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MONKEY PANIC IN THE DEEP TIME MACHINE

Eugenics, Slavery, and European Fragility in Lovecraft

ABSTRACT

This article treats H. P. Lovecraft's deployment of deep time in "At the Mountains of Madness" as a historical artifact that bears the (at times conflicting) marks of evolutionary theory, social Darwinism, eugenics, and the various temporalities of biological life (recapitulation, degeneration). In particular, Lovecraft's aesthetically charged 'controlled evolution' in his famous novella undermines the generative effects of deep time he sets out to emphasize. This undermining not only exposes Lovecraft's well-documented nativism and racism, but provides an exaggerated yet instructive example of how the neo-Darwinism of the latter half of the 19th and early part of the 20th century deployed eugenics by means of a politico-aesthetic

rearticulation of the ambiguities of evolutionary theory. This rearticulation was subsequently ramified by the trivialization of important complications to the Darwinian project prior to the so-called modern synthesis, namely, the downplaying of structuralist, mutationist, and epigenetic concerns. The article first unfolds a brief relevant history of biology and the concepts of deep time (fossil and trace) before examining how Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness" plays on these themes to construct a fatalist eugenics carried out by a superhuman (yet still material) intelligence.

KEY WORDS: H. P. Lovecraft, eugenics, slavery, geology, biology

INTRODUCTION

These vertebrates, as well as an infinity of other life-forms—animal and vegetable, marine, terrestrial, and aërial—were the products of unguided evolution acting on life-cells made by the Old Ones but escaping beyond their radius of attention. They had been suffered to develop unchecked because they had not come in conflict with the dominant beings. Bothersome forms, of course, were mechanically exterminated. It interested us to see in some of the very last and most decadent sculptures a shambling primitive mammal, used sometimes for food and sometimes as an amusing buffoon by the land dwellers, whose vaguely simian and human foreshadowings were unmistakable.²

This article treats H. P. Lovecraft's deployment of deep time—timescales prior to and exceeding those familiar to humans—in "At the Mountains of Madness" (1936) as a historical artifact that bears the (at times conflicting) marks of evolutionary theory, social Darwinism, eugenics, and various temporalities of biological life (recapitulation, degeneration). In particular, Lovecraft's aesthetically charged 'controlled evolution' in his famous novella undermines the generative effects of deep time he sets out to emphasize via materialism, since he rejects both classical theological teleology and modern rational responsibility. This is also evident in how Lovecraft's weird aesthetic is concerned neither with beauty nor sublimity but with the possibility of an intelligence for whom matter and aesthetics are coextensive. In other words, it is not the appearance of purpose (beauty) nor the overwhelming power of nature rationally contained (sublimity), but the possibility of an intelligence that reforms nature against decay (however temporarily) that is at the core of Lovecraft's weird worldview. This is how Lovecraft can combine a materialist view of the universe with the importance of preserving some form of culturally-specific tradition.

Lovecraft's culturally-biased materialism not only exposes his well-documented nativism and racism,³ but provides an exaggerated yet instructive

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- 2 H. P. Lovecraft, "At the Mountains of Madness," *Complete Works of H. P. Lovecraft*, vol. 10 (Delphi Classics, 2013), 1164.
- 3 See Lovecraft's poem "On the Creation of Niggers" in *The Ancient Track: The Complete Poetical Works of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. S.T. Joshi (San Francisco, CA: Night Shade Books, 2001).

parallel to how the neo-Darwinism of the latter half of the 19th and early part of the 20th century deployed eugenics by means of a politico-aesthetic rearticulation of the ambiguities of evolutionary theory.⁴ This rearticulation was subsequently ramified by the trivialization of important complications to the Darwinian project, supposedly ending with the so-called modern synthesis as it was called by Julian Huxley, who will be discussed in detail below. Most importantly for this article, it was during this period (1860–1930) that eugenics thrived built on top of the biometric approach to evolution carried out by figures such as Francis Galton, Raphael Weldon, and Karl Pearson, who emphasized statistical models and tendencies rather than casual or material concepts to justify natural selection as something that upstanding citizens (i.e., rich and white) must direct to ensure ‘well-bred future lineages.’ The eugenics projects carried over into the discourses on race. Prior to the emergence of biology, race could indicate a difference in species determined by the presence of a rational soul,⁵ which eventually gave way to anthropological articulations of race in relation to geographical origin and appearance, i.e., as caused by some combination of inborn dispositions and environmental effects.⁶ While the rise of Darwinian evolution furthered the monogenist notion of humans as one species, it did not challenge the common belief in the West that westerners were ‘more developed’ than non-whites and that this was linked to inbuilt capacities. Thus, eugenics was initially concerned with maintaining public health and national ‘good stock’ in terms of ‘positive’ forms (encouraging procreation among the privileged/desired groups) and negative forms (birth control or forced sterilization), but eventually became blended with racist notions of inherent differences, both in explicit programs (as in the Nazi concept of life unworthy of living), and implicitly (as in the us eugenics programs which dis-proportionally sterilized people of color).

