of some sort, a manmade crisis—for example, an oil spill—that "transform[s]" the local landscape of the "'forgotten coast.'" On the other, the passage ends with a noun phrase—"that the scientists were still studying and trying to understand"—which communicates a fundamentally motive-based approach to the crisis that contains an undeniable moral component as well. The possible "loss of life" that would result "if some break in containment" occurred motivates the scientists to keep working to learn as much about Area X before such a scenario

can come to fruition. This interpretation is not to say that trying to prevent the loss of human life

is not a noble motive but rather to reinforce the notion that the Southern Reach is run by

fundamentally motivated characters who view Area X as an entity that will be, in the last

instance, conquered via human knowledge. Nevertheless, as *Authority* progresses, readers learn

that this is not the case.

Later in *Authority*, the narrator describes Control's increasingly pessimistic thoughts

regarding the ineffectiveness of the prior expeditions into Area X. Rather than using the term

"pessimism" to describe his perspective, the narrator describes Control's thoughts as follows,

and the reference to Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)—a famous work of

existentialism[52] that possesses undeniable pessimistic elements—is clear to see:

> A need to somehow act as if they weren't as far along without concrete results or
>
> answers. Or the need to describe the story arc for each set of expeditions that
>
> didn't give away how futile it was fast becoming…Control wondered how anyone
>
> had kept it straight, and how the truth might have eaten away at morale rather than
>
> buoyed it, brought into the Southern Reach a kind of cynical fatalism. How
>
> peculiar to keep prepping the "fifth" expedition, to keep rolling this stone up this
>
> hill, over and over. (207)

In the passage above, Control questions how "a kind of cynical fatalism" might have crept into

the members of the Southern Reach agency as Area X continues to resist attempts at

comprehension. He compares the repeated but futile expeditions into Area X—which total far

more than both he and the biologist were led to believe—to Sisyphus in the underworld of

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[52] In his *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre defines existentialism as "the belief that existence precedes essence," which means that "man…conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown in existence;" in other words, Sartre concludes, existentialism denotes the view that man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (22).

ancient Greek mythology, who was forced by Zeus to roll an enormous boulder up a hill for cheating death.

Let's recall, though, that Camus' existentialist interpretation of the myth hinges on Sisyphus enjoying this activity—"One must imagine Sisyphus happy"—and thus embracing what Camus calls the absurdity of human existence (123). This reference therefore possesses some level of irony because none of the members of the Southern Reach agency that *Authority* depicts—which includes Grace, the assistant director of the agency and rival to Control's power; Whitby, a "'cohesive naturalist and holistic scientist specializing in biospheres;'" Jessica Hsyu, the staff linguist; Mike Cheney, the head of the science division of the Southern Reach Agency; and Deborah Davidson, a physicist and Cheney's second-in-command—appear to be happy at all (160). Rather, they are, at best, disgruntled employees working for a clandestine government agency that continues to keep them out of the proverbial loop, and, at worst, hollow husks of humanity always already on the verge of a nervous breakdown wrought by the incomprehensible situation in which they find themselves. In each instance, depending on the individual, the characters must choose either to work mindlessly for the institution or become secret saboteurs, plotting ways to undermine both the long and short-term goals of the Southern Reach.

Accordingly, much of *Authority* possesses a Kafkaesque feeling of nightmarish secret bureaucracy and illogical institutional authority, —again, hence the title—and the character of Control can be read, then, as an allusion to the nameless protagonist of Stanislaw Lem's novel *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* (1961), another individual torn between a commitment to institutional duty and the chaos of his institutional surroundings. The key difference between these two texts, though, is how their respective principal characters respond to the stressful scenarios at moments of climactic crisis. In *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*, at the novel's

conclusion, the nameless agent and writer of the titular memoirs is presented with a clear

opportunity to escape the Building, Lem's precursor to VanderMeer's Southern Reach, but he

decides not to leave; his reasoning appears below:

> Why hadn't I escaped before? Escaped instead of struggling with the Mission, the
>
> instructions -- the false instructions -- and the false conspiracy which turned out to
>
> be genuinely false…Why? Because I had nowhere to go, nothing to return to?
>
> Because the Building could reach me anywhere? Or was it because, in spite of all
>
> the torment I'd endured -- against, entirely against, my better knowledge -- I still
>
> held on to my faith – like a last hope, a hope against hope – in that accursed, that
>
> thrice accursed Mission of mine. (185-6)

The most revealing detail in this striking passage is the notion that Lem's agent, in the last

instance, remains motivated by "faith," which he equates to "a last hope" in the face of an

overwhelming feeling of pessimism that stems from the lack of even a modicum of clarity

regarding the actual details of his "accursed Mission." This faith in the Mission is ironically

what keeps the narrator within the recesses of the Building at the novel's conclusion and thus

motivates him to search for answers from a corpse in the text's chilling final lines.[53]

    As Robertson compellingly argues, "the climactic moment in *Authority*…comes as

Control patrols the halls of the government agency he nominally directs" and discovers a wall

that appears to be alive (109). For Control, this encounter is the proverbial straw that broke the

camel's back, and he flees the Southern Reach in terror as he realizes that "the border was

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[53] "Why had he turned away at the crucial moment…The razor? I couldn't pry it from his icy fist. Why not?
Shouldn't the fingers loosen when the heart has beaten its last? Why wouldn't he let go? And the tears, why were
they false? Why did he lie in precisely that position? Why did he hide his face?
And why -- why did the pipes whine and shriek and sing --? 'Give me the razor!' I screamed. 'Traitor! Bastard!
Give me the razor!!'" (188).

coming to the Southern Reach" (328). In other words, prior to this moment in *Authority*, even in

his most paranoid and questioning of moods, Control remains both motivated and grounded by

his faith in the very idea of a border, that Area X, though unfathomable, sits on one side of the

border and reliably objective reality on the other. This faith is thus distinctly different than that

of the nameless agent still stuck in the Building at the conclusion of Lem's novel, who has faith

in his mission as a means of maintaining some semblance of sanity. Nevertheless, in either case,

the characters' faiths are not only tested but also broken, yet the party responsible differs. For

Lem, it is the institution itself, while for VanderMeer, it is that which resists the institution's

interpretation(s), the Dionysian summit that is Area X.

Returning to Robertson's reading of *Authority*, he suggests that "Control is…unprepared

for the manifestation of Area X within this banal, all too human world" of the Southern Reach

(113). As claimed above, Control's encounter with the living wall constitutes his breaking point,

and the narrator's description of his terrified thoughts as he abandons the institution, which will

be considered shortly, further reveals his acquiescence to the pull(s) of pessimism. This

interpretation differs from Robertson's reading of the scene, which holds that "Area X may well

destroy humanity, but this outcome does not call for pessimism" or "a nonpolitical stance

ignoring humanity and humanness in the name of survival" (128). While the political ideas that

Robertson reads into not just *Authority* but also VanderMeer's oeuvre as whole provide an

intriguing framework through which to consider the author's engagement(s) with ecological

catastrophe in the context of weird fiction, the notion that the destruction of humanity "does not

call for pessimism" is evidentially erroneous. Though he quickly couches his claim(s) in the

same type of pseudo-cosmopolitan, trans-species post-humanism that Harraway and Scranton

call for, positing that the destruction of humanity "requires a rethinking of politics that

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recognizes and accepts the weird," Robertson chooses simply to ignore the blatant examples of pessimism that appear in *Authority* and throughout the final novel of the trilogy, *Acceptance*.

For example, after abandoning the Southern Reach, Control speeds home to grab bare necessities before presumably leaving the Forgotten Coast for good. When he reaches home, though, he encounters his mother, —who also works for the institution and secured Control's employment—and she provides some crucial information to her son about the border's expansion. The pessimism in her explanation remains quite clear:

> Imagine a situation, John, in which you are trying to contain something dangerous. But you suspect that containment is a losing game. That what you want to contain is escaping slowly, inexorably. That was seems impermeable is, in fact, over time becoming very permeable. That the divide is more perforated than unperforated. And that whatever this thing is seems to want to destroy you but has no leader to negotiate with, not state goals of any kind. (335)

Note the irony in her usage of the imperative verb "imagine." Control does not have to imagine such a "situation"; his mother is describing the inexplicable reality in which he already exists, and this description further exemplifies the pessimism that overwhelms Control on all fronts at the novel's conclusion. For Control, the imaginary has become the Real, and there is an abject horror in this transformation and a bordering-on sadistic irony in his mother's description of the situation. Moreover, she describes attempts at "containment" as "a losing game," connoting a grim outlook in which the outcome of the clash between Area X and humanity has already been determined, and an enemy that could never comprehend our pleas for mercy in the first place has soundly defeated us.

Driven by the news that Ghost Bird has "been AWOL for the past three days," Control parts ways with his mother and heads north "to the wilderness above the town of Rock Bay" in pursuit (336-7). The narrator recounts that "the night before he would reach the town of Rock Bay, John let himself have a last meal," and, yet again, the pessimistic connotations in this description remain readily apparent, as "last meal" equates Control to prisoner on death row, having one "last meal" before execution (344). Control's ruminations on the doomed nature of his surroundings in a "fancy restaurant" and the utter obliviousness of the other patrons stands as perhaps the most pessimistic passage in *Authority*:

> A family came in—rich, white, in Polo shirts and sweaters and khaki pants as if from a clothing catalogue. Oblivious of him. Oblivious of the bartender…they existed in their own bubble. They had just about everything and knew almost nothing…He didn't envy them. He didn't hate them. He felt a curious nothing about them. All of the history here, everything encoded, rendered meaningless. None of it could mean anything next to the secret knowledge he carried with him. (344)

In this scene, Control finds himself not judging this "oblivious" family but rather feeling "a curious nothing about them." This nothingness that he feels stems from the fact that both their lack of knowledge and his "secret knowledge," in the end, are "rendered meaningless" by Area X. All motives, all meanings, "everything encoded" in the world beyond the border will become moot in the face of the Dionysian summit of Area X, and, at this late point in *Authority*, Control accepts this truth and relinquishes his attempts at control of the crisis.

And yet, facing these dire straits, he still chooses to continue his pursuit of Ghost Bird. This detail would seem to contradict his overwhelming feelings of pessimism and thus confirm

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aspects of Robertson's reading. However, as will be seen, the pessimism he feels at this point in *Authority*—which is absolutely a literal ecological pessimism—is ultimately supplanted by his embracing of a philosophical pessimism in the vein of Nietzsche and Bataille discussed earlier, wherein confrontation with the Dionysian Summit—i.e. Area X—"*unmotivates* the moment and frees life of ends."

With the help of the bartender at the restaurant he visited, Control rents a boat and sails "downriver toward the sea," feeling "a sense of impending apocalypse" (346). As he continues his nautical journey, his motivations and the meaning(s) behind them begin to fade away, as he pessimistically concludes that, regardless of whether he finds Ghost Bird, "it was all useless anyway" (348). He describes how the landscape offers a solace that stills his thoughts, removing "the frenetic need to analyze, to atomize the day or the week…and with it the weight and buzz of human interaction and interference," that is, all the minutiae of being human (349).   In short, on his journey from the soon-to-be overrun Southern Reach to the wilderness of Rock Bay, Control willfully releases his ties to the human world beyond the border and his motivation(s) to live in that reality, choosing instead literally to leap into the unknown, quite literally, the Dionysian summit dubbed Area X.

The final scene in *Authority* depicts this literal leaping, as Control finally catches up to Ghost Bird. She threatens him with a gun, which makes him burst out into laughter caused by "a fierce joy or hysteria" that "had risen inside of him" (355).   The narrator does not describe Control's intense feeling(s) as "a brightness," but the similarity to the changes that the biologist undergoes throughout *Annihilation*—at least in terms of a distinct interior transformation—is evident, meaning that, via his encounter with the living wall back at the Southern Reach, Control, too, was already touched by Area X. Furthermore, Control's experiencing "a fierce joy

or hysteria" echoes the "*destruction*, change, and becoming," the "overflowing energy" of Dionysian pessimism that Nietzsche calls for in the face of looming abyss, rather than an ascetic resignation a la Schopenhauer. That is to say, Control's laughter is that of Nietzsche's Dionysian pessimist, one who welcomes pain, suffering, and eventually death as the aesthetically transformative and therefore necessary catalysts that they are.

Eventually, Control stops laughing and "sobered up" (355). He surrenders to the gun-wielding Ghost Bird and her interrogation of his motives, asking him why he followed her and what he thought would happen upon reaching her. His lack of answers or explanations for his actions, let alone a single motive, further exemplifies Control's transformation into a Dionysian pessimist who gives himself over to the summit of the unmotivated moment, and the narrator's description of his thoughts (or lack thereof) reveals both how meaningless his decision to follow her was and his willingness to die at her hands—not out of love for or devotion to her—but rather as a truly transcendent experience wherein he becomes part of the ever-changing landscape of Area X:

> The truth was, he didn't known what he had thought would happen, had perhaps unconsciously fallen back on their relationship at the Southern Reach. But that didn't apply here…God, but the coast here was painfully beautiful, the dark lush greens of the fir trees piercing his brain, the half-raging sky and sea, the surge of salt water against the rocks twinned to the urgent wash of blood through his arteries as he waited for her to kill him or hear him out. Seditious thought: There would be nothing too terrible about dying out here, about becoming part of all of this. (355)

Rather than shooting Control, Ghost Bird decides to accept his help in her attempts to comprehend her identity as a weird replica of the biologist, and the two characters decide to take a chance and dive into a lagoon nestled within the rocky coastline that hopefully serves as another entrance into Area X.

The final scene of *Authority* depicts Ghost Bird and Control's respective dives into the lagoon. The narrator's description of Control's final thoughts represents the character's total embracing of a Dionysian pessimist's worldview, and yet a troubling irony, once more, lingers. Before jumping, Control puts his faith in his ability to comprehend Area X via his subjective reason, a sort of genuflection to the powers of positive science, which he already knows Area X can easily dismiss. The narrator states that "he [Control] had seen wonders and he had seen terrible things," and he thus "had to believe that this"—the possible entrance into Area X via lagoon—"was one more and that it was true and that it was knowable" (357). Contemplating his decision to jump, Control "took one last look back at the world he knew…took one huge gulp of it, every bit of it he could see, every bit of it he could remember," and then "Control jumped" (357). However, similar to the biologist's brief belief described in *Authority* that the Crawler could be classified among other terrestrial organisms, Control's faith in the possible objectivity of Area X is only momentary, and he leaps into the unknown, accepting, finally, the transformative power of the Dionysian summit.