While Lovecraft would no doubt be culturally and politically sympathetic to the eugenics and racial discourses, the difference is that Lovecraft, at least in his stories, makes explicit how futile it is to use a particular cultural form to defend against the tide of material decay. For the biometricians, bloodlines and wealth are sufficient evidence for hereditary superiority, whereas for Lovecraft only the proof of intelligence will suffice. While Lovecraft entertained degeneration of lineages in several of his earlier tales, we are concerned here with “At the Mountains of Madness” as it is his most biology-focused narrative. Given that the novella is about a ‘superior’ intelligence that kept bio-engineered slaves and rewrote human evolutionary

4 For eugenic themes in Lovecraft’s other stories see Mitch Frye, “The Refinement of ‘Crude Allegory’: Eugenic Themes and Genotypic Horror in the Weird Fiction of H. P. Lovecraft,” in *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 17, no. 3 (2007): 237–54.

5 For example, the conquistadors questioned whether the Aztecs had a human soul or not.

6 As in J. F. Blumenbach and I. Kant.

history, the parallels with the discourses on race seem to be obvious and will be illustrated below. The article will first unfold a brief overview of the relevant history of biology and the concepts of ‘deep time’ (via fossils and other material traces) before examining how Lovecraft’s novella plays on these themes to construct a fatalist eugenics carried out by a super non-human (yet still material) intelligence. This utilization of biology, I suggest, has a particular import for weird fiction more generally given that the weird, in eschewing supernatural entities, wants to deploy such biological knowledge speculatively. Or put simply, if weird fiction wants to scare and disgust with biological features and description, it needs to be careful which biological theories it utilizes to do this. Combined with the historical fact that the period in which weird fiction came into existence parallels the great outbursts of nationalism and anti-immigration policies, the questions of eugenics and race seem particularly pressing for weird fiction and its deployment of material horror—of the revulsion enacted by improperly arranged limbs, twisted visages, and baroque morphologies.

ECLIPSED CONTINGENCY

In 1942 Julian Huxley published *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis* in which he makes a broad historical claim about evolutionary theory that is still repeated to this day: that Darwin’s ideas were not properly appreciated in the decades following the publication of the *Origin of Species* (1859). Huxley argues that most work in the late 1900s either focused on comparative morphology or made broad theoretical claims about Darwin’s theories.⁷ Briefly, they either attempted to see evolutionary continuity through fossil comparisons (neo-Darwinians such as O. C. Marsh), through the development of creatures in the womb (embryologists), or they attempted to prove in broad strokes how the invisible hand of natural selection worked statistically (biometricians). Huxley goes on to discuss how the rediscovery of the genetic work of Gregor Mendel by figures such as Hugo de Vries and William Bateson led to mutationism/Mendelism that was later integrated into Darwinian theory, thereby signaling the rebirth of Darwinism in the 20th century. Later histories such as Peter Bowler’s *The Eclipse of Darwinism* (1983) actually widen the gap between the biometricians (whom Huxley critiques for too slowly accepting Mendelism) and the mutationists, in claiming that the latter were anti-Darwinian when in fact this is not the case (especially after de Vries).⁸ As an example, Reginald Punnett who followed in de Vries’s Mendelian

7 Julian Huxley, *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis* (George Allen and Unwin, 1942), 22–23.

8 Peter J. Bowler, *The Eclipse of Darwinism: Anti-Darwinian Evolution Theories in the Decades Around 1900* (JHU Press, 1992). As one of the rediscoverers of Mendel’s experiments on botanical inheritance, de Vries argued that mutation could be the driving force of evolution. Rather than Darwin’s gradual changes, de Vries suggested that very small changes could build up and cause drastic changes at the macro-level.