Aside from ending the novel on a rather big cliffhanger, daring readers not to dive into the next novel in the trilogy, VanderMeer concludes *Authority* with its principal character(s) relinquishing their own individual and delusional conceptions of authority, as they leap into the Dionysian summit for which their humanity is the price of admission. While Ghost Bird remains motivated to get answers about the truth of her existence, and though Control, at the last second,

puts his faith in positive science, each character willfully and knowingly leaps into an unknown reality wherein the very notion of motive is revealed, finally, for what it really is: a flimsy human construct. Control's leap at the end of *Authority* is therefore by no means analogous to a Kierkegaardian leap of faith, wherein one puts faith in Christianity, despite all evidence to the contrary, far from it. Instead, Control's dive into the lagoon at the end of *Authority* denotes a decidedly Dionysian act, a submission to the summit of Area X, its radical possibilities, and the fundamental lack of meaning(s) and motive(s) therein, yet it is only in *Acceptance* that readers get to see where these characters land.

"As if purpose could solve everything"—*Acceptance*

Continuing the trend of a shift in narrational style seen in the move from first person in *Annihilation* to third person in *Authority*, *Acceptance* differs from the first two novels of the trilogy in terms of what we could call its hybrid narration. Rather than using a series of first person journal entries or third person omniscience to relate its story, *Acceptance* combines these two forms and adds an additional third perspective as well. The first is the second person narration of the former director of the Southern Reach, Gloria. She is revealed to be the psychologist from the first expedition and also a former friend of the lighthouse keeper who eventually becomes the Crawler, Saul Evans. Her narrative recounts her decision to enter Area X without the approval of the Southern Reach and ends with her death depicted in *Annihilation*. The second is the third person narration of the aforementioned Saul Evans, a lighthouse keeper on the Forgotten Coast, who serves as the initial contact between the entity that created Area X, and later becomes the Crawler that readers see in *Annihilation* and again at the conclusion of *Acceptance*. Finally, the third viewpoint is that of Ghost Bird and Control's journey through Area X wherein they encounter Grace, the assistant director of the Southern Reach that appears

in *Authority*. Nestled within this third viewpoint, readers get to read what Grace dubs "the biologist's last will and testament," that is, the character's journal entries written after her decision to stay in Area X at the conclusion of *Annihilation* and up until her transformation into a monstrous behemoth made of the landscape itself, which appears late in *Acceptance* (464).

As is the case in *Authority*, this change in narrational style is not without consequence. While in that text the modification served to (re)establish some semblance of reliability and literal control of the narrative(s) of Area X, the hybrid narration of *Acceptance* does exactly what its title suggests: accepts the changes wrought by Area X and makes them manifest at a formal level. This claim is not to say that, relative to *Annihilation* and *Authority*, *Acceptance* denotes some sort of highly experimental text that challenges the readers far more than its predecessors. Rather, *Acceptance* and its hybrid narration reflects a gentle acquiescence to the weird narrative content of the trilogy as a whole, one predicated on the notion that attempting to control Area X is always already a fool's errand and thus something that, in the last instance, requires acceptance.

This notion of acceptance is where we can also see trilogy ultimately move away from the anxieties of literal ecological pessimism toward an embracing of the Dionysian summit that is Area X, which demands we leave what makes us human behind in the name of constant change and perpetual becoming. While the psychologist/Gloria and Saul Evans/the Crawler's respective narratives depict some elements of ecological pessimism, the narrative of Ghost Bird, Control, and later Grace on their journey through Area X contains the most intriguing examples. Moreover, they connect more cohesively with the notion of unmotivated existence a la Bataille in his reading of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence. Accordingly, the final reading of this second chapter will focus primarily on that narrative thread of *Acceptance* as a means of concluding this

discussion of Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space" and VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*.

Ghost Bird and Control's narrative essentially picks up where it left off at the end of *Authority*, with the two characters having made it into Area X via an entry point in a lagoon in the wilderness of Rock Bay. Ghost Bird is determined to find the remains and/or new form of her prior self, the biologist, so they head towards the lighthouse where the biologist left her journal at the conclusion of *Annihilation*. As they start their trek, the narrator describes Control's thoughts regarding the likely changes already begun in the world beyond the border of Area X, stating that "somewhere…new fronts had opened up, Area X expanding in ways that might not event match its prior characteristics" (412). Control then acknowledges the pessimism of his decision to flee the Southern Reach in pursuit of Ghost Bird, claiming that "planes might be falling from the skies," and that "this non-mission, this *following*[54] of his"—the journey into Area X with Ghost Bird—was therefore "already a failure" (412). While walking with Ghost Bird, Control also thinks of a report that Whitby—a character in *Authority* revealed to have traveled into Area X on a secret mission with the psychologist/Gloria—wrote on the fundamental unknowability of Area X. Quoting this report, Control asks if the entities responsible for Area X "passed judgement without a trial" and "decided there could be no treaty or negotiation" with the human species (412). He pessimistically concludes that humanity was "condemned by an alien jury" before we could attempt to defend our existence, but Ghost Bird corrects him, suggesting that, rather than condemnation caused by contempt, our destruction was more likely the result of "indifference" (412).

With this notion of indifference, VanderMeer once more reminds readers of the undeniable Lovecraftian influence on the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, but there is a twist. While

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[54] Emphasis VanderMeer's

Lovecraft's indifference is decidedly cosmic in scale, VanderMeer's indifference is connected

not just to the alien entities that created Area X but also to the very landscape itself, to the

"pristine wilderness" that Ghost Bird recounts in her exchanges with Control throughout much of

Authority. Again quoting Whitby, Control captures this indifference in precise terms via

rhetorical question, asking Ghost Bird "would that not be the final humbling of the human

condition…that the trees and birds, the fox and the rabbit, the wolf and the deer…reach a point at

which they do not even notice us, as we are transformed" (412). He continues, claiming that "we

think in terms of machines, not animals" and Area X "doesn't acknowledge machines" (413). In

response, Ghost Bird laughs at Control's conclusions, and her description of our limited

cognitive capacities captures a precise feeling of pessimism:

> Have you not understood yet that whatever's causing this can manipulate the
>
> genome, works miracles of mimicry and biology? Knows what to do with
>
> molecules and membranes, can peer through things, can surveil, and then
>
> withdraw. That, to it, a smartphone, say, is as basic as a flint arrowhead, that it's
>
> operating off of such refined and intricate senses that the tools we've bound
>
> ourselves with, the ways we record the universe, are probably evidence of our
>
> own primitive nature. Perhaps it doesn't even think that we have consciousness or
>
> free will—not in the ways it measures such things…It probably extends to us the
>
> least attention possible. (414)

The above passage captures the powerful disconnect between humanity and Area X. Our limited

perception of reality and "the ways we record the universe" hinges on our faulty senses. Given

that humanity remains stuck looking through the cognitive categories of space and time or cause

and effect, we may appear to lack "consciousness or free will" by whatever created Area X and,

therefore, it "extends to us the least attention possible." This inability to communicate with the entities that created Area X because of the basic tenets of what makes us human—this "final humbling of the human condition," as it were—denotes an undeniably bleak view of humanity and its relationship to the world it inhabits, a pessimism that remains fundamentally ecological in nature.

As mentioned above, Ghost Bird and Control eventually encounter Grace, the assistant director of the Southern Reach and close confidant of the former director/psychologist/Gloria. After a tense exchange between the three characters, led by a gun-toting Grace, they decide to stick together, especially after she provides more pessimistic news about Area X and how long she believes she has been within its borders, three years, as well as the fact that she, along with Ghost Bird, thinks "we're not on Earth" (488). Grace delivers information regarding what happened at the Southern Reach once the border began to advance, and she claims that, in the end, "we accomplished nothing" and "made no difference" (460). Considering these facts, Ghost Bird, yet again, laments the pessimistic nature of humanity's existence and its inability to know, in any true sense, that which exists outside itself:

> Right now, if the outside world existed, it would still be sending radio-wave
> messages into space and monitoring radio-wave frequencies to seek out other
> intelligent life in the universe. But Ghost Bird didn't think those messages were
> being received. Another way people were bound by their own view of
> consciousness. What if an infection was a message…If so, the message had
> not been received, would probably never be received, the message buried in the
> transformation itself. Having to reach for such banal answers because of a lack of

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imagination, because human beings couldn't even put themselves in the mind of a

cormorant or an owl or a whale or a bumblebee. (490)

We can clearly see the tenets of ecological pessimism in this passage, as it describes the very

same disconnection described earlier, which hinges on humanity's communicative limitations

and our inability to know anything besides a human and therefore motivated conception of

reality. However, the narrator takes it a step further, here, echoing the famous line from

communication theorist Marshall McLuhan that "the medium is the message" (28). The medium

in this case, though, is not Cubism and its ability to alter viewer perspective in radically new

ways but rather Area X itself, and the message, tragically, is not received because we are unable

to escape our fundamental humanness.

   With this realization, Ghost Bird comes to accept fully the pessimism intrinsic to

humanity's attempt to stave off the radical changes wrought by Area X. Accordingly, she

realizes that an unmotivated approach offers the only way to live in this new reality. Let's recall

that, given she is a doppelgänger of the biologist, Ghost Bird was never really committed to

combatting whatever caused Area X to come into being. She instead seeks answers regarding

the nature of her existence as a weird copy of the biologist, and she learns, finally, that no

answers will be provided. The narrator's description of her thoughts as recounted in this pivotal

moment in the text appear below, and we can clearly see Ghost Bird ridiculing the very idea of

motive—what she calls "the why"—and its innate humanness (491):

   She knew where it would all lead, what it always led to in human beings—a

   decision about what to do. What are we going to do? Where do we go from here?

   How do we move forward? What is our mission now? As if purpose could solve

   everything, could take the outlines of what was missing and by sheer will invoke

it, make it appear, bring it back to life…You could know the what of something

forever and never discover the why. (491)

Facing the ultimate unknowability of Area X, Ghost Bird, along with Grace and Control, still

choose to continue their journey through the unknown. Echoing the famous closing line of

Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953), they go on, heading towards the tower/tunnel depicted

in *Annihilation*. Control claims their perseverance is necessary in the face of such debilitating

circumstances because he believes there may still be a way to neutralize the Crawler and thus

perhaps stop the expansion of Area X. Nevertheless, their encounter with the Crawler at the end

of *Acceptance* remains decidedly ambiguous and ends both the novel and VanderMeer's trilogy

on a decidedly pessimistic note.

Upon reaching the tower/tunnel, the characters begin their descent to encounter the

Crawler, with Control hoping that, in confronting it, the expansion of Area X may be halted.

They eventually reach the Crawler, and the creature reveals to Ghost Bird, via a flash of

"brilliant gold-green light" that "plunged into the heart of her," the possible origins Area X

(555):

She saw or felt, deep within, the cataclysm like a rain of comets that had

annihilated an entire biosphere remote from Earth. Witnessed how one *made*[55]

organism had fragmented and dispersed, each minute part undertaking a long and

perilous passage through spaces between, black and formless, punctuated by

sudden light as they came to rest, scattered and lost—emerging only to be buried,

inert, in the glass of a lighthouse lens. And how, when brought out of dormancy,

the wire tripped, how it had, best as it could, regenerated, begun to perform a vast

and preordained function, one compromised by time and context, by the terrible

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[55] VanderMeer's emphasis

truth that the species that had given Area X its purpose was gone…All of this in

fragments through taste or smell or senses she didn't entirely understand. (555)

This passage is fascinating for a number of reasons, and the most obvious of which is that it

provides at least some context for what caused the formation of Area X, though the precise

details still remain unclear. Beyond the information contained within this revelation, the passage

also suggests that whatever entity created Area X is itself the victim of literal ecological

pessimism, as a "cataclysm like a rain of comets…annihilated an entire biosphere remote from

Earth"—recall Lyotard's notion of solar catastrophe—and forced "one *made* organism" to travel

"a long and perilous passage through spaces between"—presumably dimensions—and land in a

"lighthouse lens" on the Forgotten Coast.

Furthermore, note the italicized use of the adjective "*made*," which implies that the

organism that catalyzed the formation of Area X was intentionally created by an entity greater

than itself, one that is now "gone," or, at the very least, inaccessible, which leaves this "one

made organism" to do what it was programmed to do: "perform a vast and preordained function"

that, to humanity, remains utterly indecipherable. An undeniable feeling of not just pessimism

but also tragedy—as defined by the *OED*, "an event, series of events, or situation causing great

suffering, destruction, or distress, and typically involving death"—haunts Ghost Bird's vision of

the creation of Area X (2021). That is to say, "the one *made* organism" is itself a victim in a

vicious cycle of literal ecological pessimism wherein, in the last instance, solar catastrophe

always already looms and can "annihilate[d]" everything, including the very agents responsible

for its creation.

During this otherworldly vision, Ghost Bird acknowledges that Grace, who stands on the

stairs behind her, "could not possibly understand what she [Ghost Bird] was seeing" and was

instead "seeing something else—something from…her life before" (556). Unable to see the lack of immediate danger, Grace "shot Ghost Bird through the back," apparently thinking that Ghost Bird was now an agent of the Crawler (556). Under the proverbial spell of what she dubs "the full force of the brightness," Ghost Bird "was not injured" and "felt nothing," and she pleads with Grace to lower her rifle. The narrator then describes Grace, "frozen there in the half-light, rifle poised," the look in "her eyes" accepting "the knowledge that this was futile, that this had always been futile, that there was no turning back, that there could be no return" (556). Yet again, an undeniable pessimism is apparent in the narrator's description, and this time it's in Grace's vision of the pointless nature of humanity's action(s). As might be expected, after failing to kill Ghost Bird, "Grace disappeared up the steps, as if she'd never been there," leaving Ghost Bird alone with Control on the steps of the tower/tunnel (556). Or so Ghost Bird thought, as she "realized, too late, that Control was no longer there, had either gone back up or had snuck past, down the stairs, headed for the blinding white light far below" (556).

Readers learn that the latter is the case, as the narrator reveals Control had somehow made it past both Ghost Bird and the Crawler and was making his way to the bottom of the tower/tunnel. In his final appearance in *Acceptance*, Control feels "the brightness welling up through his mouth, his eyes, and filling him at the same time" (572). In this ultimate confrontation with the Dionysian summit, Control accepts that "he was changing…that he was no longer entirely human," which, as Bataille argues, is the necessary exchange in our encounter with the summit; we must submit that which makes us human (572). As the narrator's description suggests, Control appears to be at peace with his transformation:

> He no longer knew whether he was still even a sliver of human by the time he—
> painfully, nauseated, crawling now, or was he loping?—came down the most

ancient of steps, of stairs, to the blinding white light at the bottom shaped like the immortal plant, like a comet roaring there but stationary, and now his decision to push himself forward in the final extremity, to push through against that agony and that outward radiating command to turn back, and to enter … what? He did not know, except that the biologist had not made it this far, and he had. He had made it this far. (573)

Once again echoing Beckett, in his final act as a human being, Control chooses "to push himself forward… to push through against that agony and that outward radiating command to turn back." Note the lack of surety in Control's confrontation with "the blinding white light," as he questions what he is supposed to do in his final moment, with the infinitive "to enter" offering the closest approximation to his option. All he knows, in the end, is that "he had made it this far," he kept going, even if his reasons for doing so, his motive(s), were never quite clear.

The narrator then states that "he [Control] sniffed the air, felt under his paws the burning heat, the intensity," which implies that Control's transformation into something not human is complete (573). With that, the narrator states that "John Rodriguez elongated down the final stairs, jumped into the light" (573). This rather ambiguous description of Control's final appearance seems to suggest that he has been transformed into a rabbit-like creature of some kind, and the reference to "his paws," the way he "elongated down the stairs," and the fact that he "jumped into the light" provide admittedly debatable evidence for this claim. And yet, ironically enough, he is referred to not as "Control" or a nameless "it," but rather as "John Rodriguez," which is intriguing because it implies that some vestige of his former self still resides in his new form, but readers can, at best, only speculate. Still, beyond this speculation, readers should note that John Rodriguez's decision to jump into the light at the conclusion of

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Acceptance mirrors his decision to leap into the lagoon at the end of *Authority*. In each instance, the character relinquishes control, accepts a certain defeat, as it were, and leaps into an unmotivated existence, throwing himself/itself into the unknown in the name of nothing but radical change, of perpetual becoming, of forever leaving behind that which makes one human and embracing the Dionysian summit.

In closing, let's now examine Ghost Bird and Grace's final appearance in *Acceptance*, as the themes of ecological pessimism, both literal and philosophical, appear throughout the short but profound scene. The two characters reconvene after Ghost Bird exits the tower, and Ghost Bird tells Grace "not to be afraid" (585). The narrator describes Ghost Bird's thoughts on what Control may or may not have accomplished by reaching the blinding white light at the bottom of the tunnel as follows:

> At the moment he had gone through the door so far below, she had seen him and had felt the Crawler's seekers fall away, the entire apparatus receding into the darkness after him. There had come a shuddering miniature earthquake, as the sides of the tunnel convulsed once, twice, and then were again still…Control had added or subtracted something from an equation that was too complex for anyone to see the whole of…Why be afraid of what you could not prevent? Did not want to prevent. Were they not evidence of survival? Were they not evidence of some kind? Both of them. There was nothing to warn anyone about. The world went on, even as it fell apart, changed irrevocably, became something strange and different. (584-5)

Ghost Bird is convinced that "Control had added or subtracted something," but she also pessimistically acknowledges that what, exactly, he did "was too complex for anyone" to

interpret. Rather than assuming the best or the worst, she embraces the unknown, the motiveless, concluding that "the world went on, even as it fell apart, changed irrevocably, became something strange and different," and she and Grace were now in the process of traversing a radically altered reality, a fundamentally different world than the one they left behind when they crossed the border into Area X.

Consider, then, the final descriptions of Ghost Bird and Grace's trek back across the border and into the world they left behind, which no may no longer exist, at least not as they remember it. Note also how the narrator repeatedly references their experiencing time in a decidedly different way:

> The present moments elongated…She lived in the present by dint of blistered feet and chafed ankles and biting flies drawn to the sweat on her ears or forehead and the parched feeling in her throat despite drinking water from her canteen…Every beautiful thing that lay ahead she knew she had seen at least once behind her. Eternity found in the repetition…The hegemony of what was real had been altered, or broken, forever. (585)

The above passage serves as one of the most compelling example of ecological pessimism defined philosophically that appears throughout the *Southern Reach Trilogy*. Ghost Bird and Grace experience time in a radically different way than they did both in Area X, such that "present moments" become "elongated" and, in a distinctly Nietzschean nature, "eternity" can be "found in the repetition."

In this final scene in both *Acceptance* and the Southern Reach Trilogy, VanderMeer leaves his readers with two fundamentally unmotivated characters walking across a landscape with "no signs of human life," living in the eternity of repetition found "in that moment in a

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world that was so rich and full," removing themselves from all reason for or connection to morality, and "throwing pebbles as they went, throwing pebbles to find the invisible outline of a border that might not exist anymore" (586-7).

Chapter 3: Afropessimism—Victor LaValle

This third chapter analyzes afropessimism, and the concept is considered primarily through the thinking of two contemporary philosophers: Calvin Warren and Frank B. Wilderson III. While Warren does not deem himself an afropessimist—a term outlined in detail shortly—his *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (2018) suggests otherwise. In that text, he presents a decidedly negative view of not only the history of black existence[56] in a precisely metaphysical context but also in our contemporary moment and possible future(s), that is, unless we collectively leave behind any and all notions of what it means to be "human." Wilderson's *Afropessimism* (2020) is the first book-length study of the topic, though "study" is a hard label to apply, given the large amount of biographical content that the book features. To date, Wilderson's monograph features the most convincing explanation of and compelling engagement with afropessimism, though, as we will see, his definition still has its own issues to address. The discussion starts with his work and then considers Warren's as a sort of rhetorical alternative, but before moving to that analysis the meaning of the term "race" is provided in the name of clarity and consistency, as the word is thrown around in many contexts but rarely (if ever) defined.

In his close reading of W.E.B. Du Bois, entitled "On Paragraph Four of 'The Conversation of Races'" and published in a 2014 issue of *CR: The New Centennial Review*, scholar Nahum Dimitri Chandler's provides a fascinating definition of "race":

> In an implicit yet profound sense that would articulate an entire ontology, the
>
> thought of the concept of race is that a certain order of essence will determine the

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[56] This lack of capitalization of "black existence" and later "blackness" is intentional. This choice is made in the name of not reifying "race" as some sort of metaphysical ground—see Chandler's definition of race below—upon which one can metaphorically stand and theoretically make claims with absolute surety.

status and character of difference or the organization of differences among that

order or form of being called human. It can thus be said that the concept of race as

it develops in European and American thought—precisely during the time of the

elaboration of the critical thought of the transcendental—produces and maintains

a naïve or precritcal understanding of the problem of the sign or the *phänomenon*

as that which organizes the very possibility of its premises. In an abstract sense it

would portend to name within the form of the human an order of pure being—a

pure essence that would show forth as a form of being. In a practical sense (and

the other face of the abstract) it would insist in a dogmatic fashion on the status of

a form of human being understood under the heading of "European," or

subsequently "white," as a unique and primordial dispensation within an entire

system of metaphysics. And, derivatively, it would concatenate a distribution of

other figures of the human in a categorical and hence hierarchical order. (255-6)

Chandler's rich definition offers multiple inroads for discussing both the fundamentally

existentialist engagement with black identity that Warren posits in *Ontological Terror* and the

biographically reflective reading that Wilderson espouses in *Afropessimism*. Furthermore,

Chandler's conception of "race" highlights a crisis of meaning at the heart of the concept itself.

To clarify, Chandler's conception of race hinges on a Derridean interpretation of the term

and, more precisely, what he describes as "a problem of grounding" in another piece entitled

"The Economy of Desedimentation: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Discourses of the Negro,"

published in a 1996 issue of *Callaloo* (82). Considering the invention of "European American or

White identity" in the context of "the first half of the 19th century," Chandler argues that "a

distinctive discourse in the United States concerning the Negro" came into existence, one that

possesses what he calls a "metaphysical appurtenance" (81-2). Chandler suggests that

> the implied question of this discourse, the hidden question about European
>
> American or White identity, brings into view the fact that the adjudication of the
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> status of the Negro implies a prior determination of the grounds for deciding any
>
> "racial" identity as one thing or another. What emerges as decisive…is
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> the problem of grounding, in some fashion that would be absolute, the socially
>
> observable hierarchy that they wish to affirm. The only manner in which such a
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> claim could be made was to assume, in the philosophical sense, that a distinction
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> could be made absolute, oppositional or pure, according to Aristotle's law of non-
>
> contradiction. On that basis then, one could insist upon the categorical difference
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> of the Negro and the White. The stricture upon the intermixing of the races thus
>
> maintains within itself a fundamentally philosophical question. (82)

Chandler's proposed "problem of grounding" and the way it makes the meaning of race "a

fundamentally philosophical question" cogently describes the faulty metaphysical status of the

concept. In other words, Chandler negates a transcendent or absolute conception of race wherein

"one could insist upon the categorical difference of the Negro and the White" as some sort of

metaphysical determinant of individual or collective identity and any correlating social

hierarchy.

Nevertheless, as the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the subsequent worldwide

protests against racial injustice revealed, both "race" and "racism" are still very much with us,

and Warren and Wilderson's studies reveal a critical response to their sustained presence in our

contemporary moment that remains undeniably pessimistic. And yet, with both scholars, the

very metaphysical status of race that Chandler argues against returns to the fore as that which, to some extent, defines afropessimism, so we are left with a tension between these two ways of thinking about race and, more importantly, racism. Accordingly, this chapter dig into this tension as a means of considering what constitutes afropessimism, the stakes of such a worldview, and the relevance of the topic in the context of Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook" and LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*. Ultimately, this third and final chapter argues first that Warren and Wilderson's conceptions of afropessimism possess notable flaws that leave them both open to critique, which therefore implies that the concept needs to be fleshed out further. Rather than defining afropessimism solely through other works of philosophy, this chapter proposes, then, that LaValle's novella offers a productive pathway for delineating the topic, though philosophy is not completely abandoned. Indeed, the conception of afropessimism discussed hereafter remains predicated on the Derridean notion of the phantasm or "living death" to describe the horror(s) of the lived experience of the black protagonist in LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*.

Frank Wilderson III's Afropessimism and Calvin Warren' s Black Nihilism

As mentioned above, Wilderson's *Afropessimism* is the only book-length study dedicated solely to engaging with the topic of afropessimism, and it also offers an insightful and incisive explanation of the concept. In that text, Wilderson argues quite convincingly that "Black people *embody*[57]…a meta-aporia for political thought," and he elaborates on what he means exactly with the term "meta-aporia" before expanding on the implications of his claim (13). He writes that

> For most critical theorists writing after 1968, the word aporia is used to designate
> a contradiction in a text or theoretical undertaking. For example, Jacques Derrida

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[57] Wilderson's emphasis

suggests an aporia indicates "a point of undecidability, which locates the site at

which the text most obviously undermines its own rhetorical structure, dismantles,

or deconstructs itself." But when I say that Black people embody a meta-aporia

for political thought and action, the addition of the prefix *meta-* goes beyond what

Derrida and the poststructuralists meant—it raises the level of abstraction and, in

so doing, raises the stakes. (13-14)

Wilderson's turn to Derrida for the purposes of clarifying his afropessimist perspective is both

striking and convincing for multiple reasons, perhaps none more so than the overlap of his ideas

with Derrida's[58] outlined in the latter's essay "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of

Philosophy" (1982). Additionally, a through line can be traced from Wilderson's Derridean-

infused conception of afropessimism and Warren's fundamentally Heideggerian framing of the

concept. In short, beyond the metaphysical context in which Wilderson and Warren argue

afropessimism must be discussed, they also share an impulse to consider the concept through a

certain hermeneutic lens.[59]

       This shared hermeneutic framework of Wilderson and Warren raises multiple questions

about some of their claims regarding, for example, metaphysics and the possibility of blackness

therein. For example, consider Wilderson's description of afropessimism:

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[58] In "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," Derrida provides the following explanation for his term "white mythology" via reference to metaphysics, which he defines as "a white mythology which assembles and reflects Western culture: the white man takes his own mythology (that is, Indo-European mythology), his logos-that is, the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that which it is still his inescapable desire to call Reason," ultimately concluding, therefore, that "white mythology" denotes "metaphysics which has effaced in itself that fabulous scene which brought it into being, and which yet remains, active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible drawing covered over in the palimpsest" (213).

[59] In his stellar *Ten Lessons in Theory: An Introduction to Theoretical Writing* (2013), scholar Calvin Thomas posits that "hermeneutics is generally understood as 'the study of understanding'" and thus "generally interpreted as 'the theory of interpretation in general'" (84). In the words of philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose *Truth and Method* remains a cornerstone of hermeneutics, hermeneutic interpretation denotes an attempt "to rediscover the nodal point in the artist's mind that will render the significance of his work fully intelligible" (166).

Afropessimism, then, is less of a theory and more of a *metatheory*[60]: a critical

project that, by deploying Blackness as a lens of interpretation, interrogates the

unspoken, assumptive logic of Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and

feminism through rigorous theoretical consideration of their properties and

assumptive logic…It is pessimistic about the claims theories of liberation

make when these theories try to explain Black suffering or when they analogize

Black suffering with the suffering of other oppressed beings. It does this by

unearthing and exposing the meta-aporias, strewn like land mines in what these

theories of so-called universal liberation hold to be true. (14)

While Wilderson's metaphysics may not appear readily obvious in the above passage, his

rhetorical logic suggests that afropessimism transcends all other versions of something broadly

called "theory"[61] in such a way as to reveal "the meta-aporias" that undercut "the claims theories

of liberation make." That is to say, via his positioning of afropessimism as some how above the

proverbial mine field of meta-aporias that hamstring "Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis,

and feminism," Wilderson arguably reifies[62] afropessimism as the theoretical lens par excellence,

thus giving the topic a certain metaphysical character.

Recalling philosopher Gianni Vattimo's definition of metaphysics discussed in chapter

two, let's note that "metaphysics is a violent response to a situation that is itself fraught with

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[60] Wilderson's emphasis

[61] In *Ten Lessons in Theory*, Thomas defines "theory" as "a battery of disturbing *questions*, an unsettled and unsettling set of strategies" (2). More precisely, citing fellow scholar Jonathan Culler, Thomas posits that theory functions "as a particularly challenging way of 'thinking about thinking'" by resisting "reification," which denotes the "baleful reduction" of reality as such to "commodified thing-iness," thus leaving theory "to rescue itself and its objects of analysis from reification, to keep itself unreified" (2-4).

[62] See note 6 above and Thomas' definition of reification as "the "baleful reduction" of reality as such to "commodified thing-iness" (4). In other words, reification denotes the violent delineation and labeling of reality such that the lines and labels that divide our shared phenomenological experience of existence appear to be transcendent, timeless, and true.

danger and violence" because of the way it posits unstable ontological foundations that "seek[s] to master reality at a stroke, grasping (or so it thinks) the first principle on which all things depend (and thus giving itself an empty guarantee of power over events)" (8). Here, then, is where the metaphysical implications of Wilderson's definition of afropessimism can be discerned. On the one hand, Wilderson's version of afropessimism offers a convincing critique of what we might tentatively call the limits of theory, but, on the other, he reifies afropessimism in such a way that its metaphysical connotations cannot be ignored.