footsteps worked on mimicry in butterflies, and while not anti-Darwinian, he was skeptical as to whether a strict understanding of genetic heredity as gradualist natural selection could explain something like complex forms of mimicry. A strict mechanical or genetic determinism cannot easily account for how butterflies can so quickly change to environmental conditions and mimic not only their environment as it changed with the seasons but also other butterflies radically different from them genetically and geographically.⁹

But any such nuance is missing from Bowler's and Huxley's accounts which attempt to cast all of these endeavors as retroactively foolhardy. The even deeper problem, however, is that Huxley's influential myth whitewashes the influence and roots of eugenics, which is especially striking given the fact that Huxley does discuss the work of the biometricians (Galton, Weldon, and Pearson) who were each extremely vocal on eugenics and contributed to eugenics laws being passed prior to and following World War One. Even more surprising, given this omission, is that the last chapter of Huxley's book discusses the concept of biological and evolutionary *progress*, which Huxley believes is possible and suggests the feasibility of controlling and raising human intelligence. Huxley ends his book by stating that progress, as a fact of past evolution, must be made and not found when it comes to human beings. All of this, of course, has to be critically viewed considering that Huxley was a member of the British Eugenics Society and supported a 'reformed' version of eugenics following the Second World War despite the fact that he famously denounced attaching any biological validity to the concept of race. Paul Weindling's account of the complexities of Huxley is central to understanding that despite his public declarations, Huxley saw a conceptual continuity with the project of Nazi Eugenics.¹⁰ This persisted till the end of Huxley's life when (in contrast to his brother Aldous Huxley, whose *Brave New World* lamented genetic engineering) he hoped for a kind of state-controlled biological faith that would go as far as building fallout shelters for sperm and ova of selected intelligent specimens.¹¹

Julian Huxley was by no means the most fervent eugenicist and in fact attempted to combat, at least in print, the ties between race and eugenics, but it is often easily forgotten that the early eugenics project was not explicitly tied to race but to moral or mental capacities—which undoubtedly, however, harmed non-Europeans because of the deep biases in measuring those capacities. The key to comparing Huxley and Lovecraft then, is that both rely upon or attempt to rely upon, a scientifically neutral materialism to justify eugenicist thinking through technological means. For Lovecraft this

9 Reginald Crundall Punnett, *Mimicry in Butterflies* (University Press, 1915).

10 Paul Weindling, "Julian Huxley and the Continuity of Eugenics in Twentieth-century Britain," *Journal of Modern European History* 10, no. 4 (2012): 480–99.

11 Julian Huxley, "Eugenics in Evolutionary Perspective," *The Eugenics Review* 54, no. 3 (1962): 123–41.

is directed towards an alien dominated past whereas for Huxley it is pointed towards a transhuman future. In part it could be said that Huxley attempted to purify the meaning of eugenics both preceding and following the Nazi research program. In this regard Lovecraft's racism can be turned against both himself and Huxley in that it exposes the heart of Huxley's projects through the cultural biases he wanted to tuck away. Huxley's means of doing this is laid bare in the closing pages of *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis*,¹² where he essentially argues that something like evolutionary progress exists because some lines of descent are longer and hence more complex, and one of these surely must be the ability of human beings to control their environment. Following this, humans gain the ability to control themselves (to make meanings) with cultural tools, but of course some cultural tools then must work better and be directed towards raising ever higher the bar of human intelligence. In this way Huxley can claim that the human species is at its core an effect of the progress of evolution that has taken control of that progress simply under different (cultural, technological) terms. He could then be seen as justifying racism in a way similar to Darwin in *The Descent of Man* (1871)—not in terms of biological evolution in a straightforward manner, but in terms of viewing different people on the Earth as more or less 'developed', and by stating that this development (understood as cultural, aesthetic, or technological) is built on top of biological development. Here again the contrast with Lovecraft is striking since for Lovecraft such cultural development is a weapon against all the limitations and apparent baseness of biological life.