Indeed, consider the language he uses to describe the core claim of afropessimism, which, as we will see shortly, remains remarkably similar to Warren's thesis in *Ontological Terror*. Via an if/then rhetorical logic, Warren proposes the following:

> If, as Afropessimism argues, *Blacks are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures*[63], then this also means that, at a higher level of abstraction, the claims of universal humanity that the above theories all subscribe to are hobbled by a meta-aporia: a contradiction that manifests whenever one looks seriously at the structure of Black suffering in comparison to the presumed universal structure of all sentient beings. (15)

Wilderson's proposition possesses its own interior tension, which hinges on his claim that "*Blacks are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props*." His language implies that subjectivity[64] is that which would authenticate or stabilize black identity. However, as

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[63] Emphasis Wilderson's

[64] Citing Thomas' *Ten Lessons in Theory* yet again, we can define subjectivity in both Marxist and Lacanian terms as the consequence of the fact that "human reality must be distinguished from nature because each and every *subject* of this reality must be set apart from the real, must separate or free itself from the real's oppressively immediate *hic et nunc* or "here and now'" (30). In other words, as Thomas rightly notes, "human reality must be distinguished from the real because, in the real, there is nothing to distinguish the human from the merely natural/animal 'here and

Martin Heidegger—again, the philosopher from whom Warren forms his conception of afropessimism—argued in *Being and Time* (1927), "subjectivity" stands as but one of many "distinctive domains of Being" that "have come into view and have served as the primary guide of subsequent problematics," and, as such, has "remain uninterrogated" (44). In sum, Wilderson's afropessimism arguably remains constrained by its own seemingly unconscious desire for a subjectivity-based form of metaphysics, specifically in terms of how he frames afropessimism as the ultimate negation of all other forms of theory, which not only reifies but also arguably deifies the idea in such a way as to prohibit its own potential for critique.

Making a relatively similar argument but with some significant differences, Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* suggests that we should think about blackness through the lens of a precisely defined form of nihilism, not pessimism or even afropessimism, though both of the latter terms remain notably undefined, like many of Warren's key terms. Via a relatively intriguing but nevertheless inaccurate reading of Heideggerian philosophy, Warren argues that "Black humanism and postmetaphysics"[65] each still "leave the question of being unattended" (5). He elaborates on this claim as follows:

> Both [black humanism and postmetaphysics] assume being is applicable an
> operative—black humanism relies on metaphysical being and postmetaphysics
> relies on multiple interpretations or manifestations of being. In other words, the

now,'" meaning that, "for Marx, *labor* pries humans loose from nature," but "for Lacan, *language* separates reality from the real," which implies, then, that "human reality"—that is, subjectivity—"is only ever the product of human work with words" (31).

[65] Warren claims that "Black humanism…appropriates schematization, calculation, technology, probability, and universality—all the instruments of metaphysical thinking—to make epistemological, ethical, and ontological claims concerning blackness and freedom," concluding that "all problems have solutions for black humanists" because "their task is to uncover the solution the problem conceals, as this uncovering equates to an eradication of the problem" (4). Meanwhile, he claims that "postmetaphysics…attempts the surmounting or twisting of the ground and logic of metaphysics" because "metaphysics reproduces pain and misery and restricts human freedom," but there is a catch (4).

human's *being*[66] grounds both philosophical perspectives…This is to suggest that both discourses proceed as if the *question* of being has been settled and that we no longer need to return to it—the question, indeed, has been elided in critical discourses concerning blackness. (5)

This elision in "the critical discourses concerning blackness" is the basis for Warren's intervention, as his project "meditates on the (non)relation between blackness and Being by arguing that black being incarnates metaphysical nothing, the terror of metaphysics" (5). As one might expect, Warren's *Ontological Terror* offers a striking study of blackness through the lens of the Heideggerian philosophy, and yet, as with Wilderson, a tension lingers in Warren's argument that requires examination.

Given Warren's claim "that black being incarnates metaphysical nothing, the terror of metaphysics," we should consider exactly what he means with this term, "metaphysical nothing." He argues that

> the function of black(ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing)… The puzzle of blackness, then, is that it functions in an antiblack world without being—much like "nothing" functions philosophically without our metaphysical understanding of being, an extraordinary mystery. Put differently, metaphysics is obsessed with both blackness and nothing, and the two become synonyms for that which ruptures metaphysical organization and form. The Negro is black because the Negro must assume the function of nothing in a metaphysical world…Nothing terrifies metaphysics, and metaphysics attempts to dominate it by turning nothing into an object of knowledge, something it can dominate, analyze, calculate, and schematize. (5-6)

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[66] Warren's emphasis

The terms that require immediate attention in the above passages are "metaphysics" and "black nihilism." Though he cites Vattimo's *The End of Modernity* (1988) and *Nihilism and Emancipation* (2004) for reference, Warren never defines exactly what he means with the term "metaphysics," choosing instead to define it via the same type of elision that he laments in "the critical discourses concerning blackness." "Black nihilism" gets a somewhat similar short shrift, as Warren claims that it ultimately "aims to trouble the ontological foundations of both postmetaphysics and black humanist discourses" via the view that "Being is not universal or applicable to blacks," though a concrete definition of the term remains unseen (12).

Regarding the meaning of "metaphysics," Warren argues that "we can understand both Vattimo's and Heidegger's projects as the attempt to capture the relationship between what we might call metaphysical Being (fraudulent Being as object) and Being (in its proper contextualized sense)," suggesting that "this relationship, indeed, has been particularly violent and has produced various forms of suffering" (11). He concludes, then, that "this suffering is the essence of metaphysics, or what Vattimo would call 'pain,'" and, therefore "the metaphysical tradition has reduced Being…to an object, and this objectification of Being is accomplished through the instruments of science and schematization" (11). This equating of metaphysics with "suffering" wrought by the "objectification of Being…through the instruments of science and schematization" remains the closest Warren comes to an explicit definition of the term "metaphysics" in *Ontological Terror*.

This detail is not without significant implications because it reveals Warren's selective reading of the history of philosophy and the metaphysical structures therein, an interpretation that remains predicated on conceiving of blackness as the terror-inducing opposite of existence, nothing. Viewing blackness through this framework is to ignore, for example, Heidegger's own

arguments about the function of "nothing" in both *Being and Time* and *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953). Heidegger suggests in the former that "the 'nothing' with which anxiety brings us face to face, unveils the nullity by which Dasein, in its very *basis*[67], is defined; and this basis itself is as thrownness into death" (356). Put differently, for Heidegger, nothing hinges on its uncanny unknowability, meaning that we *know* that things exist, or, that there is *something*, but we remain, at best, anxiously apprehensive about *nothing* because of what it implies and makes us confront, that is, our own throwness in time and unavoidable mortality in that continuum. Similarly, Heidegger argues in *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953) that "one cannot, in fact, talk about and deal with Nothing as if it were a thing, such as the rain out there, or a mountain, or any object all" (28). His logic for this claim hinges on the notion that "Nothing always remains unfamiliar," and, therefore, "we cannot begin to speak about Nothing immediately, as we can in describing a picture, for example" (*Introduction* 29). In sum, Warren undoubtedly appropriates the Heideggerian notion of nothing, utterly removes the concept from its original context, and inaccurately applies it to a specific something.

We should also note how Warren repeatedly cites the Heideggerian notion of "*Destruktion*," which he claims is in need of "correction" because of its Eurocentrism (29). Warren argues that feminist scholar Hortense Spillers completes this task of "correction" via her "protocol of tripping through layers of *attenuated meaning*"[68] such that "the destructuring of metaphysics" can "address the concealment of the Negro…buried deeply beneath layers of metaphysical violence" (29). This (mis)interpretation of *Destruktion*—which Heidegger

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[67] Heidegger's emphasis

[68] Warren's emphasis

describes in *Being and Time* quite clearly as an attempt "to *destroy*[69] the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being"—blatantly omits the notion of deconstruction, which Derrida conceived of as a philosophical extension of Heidegger's project outlined in *Being and Time* (44). For Derrida, deconstruction denotes the unending attempt(s) to desediment the layers of metaphysical certitude in any and all contexts that have violently held sway since (at least) the time of the ancient Greeks. Furthermore, as Derrida plainly tells readers in one of his later essays, "Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" published in *Acts of Religion* (2002), "*deconstruction is justice*,"[70] a claim that remains contingent on the notion that the law remains infinitely perfectible, which thus allows for "the political chance of all historical progress" (242-3).[71] Put plainly, Warren's exclusion of Derrida in his discussion of Spillers' so-called "correction" of Heidegger borders on irresponsible and reveals perhaps the most pressing issue in Warren's *Ontological Terror*: his entire argument remains philosophically untenable and haphazardly constructed.

Given the tension(s) that haunt their respective works, what, then, are we to make of Warren and Wilderson's engagements with afropessimism? While Warren differentiates his project from Wilderson specifically on the grounds of not being an afropessimist, Warren's black

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[69] Heidegger's emphasis

[70] Derrida's emphasis

[71] Arguably one of Derrida's most incisive and fascinating essays, "Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority'" proffers, in the words of the editor of *Acts of Religion*, Gil Anidjar, "an explicit rethinking of the notion of force, a rethinking that radically reconfigures the threads that link force and violence to language, law, and the theologico-political" (228). In the essay, Derrida makes the striking claim that justice, as opposed to the law, remains ultimately unknowable, even in the context of deconstruction. Derrida concludes, then, that "the operation that amounts to founding, inaugurating, justifying law, to *making law*, would consist of a *coup de force*, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust and that no earlier and previously founding law, no preexisting foundation, could, by definition, guarantee or contradict or invalidate" (228).

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nihilism and its attempt(s) "to trouble the ontological foundations of both postmetaphysics and black humanist discourses" share an undeniable affinity with Wilderson's conception of afropessimism and its argument that any and all "claims of universal humanity" are constricted by "the structure of Black suffering in comparison to the presumed universal structure of all sentient beings." As a solution (of sorts), both Warren and Wilderson argue that, in order to begin to address these perceived shortcomings of both philosophy and theory writ large, the very notion of the human must be banished and removed from any and all discourses that would wield it as a weapon, which is a compelling argument and thus an intriguing way of framing afropessimism, or, what Warren deems as black nihilism. And yet, each thinker's attempt at achieving this lofty goal begins with a rhetorical misstep—for Wilderson, in the form of the reification of afropessimism on precisely metaphysical lines, for Warren, in the form of a misreading of Heideggerian philosophy and an ignoring of Derridean deconstruction—which leaves the very nature of something called afropessimism less than clear and thus in need of further description.

Accordingly, we arrive, once more, at Lovecraft, and we must address, finally, the problem of race that arguably haunts his entire fictional corpus.[72] Accordingly, this chapter proposes that examining Lovecraft's engagement with race in "The Horror at Red Hook" allows for a nuanced formulation of afropessimism that we can subsequently trace through LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*. In short, we can examine a version of the concept that stems first and foremost from fiction, not philosophy, while also providing an opportunity to see the concept, afropessimism, in action, as it were.

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[72] In their *The Love of Ruins: Letters on Lovecraft* (2016), scholars Scott Cutler Shershow and Scott Michaelsen cogently claim, "there can be no deracialized reading of Lovecraft" because "'race' is everywhere in the corpus, from first to last," functioning as "a structuring concept for every important argument Lovecraft's texts make about human difference" (17).

This rhetorical move follows that of literary scholar Vincent Leitch, who argues in his

Literary Criticism in the 21st Century: Theory Renaissance (2014) via a reading of Derrida's *The*

Beast & the Sovereign Volume II (2011) that "it is literature, not philosophy" that allows us to

think through the implications of what Derrida described as "the living dead, the fantasm, and

survivance" (152). LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*, which is written as a direct response to

Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook," engages with the notion of "the fantasm," or

"phantasm," in fascinating ways.[73] But what, exactly, does Derrida mean with this term, and

what does it offer us, here, in terms of comprehending afropessimism?

The Derridean Phantasm: Living Death

Derrida defines "phantasm" in *The Beast and the Sovereign Volume II* somewhat

circuitously, providing a variety of ways to grasp his usage of the term in the context of his

reading Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). He ultimately traces the word back to its

ancient Greek origin, "*phantasmata*," which he defines as "word that…means both product of

the imagination and fantasy or revenant" (136). He elaborates on this explanation, claiming that

"phantasm" denotes

> the unthinkable, what we are calling, still in the tracks of Robinson Crusoe,
>
> "living death," the living death that scared Robinson Crusoe so much, that state in
>
> which the dead man is alive enough to see himself die and know that he is dying,
>
> to live his own death…to be present at his death and beyond, without however
>
> failing to die, to survive his death while really dying, to survive his death. What I
>
> called "phantasm" in this context is indeed the inconceivable, the contradictory,
>
> the unthinkable, the impossible. (148)

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[73] According to Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud, the editors of Geoffrey Bennington's translation of *The Beast and the Sovereign Volume II*, "Derrida spells this word (in French) as both "*fantasme*" and "*phantasme*" (77).

Via Derrida's description of the phantasm as "the unthinkable," or an experience of "living

death…in which the dead man is alive enough to see himself die and know that he is

dying…without however failing to die," we can grasp the conception of afropessimism discussed

in this chapter's reading of LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*. In sum, the Derridean

conception of the phantasm describes "the living death" of the novella's black protagonist,

Tommy Tester. That is to say, with its black protagonist willfully embracing a certain "living

death" as a means of not just surviving but also avenging the racial injustices he faces, LaValle's

The Ballad of Black Tom highlights the precise affect that this notion of the phantasm generates

and reveals itself, finally, as an afropessimist work of weird fiction.

Let's pivot, now, to an examination of Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook," which

portrays racial diversity as a terrible truth that the story's bigoted protagonist, Thomas F.

Malone, connects to a precisely metaphysical horror, a cosmic chaos of original hybridity. In the

eyes of both Malone and the story's narrator, this comic chaos justifies their prejudiced views of

a Brooklyn neighborhood. After examining the story, LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* will

be examined as a contemporary afropessimist counter to Lovecraft's racism not only in "The

Horror at Red Hook" but also as it appears throughout the author's oeuvre.

"The Horror at Red Hook"—"a horror beyond all human conception"

Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook" was published in a 1927 issue[74] of *Weird Tales*.

Aside from its overt racism and blatant bigotry, the first notable facet of the text is the fact that it

is not part of the larger Cthulhu mythos and thus lacks much of the cosmic horror atmosphere

that the author is widely known for today, featuring instead a demonic entity, Lilith—a female

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[74] Though first published in *Weird Tales,* "The Horror at Red Hook" was later published in book form in the third volume of *Not at Night*, —entitled *You'll Need A Night Light* (1927)—a horror anthology that was relatively prestigious in its time and edited by British horror author Christine Campbell Thomson.

figure in Mesopotamian and Judaic mythology—as its central supernatural element. Narrated in

the third person, the story tells of one Thomas F. Malone, a former New York detective who now

resides in Rhode Island and suffers from a phobia of large buildings; readers first encounter him

"staring queerly for a second at the tallest of the buildings before him, and then, with a series of

terrified, hysterical shrieks breaking into a frantic run" (125). Via flashback, the narrator then

provides the reason(s) for Malone's public mental breakdown, which hinges on his involvement

with an individual named Robert Suydam, "a lettered recluse" of the neighborhood (130).

As Lovecraft scholar and author of Cthulhu mythos fiction Peter Cannon points out,

"critics…have noted" that "The Horror at Red Hook" suffers from "lapses in logic and confusion

of plot" (220). Given these issues, as well as the fact that the analysis that follows focuses more

on the text's blatant depictions of racism, rather than its narrative content, a brief plot synopsis of

the story from well known Lovecraft biographer and scholar S.T. Joshi is quoted at length below

in the name of clarity and cohesion for the reading(s) to come:

> The plot of "The Horror at Red Hook"…is presented as an elementary good-vs.-
> evil conflict between Thomas Malone…and Robert Suydam…Suydam first
> attracts notice by "loitering on the benches around Borough Hall in conversation
> with groups of swarthy, evil-looking strangers." Later he realizes that his
> clandestine activities must be masked by a façade of propriety; so he cleans up his
> act, foils the attempts of relatives to deem him legally incompetent…and as a final
> coup marries Cornelia Gerritsen…The wedding party following the ceremony,
> held aboard a steamer at the Cunard Pier, ends in horror as the couple are found
> horribly murdered and completely bloodless. Incredibly, officials follow the
> instructions written on a sheet of paper, signed by Suydam, and insouciantly hand

his body over to a suspicious group of men…From here the story takes a still

more pulpish turn, and we are taken into the basement of a dilapidated church that

has been turned into a dance-hall, where horrible rites to Lilith are being practiced

by loathsome monstrosities. The corpse of Suydam, miraculously revivified,

resists being sacrificed to Lilith but instead somehow manages to overturn the

pedestal on which she rests…thereby somehow ending the horror. All this time

detective Malone merely watches from a convenient vantage-point, although the

sight so traumatizes him that he is forced to spend many months recuperating in a

small village in Rhode Island. (796-7)

While Joshi and Cannon[75] have each derided the story for its overt racism, "The Horror at Red

Hook" has also received critical analysis for that very reason, that is to say, as a means of

comprehending the scope and implications of Lovecraft's prejudiced opinions and their

contextual relationship with socio-cultural views of race in the United States of the early

twentieth century. Indeed, as scholars Scott Cutler Shershow and Scott Michaelsen argue in their

The Love of Ruins: Letters on Lovecraft (2016), along with Lovecraft's other "New York

stories," "The Horror at Red Hook" remains a metaphorical "'open wound'" that "reminds us of

the way American literature marks the project of racialization as a combined

physical/psychological wounding," and the fact "that the wound remains 'open' is an important

reminder that the time of 'race' has not yet passed" (32).

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[75] Deeming the story "one of the poorest of his longer efforts," Joshi claims that "The Horror at Red Hook" ultimately remains "nothing but a shriek of rage and loathing at the 'foreigners' who have taken New York away from the white people to whom it presumably belongs" (795). Nevertheless, Joshi qualifies this argument by suggesting that "Lovecraft was simply behind the times intellectually in adhering to such views as the biological inferiority of blacks, the radical cultural inassimilability of different ethnic groups, and the racial and cultural coherence of various races, nationalities, or cultural entities" (804). Similarly, Cannon describes the story as "poorly executed," concluding that "for once Lovecraft was not being overly harsh when he said, 'The tale is rather long and rambling, and I don't think it is very good'" (224).

Examples of other race-focused readings of the story include scholar Sebastian Schuller's

"Gods of the Real: Lovecraftian Horror and Dialectical Materialism," which was published in a

2020 issue of the *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*. Schuller's reading interprets

Malone as "a stereotypical Lovecraftian protagonist who can only passively register that the

white society he stands for is already lost" (104). However, Schuller takes the implications of

this feature of the text a step further, concluding that "it is not only the world of the [white]

gentleman that is dissolved; reality itself becomes unstable, allowing for the world to be

considered from a non-human perspective as a mere point in a cold and dark universe" (105).[76]

In another noteworthy analysis, "H. P. Lovecraft, Too Much Sex, and Not Enough: Alan

Moore's Playfully Repressive Hypothesis," published in a 2015 issue of *Journal of the Fantastic*

in the Arts, literary scholar Adam Kozaczka provides a reading of story via comparison to Alan

Moore's graphic novel *Neonomicon* (2011), a text that "incorporates elements from H. P.

Lovecraft's 'The Horror at Red Hook' and 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' into a graphic Cthulhu

Mythos tale roughly set in a dark version of our twenty-first century" (489). Kozaczka makes

the insightful observation that *Neonomicon* begins with its blatantly racist protagonist Aldo Sax,

a federal investigator, "undercover in Red Hook," and Moore's graphic novel then recounts

Sax's story via "a narration meant to evoke the racialism that pervaded the Lovecraft story set in

that same Brooklyn neighborhood" (503). Kozaczka convincingly concludes that "Sax's

offensive narration is in the first person…meaning that unlike in 'The Horror in Red Hook,' the

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[76] Schuller further suggests that in "The Horror at Red Hook,"

> While he may cling to his regressive and racist convictions, he nonetheless does not tell tales of race war or Aryan *Übermenschen*, but reduces his protagonists to mere spectators or, more often, victims who can only passively register the presence of cosmic entities beyond human imagination or resistance…The modern scientific worldview, as figured in these stories, disavows the reality of the simple, quiet life of the white gentleman, depicting such a life as always-already an impossibility, one that is threatened not only by historic, social transformations but by cosmic forces. The seemingly ordered harmony of a hierarchical human world is but an exception in the madness of relativistic space-time. (104-5)

racism is localized on a troubled character rather than being a fact of the diegesis" (503).

Finally, literary scholar Jay McRoy's "There Goes the Neighborhood: Chaotic Apocalypse and

Monstrous Genesis in H. P. Lovecraft's 'The Street,' 'The Horror at Red Hook,' and 'He,'"

published in a 2003 issue of *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, argues that "The Horror at Red

Hook" "represent(s) distinctly modernist engagements with several of the dominant ideologies of

Lovecraft's day, including an understanding of alterity that arises from a culture of racism

predicated upon anxieties over the creation of a particularly 'American' national body to

complement the country's emerging economic and political identity" (336). With this brief

literature review complete, let's pivot to an examination of the story in the name of

comprehending how Lovecraft's racism is framed in a precisely metaphysical perspective

throughout "The Horror at Red Hook." From there, we will consider the ways in which LaValle

reframes the horror(s) of Lovecraft's story to the lived experience of his novella's black

protagonist, Tommy Tester, and the meaning and function of the phantasm, or living death,

within that context.

"The Horror at Red Hook" begins with its narrator describing Malone's public

breakdown at the sight of tall buildings "on a street corner in the village of Pascoag, Rhode

Island" (125). The narrator then takes readers back in time in order to comprehend the cause of

Malone's mental ailments, which stem from his previous "disproportionately arduous work on a

gruesome local case" in Red Hook wherein "a collapse of several old brick buildings during a

raid in which he had shared" traumatized his psyche (126). Rather than describing Malone's

experience(s) on this police raid, or even the events leading up to it, the narrator instead

discusses the character's racist thoughts about the diverse population of Red Hook. The narrator

describes the neighborhood as "a maze of hybrid squalor" wherein "the population is a hopeless

tangle and enigma," as well as "a babel of sound and filth" in which "the blasphemies of an

hundred dialects assail the sky" (128). While the narrator expounds on Malone's racist views[77]

throughout much of the story, the most noteworthy detail in these prejudiced polemic(s) remains

how, from Malone's perspective, they are connected on a precisely metaphysical level to "a

horror beyond all human comprehension" (126).

Indeed, when the narrator describes Malone's racist diatribes, the detective's bigoted

views are always linked to a metaphysical source of horror. The narrator claims that, for

Malone, non-white races "chilled and fascinated him more than he dared confess to his

associates on the force" (129). The narrator's explanation for this chilling fascination is quoted

at length below:

> for he seemed to see in them some monstrous thread of secret continuity; some
>
> fiendish, cryptical, and ancient pattern utterly beyond and below the sordid mass
>
> of facts and habits and haunts listed with such conscientious technical care by the
>
> police. They must be, he felt inwardly, the heirs of some shocking and primordial
>
> tradition; the sharers of debased and broken scraps from cults and ceremonies
>
> older than mankind. (129)

The first terms that require analysis in the above passage are "he seemed to see in them," a

clause that could just have easily been written as "he saw in them." However, the narrator's

phrasing gives Malone the benefit of the doubt, meaning that the detective's view(s) of racial

diversity connecting to "some fiendish, cryptical, and ancient pattern" remains, in the last

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[77] Throughout the story, the narrator describes Malone's thoughts on the racial diversity of the underworld of New York, deeming it both a "polyglot abyss" and "a freak beyond sensible explanation" (127). Malone equates racial difference to a "contagion" and describes members of non-Anglo-Saxon races as "creatures" (131-2). Furthermore, his vitriolic views are not limited to blacks, for he condemns "the unclassified Asian dregs," as well as "Syrian, Spanish, Italian…and fragments of Scandinavian" immigrants, and he later describes "the leader of the visiting mariners" that abscond with Suydam's body as "an Arab with a hatefully negroid mouth" (139).

instance, a personal perspective contingent upon some level of interpretative correlation, not objective denotation.

This reading is further validated by the second sentence of the passage, which features a somewhat similarly phrased description of Malone's undeniably racist yet ostensibly personal views. Note how his thoughts include both the use of modal "must"—"They must"—to solidify the content of the sentence's predicate—"be…the heirs of some shocking primordial tradition"—as well as a non-essential appositive—"he felt inwardly"—that simultaneously interrupts the narrator's description of Malone's thoughts and singularizes them to the character's interiority, that is, his subjectivity. This interpretation would therefore seem to clash with Kozaczka's view that the racism of "The Horror at Red Hook" is a "fact of the diegesis" and not "localized on a troubled character." However, as we will see shortly, Malone's subjective suppositions remain notably absent during the narrator's later descriptions of the perceived metaphysical horror of racial diversity that so troubles the detective throughout the story. Before examining those passages, let's note that both Malone and the narrator read racial diversity as evidence "of some monstrous thread of secret continuity; some fiendish, cryptical, and ancient pattern utterly beyond and below the sordid mass of facts." In other words, from the perspective of Malone and the narrator, if racial diversity remains connected to a metaphysical hybrid horror beyond human existence, then it cannot be comprehended via "conscientious technical care by the police," which then implies, for them, that it is ultimately incomprehensible and therefore justifies their (ir)rational fear and correlating prejudice(s).

Recalling Warren's ideas in *Ontological Terror* discussed above, we can cite his argument, here, about blackness representing a metaphysical nothingness of which humanity remains both fundamentally terrified by and yet philosophically in need of, but we can leave

behind his untenable reading of Heideggerian philosophy and obvious omitting of Derridean deconstruction. Warren argues that, for a world grounded in what we could call a certain white mythology, blackness necessarily represents a metaphysical ontological terror, and his claim connects both to Malone and the narrator's racist perspectives in "The Horror Red Hook." That is to say, for both Malone and the narrator, blackness serves as irrefutable evidence of a precisely metaphysical and horrifically incomprehensible cosmic chaos, an original hybridity "antedating the Aryan world," to quote the narrator, that therefore negates their obviously false views regarding the possibility of (white) racial purity (130).

Focusing on this notion of incomprehension, let's consider a tension at the core of "The Horror at Red Hook" that hinges on calculation, which, as noted above, remains a pointed target for Warren in his *Ontological Terror*.[78] Roughly halfway through the story, Malone is assigned to investigate Suydam and his "new associates," which the narrator describes in undeniably racist terms as "among the blackest and most vicious criminals of Red Hook's devious lanes," suggesting, too, "that at least a third of them were known and repeated offenders in the matter of thievery, disorder, and the importation of illegal immigrants" (132). Speculating on the possible origins of "these unauthorized newcomers," the narrator posits that they "were flooding Red Hook in increasing numbers" (133). In the passage below, note how both Malone's name and investigative assignment are tacked onto the narrator's racist description, highlighting Kozaczka's claim that the racism of "The Horror at Red Hook" is a "fact of the diegesis" and not "localized on a troubled character." In other words, there is no separation between Malone and

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[78] Chapter three of *Ontological Terror* is entitled "Scientific Horror," and Warren's thesis therein remains predicated on the notion that "metaphysical procedures and practices structure scientific thinking—calculation, schematization, predictability, objectification, and numerical supremacy" (110). Laying out a five-pronged proposal regarding "the relation between blackness, nothing, and horror," Warren proposes that, regarding calculation specifically, "science relies on numeracy or the calculating mind to carry out its brutal obsession" and thus that "numbers are not neutral or innocuous but are weapons of pulverization and subjection" (111).

the narrator's racism, despite what appears to be the latter's attempt to provide some level of distance from the former's prejudiced views:

> Their squat figures and characteristic squinting physiognomies, grotesquely combined with flashy American clothing, appeared more and more numerously among the loafers and nomad gangsters of the Borough Hall section; till at length it was deemed necessary to compute their numbers, ascertain their sources and occupations, and find if possible a way to round them up and deliver them to the proper immigration authorities. To this task Malone was assigned by agreement of Federal and city forces, and as he commenced his canvass of Red Hook he felt poised upon the brink of nameless terrors, with the shabby, unkempt figure of Robert Suydam as arch-fiend and adversary. (133)

Malone's assignment "to compute their numbers" denotes the metaphysical logic of calculation that Warren convincingly condemns in *Ontological Terror*. The detective uses not only his authority as a figure of the law to complete this task but also his power in that same context as figure of a violent whiteness destined, in his view, to "deliver" the world from "the brink of nameless terrors," or, more precisely, racial diversity and its continued encroachment on the Anglo-Saxon culture that Lovecraft so cherished. Additionally, note how Malone's name appears only once in the passage, specifically late in the narrator's valorizing the calculation and deportation of what amounts to the non-white population of Red Hook, further confirming Kozaczka's reading that sees racism not localized to Malone's perspective but as a fundamental facet of the story's diegesis.