While these capacities are a marker of intelligence, intelligence can be understood as just a contingent result of the distribution of matter in the universe and what evolved from it. The tension between the biometricians (largely wedded to eugenics) and the mutationists (largely critical of eugenics) highlights the problem of how to understand the degrees and qualities of the continuous and the discontinuous variations in human beings, as we trace biology to culture or culture to biology. It seems difficult to sunder any connection between biology and culture, and yet the question becomes how we can make judgments about this connection without overly codifying biology with non-biological concepts or without detaching the ethical or the political from any ground considered outside of its domain. Lovecraft, for instance, demonstrates throughout his work, both fictional and non-fictional, that culture and civilization is primarily ameliorative, papering over our animalistic nature but not unimportant for that reason. In response to the Great War Lovecraft writes:

Man's respect for the imponderables varies according to his mental constitution and environment. Through certain

¹² Huxley, *Evolution*, 556–72.

modes of thought and training it can be elevated tremendously, yet there is always a limit. The man or nation of high culture may acknowledge to great lengths the restraints imposed by conventions and honour, but beyond a certain point primitive will or desire cannot be curbed. Denied anything ardently desired, the individual or state will argue and parley just so long—then, if the impelling motive be sufficiently great, will cast aside every rule and break down every acquired inhibition, plunging viciously after the object wished; all the more fantastically savage because of previous repression.¹³

Thus, for Lovecraft the nations are living on borrowed time as we futilely deny our bestial nature that twitches beneath a veneer of respectability. For Lovecraft, modernity is a double-edged sword: of learning more about how we are lumps of matter barely holding it together, but also providing us ever more dangerous means of expressing that purely physical nature (animal behavior combined with ever more advanced weapons).

Science, as Lovecraft often mentioned, is thus both marvelous but terrifying in that it opens doors that we may regret stepping through. Overconfidence in genetics in the last few decades, for instance, led to foolish searches for a single gene for every behavior reigniting eugenicist dreams and hopes of genetically designed children. Huxley, on the other hand, believes there is progress that can be threatened but is ultimately built upon the successes of biological life. Huxley's view is largely dependent upon the statistical analyses of figures such as Roland Fisher, who is the conceptual descendant of Galton, Weldon and Pearson, and who was openly an advocate of eugenics and opposed attempts to argue for racial equality. Fisher's mode of analysis was to deny we could directly treat genes as causes, but rather to see them as such only by way of statistical models. He was pushing the ideas of Pearson and Weldon by accepting Mendelism (i.e., by making evolution genetic) while minimizing structural or macro-scale contributions to evolution. In so doing Fisher could eliminate the nurture side of the nature-nurture question and find political purchase for his statistical analyses by way of biology.¹⁴ Things become even more muddled by the fact that Huxley put forward a scientific critique of the category of race as part of a UNESCO document in 1951 (largely a response to the horrors of Nazi eugenics), which was rejected and attacked by Fisher, who in his response claimed that scientists should not make doctrinal statements when they are

13 H. P. Lovecraft, "At the Root," The H.P. Lovecraft Archive, last modified October 10, 2009, <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/atr.aspx>.

14 See Bernard Norton, "A Fashionable Fallacy Defended," *New Scientist* (27 April, 1978): 223–25.

in fact theories. Incredibly, one of the central authorities Fisher quotes is Erwin Baur, a Nazi biologist who inspired Hitler.¹⁵

The fact that Fisher in essence states that biological theory cannot dismiss race as a biological category strangely denies progress within theories (i.e., that eugenicist race discourse could be wrong) if not progress within species. Huxley, on the other hand, sees a certain form of humanism as a result of biological progress and hence that form of humanism should be defended by those capable of doing so. Fisher's eugenicist fatalism is evident in his well-known and celebrated *The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection* (1930), the closing chapters of which address human history and the topic of selective breeding. Fisher's discounting of doctrinal or ideological statements appears even more contradictory given what he says about class and civilization. Following the notorious Arthur de Gobineau who wrote *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853), Fisher states that one should not disturb the 'internal harmony' of the races and that an aristocracy is necessary in order to maintain a structure of proper social position.¹⁶ Huxley, Fisher, and Lovecraft all accept that there are such things in nature as 'mistakes', but each disagrees as to the extent such things can be changed or prevented. For Huxley and Fisher these mistakes occur in human beings whereas for Lovecraft any part of nature can be designated unnatural or a mistake on aesthetic-cultural grounds. This does not make Lovecraft less racist but it rather makes the sources of scientific racism in general more explicitly ramified by his cosmism described above. Or, in other words, the scale and push towards materialism at the cosmic scale in Lovecraft makes the narrow and unfounded reasons for racist views starker than in Fisher or Huxley. If there is something potentially instructive in this starkness, it is that it indexes the importance of properly emphasizing the contingency of evolutionary change dictated by the immensity of deep time—the concern here is to understand the relevant scales of deep time in terms of the relevant and tractable material effects.