Now, contrast this valorization of the metaphysics of calculation for the purposes of racial differentiation with a passage later in the story that designates calculation as an action "of

no use" (138). Describing the strange and disturbing events that occurred the night of Suydam and Cornelia's wedding as they departed on their honeymoon cruise, the narrator states the following:

> At five o'clock adieux were waved, and the ponderous liner edged away from the
> long pier, slowly turned its nose seaward, discarded its tug, and headed for the
> widening water spaces that led to old world wonders…Whether the tramp steamer
> or the scream was first to gain attention, no one can say. Probably they were
> simultaneous, but it is of no use to calculate…Two hours later, and the world
> knew by radio all that it ought to know of the horrible affair. (138-9)

The above passage reveals a troubling tension at the core of "The Horror at Red Hook" that hinges on the applicability of the metaphysics of calculation. That is to say, the narrator deems a calculative approach only necessary in the context of arresting and deporting "illegal immigrants" and "unauthorized newcomers," not when discerning the details of Suydam and Cornelia's death, despite the fact that a precise time stamp—"Two hours later"—is provided as means of contextualizing when "the world" learned "all that it ought know of the horrible affair." Ultimately, this troubling tension reveals the racism of the metaphysics of calculation that both Malone and the narrator wield as a violent weapon of whiteness, but they wish to do so only when it suits their prejudiced project of racial profiling for the purposes, finally, of deportation.

Consider, then, as a final point on "The Horror at Red Hook," how the story ends with Malone hoping that his horrifying experience(s) will prove to have been merely a dream. Having witnessed a profoundly unsettling ritual to Lilith and lived through the subsequent collapse of "the three old houses in Parker Place," Suydam's demonic headquarters, Malone is described by the narrator at the end of the story as "content to rest silent in Chepachet, calming his nervous

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system and praying that time may gradually transfer his terrible experience from the realm of present reality to that of picturesque and semi-mythical remoteness" (145). This narration is striking because it reveals a repetition of the earlier point that both Malone (and the narrator) desire metaphysical proof for their racist fears, but, once more, Lovecraft leaves readers with yet another tension. That is to say, as claimed above, on the one hand, Malone needs racial diversity to serve as evidence of an original cosmic chaos that collapses any and all attempts at calculation or comprehension. On the other, Malone's "nervous system" is plagued by the fact that he knows his "terrible experience" in Red Hook was not a dream but rather an undeniable fact of "the realm of present reality," and this point possesses precise implications. In other words, if his recollections were to be "transfer[ed]" to the metaphysical space of "picturesque and semi-mythical remoteness," they would thus function in the same way as the incalculable cosmic chaos of which he sees racial diversity as a horrific byproduct, that is, as a terrifying validation of his worst fears that, at best, he can deny the existence of, and, at worst, act out on in the form of a violent intolerance disguised as law-upholding authority.

Consequently, the narrator of "The Horror at Red Hook" concludes that "Malone does not shudder without cause" because, though "Suydam came and went" and thus a "terror gathered and faded," "the evil spirit of darkness and squalor broods on amongst the mongrels in the old brick houses" (146). The narrator closes the story, then, by doubling down on both his and Malone's racism, leaving readers with an image of the two of them, finally, as mere mortal (white) men responding to "age-old horror…with a thousand heads," that is, racial diversity as such, and thus trying "to combat poisons older than history and mankind" (146). And yet, the narrator also acknowledges the futility of their fight, asking first and foremost a question—"Who are we?"—to which neither he or Malone wishes to respond because they already know the

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answer: the products of the very hybridity that they so despise, leaving them lost in their own hypocrisy and the horror(s) therein.

The Ballad of Black Tom—**"I'll be the worst monster you ever saw"**

Dedicated to "H.P. Lovecraft, with all my conflicted feelings," Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* is a 2016 weird novella that tells the story of Tommy Tester, a young black man living in the early twentieth century of the United States, working as a delivery man for sinister occult figures, and dealing with racial discrimination and police brutality as commonplace facts of his day-to-day existence. The text features different versions of the principal characters from Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook," Thomas Malone and Robert Suydam, but LaValle's work tells a decidedly differently story.

Narrated in the third person and divided into two parts—part one of the novella recounts events from the perspective of Tommy, while part two focuses on Malone—*The Ballad of Black Tom* depicts Tommy's traumatic transformation into Black Tom, a murderous conduit of Cthulhu, Lovecraft's most famous monster. This change stems first from Tommy's meeting Robert Suydam, a wealthy recluse of Red Hook who, early in part one of the novella, hires Tommy to play guitar at "a party" at Suydam's "mansion" (21). Tommy later learns that this "party" is actually Suydam's attempt to bring about "the return of the Sleeping King," that is, Cthulhu, an entity that Suydam claims will "wipe[s] away" not only "the follies of mankind" but also the "hybrid squalor" and "wretchedness"—the former denotes a direct quote of Lovecraft's racist narrator in "The Horror at Red Hook"—of "your [Tommy's] people" (47, 50). However, for reasons outlined below, Tommy interferes in the summoning process (50).

The second reason for Tommy Tester's transformation is the brutal slaying of his father, Otis, at the hands of Mr. Howard, a private investigator in cahoots with Thomas Malone, a New

York City detective. A female character named Ma Att, one of the strange and sinister figures with seemingly supernatural power(s) to which Tommy makes deliveries, hired Mr. Howard to retrieve a page that Tommy ripped from a book before bringing it to her. The narrator describes Tommy's motives for this action as follows:

> A hustler's premonition told him he didn't want to run into Ma Att again. After all, the book he'd given her had been missing one page, hadn't it? The very last page. Tommy Tester had done this with purpose. It rendered the tome useless, harmless. He'd done this because he knew exactly what he'd been hired to deliver. The Supreme Alphabet.[79] He didn't have to read through it to be aware of its power. Tommy doubted very much the old woman wanted the little yellow book for casual reading. He hadn't touched the book with his bare hands and hadn't read a single word inside, but there were still ways to get the last sheet of parchment free safely. In fact that page remained in Tommy's apartment, folded into a square, slipped right inside the body of the old guitar he always left with his father. Tommy had been warned not to read the pages, and he'd kept to that rule. His father had been the one to tear out the last sheet, and his father could not read. His illiteracy served as a safeguard. (19-20)

According to Mr. Howard and Detective Malone's explanation to Tommy of the circumstances

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[79] As scholar Yumi Pak notes in her article on the novella, —discussed in detail below—"The Supreme Alphabet is a language system created by the Five Percent Nation, or the Nation of Gods and Earths, in 1964…While he cannot name his anxiety around Ma Att having this book in her possession, he remains convinced that the alphabet of a Black cultural movement should not fall into her hands" (361). However, Pak also clarifies that she is "aware, of course, that Tommy's knowing the Supreme Alphabet seems anachronistic; the story is set in 1924, and the Five Percent Nation does not create this alphabet until 1964," but, for Pak, this point "speaks to the presence of multiple timelines and worlds that exist" within the novella (376).

surrounding his father's death, Otis was shot because Mr. Howard mistook Otis' guitar for a

rifle. Mr. Howard sadistically describes to Tommy how he "felt in danger" and thus "emptied

my revolver," before cruelly adding that he then "reloaded and did it again" (65). In short, Otis'

death reveals to Tommy what the narrator will later describe as the "comical, or downright

naive" nature of his fearing "cosmic indifference" a la Cthulhu when the undeniably factual

horrors of police brutality and racism writ large remain painfully real in his lived experience(s)

(66).

Indeed, the narrator describes Tommy's thoughts in precise terms shortly after his

exchange with Mr. Malone and Mr. Howard. Traumatized by the brazenly unjust murder of his

father, Tommy undergoes an epiphany of sorts. This awakening is catalyzed by and correlates

with police brutality, as the passage below reveals:

> His night with Robert Suydam returned to him, all of it, all at once. The breathless
>
> terror with which the old man spoke of the Sleeping King. A fear of cosmic
>
> indifference suddenly seemed comical, or downright naive. Tester looked back to
>
> Malone and Mr. Howard. Beyond them he saw the police forces at the barricades
>
> as they muscled the crowd of Negroes back; he saw the decaying facade 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? "Indifference would be such a relief,"
>
> Tommy said. (66)

Tommy attends Suydam's party shortly after the death of his father, and he has yet another

epiphany of sorts, one that spurns him to action. Tommy ultimately interferes in the Suydam's

conjuring ritual, and he consequently becomes Black Tom, a phantasm of revenge who decides,

finally, in his own words, that he'll "*take Cthulhu over your white devils any day*[80]" (143). Before moving to an examination of the novella through the lens of afropessimism via the Derridean notion of the phantasm, let's briefly consider two noteworthy articles that examine the text as a means of highlighting how the following chapter contributes to a specific scholarly conversation regarding LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*.

Published in a 2021 issue of *ASAP/Journal*, scholar Yumi Pak's "'This is how you hustle the arcane': The Unspeakable Thing Unspoken in Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*" compellingly suggests that "what is powerful about Lovecraft is that one can never encounter his work without coming face to face with his abhorrent investments," which means, then, that "any analysis of Lovecraft's writing must consider how it retains a cultural force because of his racism, not despite it" (354). Focusing specifically on LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*, Pak argues, then, that,

> rather than functioning as a sweeping acceptance or rejection of Lovecraft's
> influence, LaValle's complicated feelings give rise to what José Esteban Muñoz
> terms a "disidentification," an alternative strategy that differs from identification
> and counteridentification. Disidentification hearkens to the survival mechanisms
> undertaken by those positioned opposite to dominant ideologies, in which they
> rework the codes of cultural objects that are not meant for them to create
> counterpublics that are…LaValle takes what is at hand to challenge the
> Lovecraftian ur-text, not to offer a rebuttal, but to provide the "contact lenses" of
> seeing what—or who—comprises the ordinary monsters lurking *in* and *as*[81] New
> York City, all that which Lovecraft is unable to see. (356)

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[80] Emphasis LaValle's
[81] Emphasis Pak's

This interpretation of LaValle "disidentifying" with Lovecraft via the narrative content of *The Ballad of Black Tom* remains both smart and convincing. Furthermore, her reading of the novella offers much for those interested in comprehending LaValle as an important author of both "Black horror" and "Black speculative fiction," one who remains both fundamentally influenced by Lovecraft while simultaneously challenging the racism that plagues the author's corpus (357).[82]

Guy Witzel's "Abcanny Waters: Victor LaValle, John Langan, and the Weird Horror of Climate Change," published in a 2018 issue of *Science Fiction Studies*, stands as the other significant piece of criticism focused on *The Ballad of Black Tom*. Reading LaValle's novella alongside *The Fisherman*, John Langan's 2016 Bram Stoker Award winner, Witzel convincingly proposes that the authors respectively "develop their climate imaginaries through distinct vectors of domination" via an attempt to "merge the inhuman agencies of the Anthropocene with the horrors associated with the weird genre" (560). More precisely, focusing specifically on LaValle's text, Witzel holds that "the character Black Tom represents" the "racialized population of "Lovecraft's notoriously racist 'The Horror at Red Hook'" (560). Claiming that Black Tom's "reaction" to the "mistreatment" of the "racialized population" therefore "ensures the flood," Witzel concludes that LaValle's novella ultimately "indicts the modernity that brought us to the

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[82] While in many ways a trenchant reading of *The Ballad of Black Tom*, Pak's article, specifically its conclusion, remains unfortunately unconvincing. This issue hinges on the notion that, according to Pak, it is "only by reading" LaValle's novella "at times as and at times alongside Black feminist thought and worldmaking practices" that we can "ever hope to move beyond and outside the restrictive boundaries of white supremacy and antiblackness" (358). Pak's proposed reading is fundamentally limited, as she places precise parameters on how we can frame *The Ballad of Black Tom*, as well as textually inaccurate, for the character of Ma Att challenges Pak's reading of the story regarding the "absent presence" of female characters in the novella (358).

ecological brink and the ideologies that worsened its predations" (560).[83] With this brief

literature review complete, let's return to the aforementioned scene from the novella in which

Tommy frustrates Suydam's summoning process and is transformed into Black Tom, while also

considering the stakes of Tommy's decision to interfere with Suydam's ritual(s).

The narrator describes the scene at Suydam's mansion from Tommy's perspective in

pessimistic terms. Let's first note that Tommy is not the sole individual present at Suydam's

mansion like he was the initial time he visited the locale. Rather, the other "guests" of Suydam's

party include "men and women and some in-between, as varied a group as Suydam had

promised" (73). Moreover, echoing both Malone and the narrator from "The Horror at Red

Hook," the narrator of *The Ballad of Black Tom* relates that "the room babbled with languages,"

including but not limited to "English and Spanish, French and Arabic, Chinese and Hindi,

Egyptian and Greek, patois and pidgin" (73). Amidst this cosmopolitan cacophony of

communication, Tommy "sang to himself and avoided the eyes of the other guests" (73). The

narrator then relates Suydam's speech to the party, and we should remember that this narration is

filtered through Tommy's perspective of the event(s):

> All the old man said three nights ago was repeated. The Sleeping King. The end
>
> of this current order, its civilization of subjugation. The end of man and all his
>
> follies. Extermination by indifference. "When the Sleeping King awakes, he will
>
> reward us with dominion of this world. We will live in the shadow of his grace.
>
> And all your enemies will be crushed into dust. He will reward us!" the old man
>
> repeated, shouting now. "And your enemies will be crushed!" They shouted
>
> back. They clapped each other on the shoulders. Founding fathers of a new nation,

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[83] Witzel's conclusion is particularly striking. He argues, finally, that "climate change's entanglement with white supremacy runs deep, from slavery to the suburbs," and "LaValle's protagonist…reads as a rebuke of an unjust society" (569).

or even better, a world now theirs to administer and control. "I will guide you in this new world!" Suydam called, standing and raising his hands. "And in me you will finally find a righteous ruler!" They stamped and knocked over their chairs. They toasted Robert Suydam's reign. (76)

The first detail to consider in the above passage is the narrator's description of Suydam's account of the Sleeping King and what his return represents. Sentence fragments make up five of the first six clauses of the passage, and then Suydam begins his speech. Recalling that the narrator describes this scene through the perspective of Tommy, who just learned that his father was murdered by cops and thus sees "cosmic indifference" as "comical, or downright naive," these fragments connote a pessimistic boredom and skeptical exasperation on behalf of Tommy. That is to say, the sentence fragments are monotonous, as if they are part of a list of dull possibilities that, in the last instance, Tommy could care less about, given his father's death and the violent actuality of police brutality and racial discrimination it entails.

The second detail builds upon the first, and it is the fact that Suydam's speech is hampered by a contradiction that must be read through the lens of race. On the one hand, Suydam claims that the Sleeping King's return will benefit the racially diverse collective gathered at his party: "he will reward *us*…*We* will live in the shadow of his grace." On the other, this very collective will be ruled by Suydam, a wealthy white man: "*I* will guide you in this new world… And in *me* you will finally find a righteous ruler!"[84] Right after Suydam's speech, Tommy experiences another awakening of sorts, one that directly relates both to his father's murder and to the racist contradictions in Suydam's oration, and one cannot ignore the pessimistic tone of Tommy's thoughts:

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[84] All emphasis added.

But Tommy Tester couldn't celebrate such a thing. Maybe yesterday the promise

of a reward in this new world could've tempted Tommy, but today such a thing

seemed worthless. Destroy it all, then hand what was left over to Robert Suydam

and these gathered goons? What would they do differently? Mankind didn't make

messes; mankind was the mess. Exhaustion washed over Tommy and threatened

to drown him. (76)

Having already deemed cosmic indifference "a relief" relative to the violent reality of racism,

Tommy embraces an afropessimist outlook in the passage quoted above. This worldview

remains predicated on doubting the positive outcome of "Robert Suydam and these gathered

goons" running what remains of the human race after the rise of Cthulhu.

Accordingly, Tommy decides to act, to affirm his agency, that is, the "ability or capacity

to act or exert power" (2021). The narrator describes Tommy violently interrupting Suydam's

speech as follows, with only Suydam appearing to observe Tommy's actions:

Suydam noticed even if others didn't. He looked up at Tester sharply, but quickly

his expression changed. His annoyance shifted to surprise as he saw Tester raise

the expensive guitar and bring the body down against the floor. Shattered. Tester

turned to the library's closed double doors…Robert Suydam watched as Charles

Thomas Tester grabbed the two handles and pulled the doors open. Then, to

Robert Suydam's horror, Tommy walked through them and shut the library doors

behind him. (77)

This moment is pivotal for several reasons, but the most critical are the fact that Tommy smashes

his guitar as a means of interrupting the ceremony and that he then disappears both from the

scene and novella, returning as Black Tom thirty pages later in part two, which, again, depicts

events from Thomas Malone's perspective. By examining this sequence in detail, we can discern

what, exactly, makes Tommy's bleak outlook a form of afropessimism and, moreover, how

Derrida's notion of the phantasm comes into play in this context.

Let's first consider Tommy's smashing his guitar. While a bit of a stretch historically,

this scene in *The Ballad of Black Tom* echoes a significant moment in Homer's the *Iliad* wherein

Achilles smashes Agamemnon's scepter, a passage from the epic poem convincingly interpreted

by classics scholar Charles D. Stein in his "The Life and Death of Agamemnon's Scepter: The

Imagery of Achilles (*Iliad* 1.234–239)," published in a 2016 issue of *Classical World*.[85] We can

read Tommy's smashing of his guitar as analogous to this famous moment in the *Iliad*, with the

same themes of disparaging injustice and embracing disillusionment present. However, the

reasons for these emotions remain fundamentally different, meaning that they are contingent on

Tommy's agential response both to his father's murder (injustice) and Suydam's racist

motivation(s) (disillusionment). Additionally, though this thematic connection between *The

Ballad of Black Tom* and the *Iliad* spans a great deal of time, prior to Tommy's smashing the

guitar, Suydam equates himself to Julius Caesar and Tommy to Gaius Octavius, telling Tommy

that "If I am Caesar, you are Octavius" (74). While not a direct reference to Agamemnon and

Achilles, Suydam's equating himself to the famously assassinated Roman ruler and Tommy to

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[85] Stein argues that Achilles' smashing Agamemnon's scepter "disparages Agamemnon as an unjust king and, more broadly, announces in symbolic terms Achilles' disillusionment with the war" (448). He elaborates on his reading as follows, claiming that

> In contrast to the rest of the *Iliad*, where the narrator uses the (golden) scepter as a symbol of just kingship and tree imagery as a way to recognize the Achaeans' success on the battlefield, Achilles conceives of the scepter as a piece of useless, dead wood, irrevocably severed from the living tree. While the narrator regularly uses tree imagery (in the similes) to tell stories of heroic craftsmen fabricating a useful object from the tree, like a ship-plank or the wheel-rim for a war chariot, Achilles downplays the craftsmanship theme and dwells instead on the trauma inflicted on the living branch that has robbed it of its potential to grow and bloom. These changes in presentation create an unconventional image (in comparison with the narrator's standard practice). (448)

Caesar's nephew, who later became the first Roman emperor under the name Augustus, makes the thematic connection to classical literature more plausible.

Regarding Tommy's disappearance from both the scene and the novella, we can bring in Derrida's notion of the phantasm as means of conceiving of a fundamentally agency-based form of afropessimism wherein Tommy willfully chooses a form of living death, one that allows him to remove himself as a passive sufferer from the racism of early twentieth century Brooklyn. There is an inarguable form of action in this decision, both at the level of Tommy choosing to "pull[ed] the doors open" and "shut the library doors behind him." These actions suggest that Tommy alone decides to give himself over to a certain living death via Cthulhu, —an entity accessed through Suydam's interdimensional portal disguised as a library—and, in shutting "the library doors behind him," Tommy defines a precise boundary, a clear line that separates him from not only the racially hierarchical relationship of Suydam and his "gathered goons" but also the world writ large. This decision is thus not a suicidal act, but it is a destructive one, as will be seen shortly. While this scene denotes the last time readers encounter Tommy Tester in the novella, the narrator does not disclose what happens to him upon opening and closing the doors the library doors, thus leaving his exact outcome to some extent ambiguous. Though Tommy appears to perish in his encounter with Cthulhu behind closed doors, this demise remains, at most, symbolic, as Black Tom exists as the living death of Tommy Tester, a phantasm that, as will be seen, acts in the service of no one but himself, or lack thereof.

Briefly returning to Derrida and his notion of the phantasm as a form of living death, consider his explanation and the function of what he terms "spirit" in said context (152). Closely reading both Sigmund Freud and G.W.F. Hegel, Derrida argues

This spirit (but when one says *Geist,* in German, one indeed says Spirit, but also,

spirit defined as a specter or a revenant, a ghost, as I have insisted at length

elsewhere), this spirit that has the strength to bear death, this spirit is a power, but

the power not to turn away from the negative, and therefore the courage, at

bottom, not only to look it in the face, but to take the time to look it in the face, to

make this gaze last, not to be content with a quick glance, not to look death in the

face for a moment and then look away from it the next moment. (153)

In this rich passage from *The Beast & the Sovereign Volume II*, Derrida emphasizes that the

phantasm of living death remains predicated on the notion of "power," and he clarifies that this

power is not one that "turn[s] away form the negative." Rather, the phantasm of living death

"look[s] it in the face" and "make[s] this gaze last," and, in so doing, affirms agency, power as

such.

Considering this conception of the undeniable power that lies in the gaze of the

phantasm, note the first appearance of Black Tom in part two of the novella. Following up on

leads regarding how "Robert Suydam became the sole topic of conversation in the diners of Red

Hook," Malone investigates "word of a second-in-command, Robert Suydam's sergeant, a Negro

heretofore unknown in the crime logs of Brooklyn" who "acted as Suydam's mouthpiece, giving

orders when the old man wasn't around" (92, 101). His investigation leads him to a

confrontation outside "of one Suydam's tenements" with this individual, Black Tom, who the

narrator describes as "greatly changed from when they'd last met" (103-4). During his exchange

with Malone, Black Tom "spoke with open disdain and returned Malone's stare so directly that it

was Malone who looked away" (104). In an effort to reestablish some semblance of control or

dominance in the conversation, Malone reminds Black Tom of his deceased father, asking him

"have you buried him yet?" (104). Black Tom responds that "they wouldn't release the body…until the investigation is completed," which surprises Malone, who assumes that "it must be cleared by now," but Black Tom informs him that he "stopped trying" (104). The narrator then states that "the Negro watched Malone with the glass-eyed interest of a cat stalking a bird," and "Malone looked back to his notebook to escape that gaze" (104). The conversation concludes with Black Tom warning Malone that he "shouldn't be here when I get back," and the narrator states that "what happened next was inexplicable, difficult even to remember," as Black Tom appears to employ some means of supernatural power(s) to leave the scene on his errand to retrieve a book for Suydam "that can only be found in Queens" (105-6).

There is much to discuss in this exchange between Black Tom and Malone. First and foremost, let's note how Black Tom "spoke with open disdain and returned Malone's stare so directly that it was Malone who looked away." This "stare" can be read as the gaze of the phantasm, "the spirit that is power" that Derrida describes. Indeed, as the rest of the scene reveals, Black Tom possesses certain supernatural powers that render the racially tinged legal authority that Malone wields as a weapon of his whiteness moot, forcing Malone, finally, to "look[ed] away" and not return Black Tom's "gaze."

We should also consider the significance of Otis' body in the conversation, which Malone refers to out of spite, again attempting to reassert his (white) power. However, Tom negates this challenge by claiming that he "stopped trying" to acquire his father's corpse, ultimately declaring that "my birth name has no power over me" because "it died with my daddy" (105). This exchange reveals that not only did Tommy Tester never get access to his father's body, he also "stopped trying" altogether because Tommy Tester no longer exists, which means, in Black Tom's words, that "that name has no power." In other words, via the

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destruction of Tommy Tester, Black Tom detaches from his own ancestral heritage and thus the familial connections that would make both his name and his father's body sacred on some level. Yet again, then, we arrive at a form of agency, but it is one that must be grasped as a form of afropessimism.

This conception of afropessimism hinges on the power(s) of the phantasm of living death that Tommy Tester chooses to become, transforming himself into Black Tom and disconnecting from his family's name and the kinship it entails. In choosing to make this change and accept its correlating severance, Black Tom accesses a distinct form of power that allows him not to avenge his father—again, he "stopped trying" because his "birth name has no power" since "it died" when Otis was murdered—but rather to force both the willfully ignorant and blatantly racist individuals of early twentieth century Brooklyn to see the literal horrors of racism, whether they want to or not. However, let's recall that the narrator described Black Tom as "a second-in-command" and serving as "Robert Suydam's sergeant." As a means of concluding this reading of LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* and highlighting the text's undeniable afropessimism, let's analyze the novella's final scenes in which Black Tom murders Suydam and maims Malone in order to consider the meaning and function of the phantasm therein.

Unsettled and angered by his confrontation with Black Tom, Malone "scheme[s] a way to get the entire New York City police force over to Red Hook with him" by claiming that "Suydam and Black Tom were bootlegging…and housing illegal immigrants from the most unwanted of nations," and "within the hour, the concentrated forces of three different stations were gathering, an army off to battle" (114). After "the first wave of officers storm[ed] the tenement entrances," Malone "went to find Robert Suydam," whom he finds in the basement, along with Black Tom, who are in the process of once again attempting to summon the Sleeping

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King, Cthulhu, via the creation of an interdimensional portal (117). The narrator's description of

Malone's perspective of the horrific scene is quoted at length below and discussed in detail

thereafter:

> He no longer saw the basement stairs leading up to sidewalk level. There was,
> instead, a great bubble of darkness that was not pure darkness. Through this door
> he peered into the depths of a fathomless sea. And in that sea, the outline of
> something enormous, impossible to reconcile with his rational mind…Black Tom
> raised a hand in the air, and something silver caught the light. He pulled a razor
> across Robert Suydam's neck…Black Tom marched Malone toward the portal,
> and Malone felt the sudden conviction Black Tom would throw him in…Through
> the portal, amid the ruins of the sunken city, Malone perceived the figure's
> enormous features…Eyelids the size of unfurled sails remained, blessedly, shut,
> but they quivered as if to open…Black Tom grunted. Suddenly he was doing
> something to Malone's face, but Malone couldn't understand what it could
> be…Something was being done to Malone's eyes…Black Tom had cut off
> Malone's eyelids. (126-33)

As the passage above reveals, in a rather shocking turn of events, Black Tom murders Suydam in

the process of their summoning Cthulhu by slitting his throat. He then cuts off Malone's eyelids

and forces him "against his wishes" to look through the portal at Cthulhu, the entity's "eyelids"

now fully "opened" and no longer covering "a pair of eyes" that "shone as bright as starlight"

(133). These vicious acts of violence reveal, yet again, Black Tom's agency as a phantasm of

living death, a conduit not only for Cthulhu but more importantly an active form of

afropessimism that forces Malone—who, let's recall, remains, at the very least, complicit in

and/or culpable for Otis' death—"against his wishes" to confront the horror(s) of his racist views via a confrontation with Cthulhu.

The entity's eyes appearing "bright as starlight" suggests, too, another version of violence, that of Malone realizing the meaningless of his whiteness in the literal face of a chaotic cosmic hybridity that negates his racist worldview(s) such that he cannot, in Black Tom's words, "choose blindness when it suits" him (133). That is to say, Cthullu's "bright as starlight eyes" not only reflect Malone's fundamentally flawed views back to him, revealing their bunk nature. They also annihilate the flimsy ground on which they stood, leaving Malone to cry at the loss of his perceived racial superiority and the metaphysical meaning(s) he attached to his prejudiced perspective(s). Accordingly, as the narrator succinctly states, "Malone wept" (133).

The Ballad of Black Tom concludes rather rapidly after this undeniably powerful and disturbingly violent scene, and the text may leave readers wondering if LaValle's novella on some level endorses violence as a response to racism, which then begs another question. In other words, is afropessimism, finally, a fundamentally violent version of pessimism, a philosophical worldview predicated on a reciprocal response to racism that, in the last instance, attempts to combat the authoritarian powers of whiteness by forcing those that propagate it to confront the horrific nature of their perspective, whether they want to or not? Let's consider Black Tom's final lines in the story as a means of beginning to respond to this question.

After a brief denouement that describes Malone's traumatic memories of having his eyelids cut off and involuntarily glimpsing Cthulhu, the novella closes with Black Tom meeting his best friend, Buckeye, at a local club, the Victoria Society. Buckeye informs Black Tom— whom Buckeye still addresses as Tommy Tester—that he "heard about" his father's death, and Black Tom's response is particularly telling, as he responds, "'my father?'…as if he'd forgotten

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he ever had one" (146) This exchange recalls the earlier scene in the novel wherein Tommy

Tester chooses to disconnect from his own ancestral heritage and the familial ties therein and

becomes a phantasm of living death. Buckeye is troubled by this apparent change in

Tommy/Black Tom, and he asks his friend, "What happened to you?" (146). Black Tom's

response is quoted at length below:

> Every time I was around them, they acted like I was a monster. So I said
>
> goddamnit, I'll be the worst monster you ever saw…The seas will rise and our
>
> cities will be swallowed by the oceans…The air will grow so hot we won't be
>
> able to breathe. The world will be remade for Him, and His kind. That white man
>
> was afraid of indifference; well, now he's going to find out what it's like. I don't
>
> know how long it'll take. Our time and their time isn't counted the same. Maybe a
>
> month? Maybe a hundred years? All this will pass. Humanity will be washed
>
> away. The globe will be theirs again, and it's me who did it. Black Tom did it. I
>
> gave them the world. (147-8)

Black Tom's thoughts in this passage seem to affirm violence as a just response to racism.

However, this violence is done not in the name of vengeance or even equality but, finally, a

cosmic "indifference" in a "world…remade," where both race and racism are, ultimately,

meaningless in the post-humanity reign of Cthulhu and the Old Ones. LaValle thus leaves

readers with a powerful conception of afropessimism as a necessarily violent rebuttal to racism

and white supremacy, one that reframes Lovecraft's cosmic indifferentism along the lines of a

post-humanity world wherein what remains of our species is, finally, indifferent to any notion of

race.

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Coda: Compassion—Caitlin R. Kiernan and Stephen King

The following coda briefly examines the notion of compassion in the pessimistic philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer and as it appears in Caitlin R. Kiernan's 2016 novella *Agents of Dreamland* and Stephen King's 2014 novel *Revival*. This approach differs from the previous readings, which all examined a fictional work from Lovecraft and through the lens of a specific manifestation of pessimism alongside an analysis of a work of contemporary weird fiction engaged with similar themes. This change is made because compassion is essentially absent from Lovecraft's writings, with the closest readers get coming in the form of what the narrator of "The Call of Cthulhu" describes as "the…merciful…inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents" (167). This "merciful inability" arguably implies the very conscious teleology for the universe that Lovecraft claimed invalidated pessimism as a philosophical worldview, which is why he described as himself as indifferentist. We are left, then, with yet another tension in Lovecraft's cosmic perspective(s) at the level of his so-called indifferentism.

That is to say, one who subscribes to cosmic indifferentism cannot see the limited human perspective within the vast unknown cosmos as "merciful," since "mercy" is a human concept, given and/or granted by humans to other suffering humans or biological lifeforms on the planet. Furthermore, though some overlap exists, mercy is not compassion. Mercy is predicated on a power-based relationship wherein one party can choose to grant or not grant mercy to the other, while compassion requires no such scenario. In sum, generally speaking, Lovecraft's fictions feature little to no depictions of compassion. Nevertheless, as will be seen shortly, pessimism remains, according to Schopenhauer, always already a compassionate philosophy concerned with how humans treat other humans, and, finally, what we owe to each other during our short time on this planet, and both Kiernan and King's writing engage with this idea in insightful ways.

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Compassion, According to Schopenhauer

In his essay "On the Suffering of the World," Schopenhauer argues that

> it might occur to us that the really proper address between one man and another
> should be…*my fellow sufferer*. However strange this may sound, it accords with
> the fact, puts the other man in the most correct light, and reminds of us that most
> necessary thing, tolerance, patience, forbearance, and love of neighbor, which
> everyone needs and each of us, therefore, owes to another (14-15, 2010).

Here, we can see Schopenhauer describing compassion as a debt, as something that we already owe each other by virtue of our shared suffering. Moreover, we can see a resemblance to the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant and his notion of the categorical imperative in Schopenhauer's conception of morality, but there is critical difference.

Kant's categorical imperative holds that each of us should unconditionally act as if our behavior were a universal law. And yet this same system of morality, as philosopher Nick Land smartly argues in his collection of essays *Fanged Noumena* (2011), is "legitimated by the position of imperial or universal jurisdiction," reason, which makes it "the law of empire" (74). That is to say, regarding Kant's categorical imperative, Land argues that morality "cannot be legitimately discussed, and…is therefore an unresponsive or unilateral imposition," one that "prefigures a deaf füher, barking impossible orders that seem to come from another world" (74). In short, Kant's categorical imperative implies the violent eradication of the flawed animalistic and unique misbehaving self such that we obey a universal injunction with no questions asked regarding, for example, context or relativity.

In Schopenhauer's morality, we remain always already in debt to each other because of our shared suffering, but we are not categorically forced by an unconditional law of behavior to

live in a way that is, in the last instance, inarguably violent. Indeed, for Schopenhauer, the same force that unites each of us at a metaphysical level is also that which determines how we treat each other, that is, the will. On a universal scale, humanity is but one highly evolved tentacle on the metaphorical anemone that is the will to life, but we remain paradoxically self-conscious and thus cut off from the rest of the planet's fauna. But this same self-consciousness also gives us gives us our own will power, a limited agency, but a form of agency nevertheless.

This agency comes down to how we treat each other both because or in spite of our shared suffering that we all (will) experience by virtue of our being-together in the world. In *On the Basis of Morality* (1840), Schopenhauer claims the following:

> If we look more closely at this process called Compassion, which we have shown to be the primary ethical phenomenon, we remark at once that there are two distinct degrees in which another's suffering may become directly my motive, that is, may urge me to do something, or to leave it undone. The first degree of Compassion is seen when, by counter-acting egoistic and malicious motives, it keeps me from bringing pain on another, and from becoming myself the cause of trouble, which so far does not exist. The other higher degree is manifested, when it works positively, and incites me to active help. The distinction…was effected by Kant in such a forced and artificial manner, [but] here results entirely of itself…It is the natural, unmistakable, and sharp separation between negative and positive, between doing no harm, and helping. (2004)

Note Schopenhauer's reference to Kant's unflinching conception of morality a la the categorical imperative in the above passage. Similar to Land, Schopenhauer describes Kant's moral philosophy as "forced and artificial," while his two degrees of compassion remain "natural" and

"unmistakable" because of the way they highlight the "sharp separation between negative and positive, between doing no harm, and helping." In the following short readings of Kiernan's *Agents of Dreamland* and King's *Revival*, Schopenhauer's compelling conception of compassion is considered as means of concluding this dissertation and its discussion of the contemporary weird fiction authors writing in and at Lovecraft's wake and the function of pessimism therein. Put plainly, rather than only focusing on the bleaker implications of a pessimistic worldview, this project closes with a turn towards the positive and the fundamental necessity of compassion not only during trying times but more importantly in the day-to-day trenches of human existence wherein suffering remains a painfully reliable constant.

Caitlin R. Kiernan's *Agents of Dreamland*

Caitlin R. Kiernan's 2017 novella *Agents of Dreamland*—the first in a set of novels dubbed the Tinfoil Dossier series, which includes both *Black Helicopters* (2018) and *The Tindaloss Asset* (2020)—qualifies as a text of the Cthulhu Mythos, as opposed to the Lovecraft mythos.[86] In Kiernan's narrative, the Mi-Go, an interstellar species of flying fungus-crustacean hybrids from the planet Yuggoth, which were first introduced in Lovecraft's "The Whisperer in Darkness," published in *Weird Tales* in 1931, are in the process of invading Earth via the assistance of a death cult in the desert of California in the early 2000s. Trying to stop this invasion but knowing the effort is all for naught and that humanity fights a losing battle is one Immocalata Sexton, who, along with the Signalman, work for conflicting yet cooperating clandestine government agencies assigned to deal with weird crises, as it were, which, of course, includes Mi-Go invasions.

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[86] As mentioned in this project's introduction, according to S.T. Joshi, the Cthulhu Mythos denotes a series of texts written by post-Lovecraft authors who set their respective works in the same fictional universe as Lovecraft, whereas the Lovecraft mythos refers to the author's original stories themselves.

Roughly halfway through *Agents of Dreamland*, readers learn that Immocalata is "a living corpse" with "a consciousness imprisoned in her"—let's note the similarities to Ligotti's conception of humanity discussed in chapter one (71). This consciousness "knows no meaningful speed limits and travels in all directions simultaneously" in "an ever-expanding continuum of space and time," and all of this happens without Immocalata "ever leaving her seat" (71). The narrator describes her as "a quantum-foam tourist, unanchored, unfettered," and readers get access to some of her temporal journeys throughout the chapter. One such travel takes us into year 2043 to "a city that was once Los Angeles," now ruined and under the rule of the Mi-Go, which, along with the rest of the planet, now serves "the New Gods…the Elder Beings," Nyarlathotep and Azathoth, which were discussed in detail in chapter one in a discussion of Lovecraft's "The Haunter of the Dark"(84).

In this desolate future, Immocalata delivers "canned goods, mostly fruit and vegetables" to "the blighted and dying" who "huddle together and wait for the end," who "were not so much abandoned, as they allowed themselves to be left behind" (83-84). Her point of contact in this post-apocalyptic landscape is nameless "a young woman" (84). The young woman "tries to smile" upon Immocalata's arrival, "but her twisted face only vaguely remembers how, and the expression comes off more like a grimace" (84). In their short exchange, the young woman is surprised by Immocalata's return, as she was "afraid we'd seen the last of you," though she "didn't want to believe that, but…was starting to, all the same" (84).

Immocalata's response to the young woman's surprise contains two key details that connect to Schopenhauer's notion of compassion. The first is the short but profound reasoning she provides for her return, "I said I would" (84). This line of dialogue arguably transcends Schopenhauer's morality in the sense that it takes the notion that we each, at a very minimal

level, owe each other some degree of compassion. However, Kiernan's novella filters this idea through an interpersonal experience of elementary faith in the Other wherein, even in the context of a post-apocalyptic world reigned over by the Outer Gods, the last remnants of humanity, *still*, remain only as good as their word(s).

The second critical detail in Immocalata's exchange with the nameless young woman is the fact that she follows her explanation with a regret, as she states that "I wish I could have brought more" (84). The young woman quickly cuts her off, telling Immacolata that "this is plenty" and that "you do so much for us," which means she shouldn't "apologize for not doing more" (84). In this exchange, we can clearly see Immocalata both not adding to the suffering in the future, but she also tries to alleviate this suffering, even going so far as to lament the fact that she cannot do more. This depiction of compassion in *Agents of Dreamland* is particularly powerful, and its profound affective force lies in the fact that Immocalata knows that her efforts to ease the suffering of the remaining humans in this unavoidable and horrific future will neither save the species nor amount to any sort of retributive response on behalf of humanity against our alien overlords. And yet, despite these doomed circumstance, while not adding to the suffering, she also still chooses to help others and wishes, finally, that she could do more.

Stephen King's *Revival*

Stephen King's *Revival* is an epistolary text narrated by Jamie Morton, a recovering heroin addict and musician. Set in Harlow, a fictional small town in Maine—a standard setting for much of King's writings—the novel spans from the early 1960s to the diegetic present in 2013 and focuses on Morton's decades-long relationship with Charles Jacobs, a young minister he met as a child. Early in the narrative, Jacobs' wife and child are killed in a gruesome car accident. This tragedy compels Jacobs to leave the clergy after a public meltdown at his local

church, an event that profoundly affects Morton. The story then pivots to descriptions of

Morton's adolescence and early college years during which he joins a band and gets hooked on

heroin, before reuniting with Jacobs roughly 30 years in the early 1990s.

In 1992, Jacobs works as a fraudulent tent revival preacher, curing people of their

afflictions and addictions via high levels of electricity. He has becomes obsessed with the

possibility that an afterlife might exist, not one of angels and streets of gold, but some form of

existence beyond the limits of space and time wherein some semblance of his wife and son may

reside. His theory is that such an afterlife can be accessed via a secret form of extremely

powerful electricity that he believes drives the universe. However, Jacobs' treatments do not go

without consequences for his patients, as each begins to have horrifying visions of a terrifying

ethereal landscape dominated by humanoid ant-like creatures, and some of his patients are even

driven to suicide as a result. Morton's brother, Conrad, receives one such treatment for an injury

to his vocal chords in his youth, and he resides in a mental institution during Morton's writing(s),

driven mad by Jacobs' "cure."

Through an increasingly sinister series of events set forth and manipulated by Jacobs,

Morton finds himself working with him in the novel's final chapters. Jacobs' plan is to harness a

massive amount of secret electricity via lightning rod and channel the energy into a recently

deceased corpse, a clear allusion to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus*

(1818). His motivations are to find out "what the universe has in store for all of us once this life

is over" (356). Jacobs' experiment is a horrifying success, as both he and Jamie transcend the

limits of space and time and encounter a giant arachnid entity known as "Mother" that reigns

over an afterlife known as "the Null" wherein a series of Lovecraftian-esque creatures known as

"the Great Ones" torture humanity for eternity, what Morton describes as "a prismatic world of insane truth that would drive a man or woman mad if it were so much as glimpsed" (380).

Jacobs dies in the encounter, but Morton escapes. He concludes the novel on a rather somber note, revealing that he still visits Conrad regularly and hopes both that his condition can be reversed and that his vision of the Null was merely a terrifying hallucination. Consider the following description of Morton's reasoning for why he still regularly visits Conrad, despite his awareness of the Null:

> There's hope for him. He plays tennis, after all (although he never speaks), and as I said, he's a volleyball master. His doctor says he's begun to show increased outward response…and the nurses and orderlies are less likely to come in and see him standing in the corner and striking his head lightly against the wall…Conrad may come all the way back; he may *revive*. I choose to believe he will. People say that where there's life, there's hope, and I have no quarrel with that, but I also believe the reverse. There is hope, therefore I live. (401)

In the above passage, we can see Morton's compassion for Conrad, as he still chooses to care for his brother and not to add to his suffering, despite the terrible knowledge he possesses that would drive the rest of the world mad, or, at the very least, seemingly justify an uncompassionate response. Nevertheless, despite the life-affirming hope that Morton feels in his visits with Conrad, his final lines in *Revival* reveal the ultimate pessimistic truth of King's novel: "But eventually something will happen. Something always does. And when it does…I will come to Mother" (403).

Conclusion

Let's note, though, that in each of these texts, compassion is to some extent contingent upon a character possessing forbidden knowledge that the rest of humanity lacks. In Kiernan's *Agents of Dreamland*, Immocalata sees the doomed future wrought by the Mi-Go, yet she still helps them via food deliveries and regrets that she cannot do more to ease their suffering. In King's *Revival*, Jamie has seen beyond the limits of human perception and learned the terrible truth of the afterlife, the Null, and the unavoidable eternal suffering therein at the hands of Mother and the Great Ones, and he still chooses to care for Conrad, despite the horrific certainty of the existence to come. These details are not without serious significance because they highlight a certain limit to the examples of compassion seen in these respective works of contemporary weird fiction, one that seems to pivot on what we know, and more importantly, what we do to each other because of what we know.

In the chaotic present of 2022, humanity faces real existential threats on multiple fronts, and we know with a sense of scientific certainty that this planet remains inevitably doomed, with a Mi-Go invasion not even necessary, and the afterlife is a possibility that we can only hope, on even its worse day, is nothing like the Null. We do not need the actuality of these threats to function as a catalyst for our compassion; it should be there from the start, not as a forced or artificial universal injunction that we cannot ignore, but as a necessary reminder of the difference between doing no harm and helping, and the fundamental need for both; we owe it to each other.

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