DEEP AND DEEPER TIME

The question then is how exactly time functions within the various connections between nature and culture which mask differing amounts or regimes of control and contingency. This manifests in numerous ways—tradition as something to be maintained against change, history as about human freedom or as inevitable destiny, etc. Lovecraft's materialism forces him away from theological or other human-centric notions of the timescale and leads him

15 See Johnathan Marks, *Human Biodiversity: Genes, Race and History* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995).

16 R. A. Fisher, *The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection* (Clarendon Press, 1930), 237–47.

to dramatize not only the effects of deep time in the geological cosmological sense, but also our indirect access to these domains of experience. It is telling that Lovecraft's entire oeuvre begins with a meteorite, a marker of cosmological time and of humanity's insignificance. In a meta-commentary on Lovecraft, Fritz Leiber wrote that Lovecraft's fictional university Miskatonic begins its research into the odd and the occult as a result of the meteorite impact, which forms the center of the story "The Colour Out of Space" (1927). In "A Literary Copernicus" Leiber writes:

In June 1882 a peculiar meteorite fell near Arkham. Three professors came from Miskatonic to investigate and found it composed of an evanescent substance defying analysis. Despite this experience, they were highly skeptical when later on they heard of eerie changes occurring on the farm where the meteor fell and, contemptuous of what they considered folk superstitions, they stayed away during the year long period in which a hideous decay gradually wiped out the farm and its inhabitants.¹⁷

Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space" thus brings cosmological time (or deeper time) into geological time in the form of a meteor impacting the Earth. Of course, this is not one register of time colliding with another but a trace of one impacting another trace. Lovecraft's fictional impact has its real-life correlate in Meteor Crater in Arizona. Initially believed to be the result of volcanic explosions, the crater (which is almost 4000 ft wide and 570 ft deep) was verified as an extraterrestrial impact site by Sydney Shoemaker in the 1960s. A fragment of the meteorite from the crater was examined by the geochemist Clair Cameron Patterson who determined, via an analysis of lead isotopes, that the age of the Earth was approximately 4.5 billion years old.

The whole register of an artifact or a material trace of contingency seems paradoxical or at least extremely odd since a contingent object indexes something structural about the material world, which of course in turn makes that trace possible. This trace structure has been discussed at length by Quentin Meillassoux and extensively commented upon by numerous critics. Meillassoux's interest in the fossil lies in the fact that it indexes a time before human consciousness, which troubles what he calls correlationism—the mode of philosophy which asks all questions from the point of view of the human, or from the for us.¹⁸ But more than this, and what interests us here, is the fact that a fossil or a meteorite can index not only a deep past but also can exhibit the

17 Fritz Leiber, "A Literary Copernicus," in *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*, ed. S. T. Joshi (Ohio University Press, 1981), 59.

18 See Chapter 1 of Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude* (Bloomsbury, 2006).

tension between the continuous and the discontinuous, or between variation and structure. The chance impact of two material objects allows us to trace the history of both because of the relatively constant rate of nuclear decay.¹⁹ Based on nuclear decay we can trace the stability of larger-scale material structures which then have other levels of structure and contingency nested inside them (the age of the Earth gives us a boundary for the age of life, etc.). Of course, to see larger scales as more or less contingent assumes we have a grasp on contingency as such which, as Meillassoux emphasizes, is not possible since absolute contingency is thinkable but not knowable. Thinkability is thus tied to a trace structure, to already discovered structures, whereas models or theories are attached to the knowable.

This in turn connects to the imperfect opposition of biometrics and mutationism, where the biometricians accept contingency to the extent that evolution occurs in unexpected ways but can still be thought to be complexifying or progressive. For the mutationists and the Mendelians evolution can be traced through the causal capacities of genes as well as the resulting structures which subsequently affect the causal pathways of genes. What this means is not that models and knowability are continuous or discontinuous, but are both as is the trace structure. The continuity of models has to do with their applicability, whereas its discontinuity is offered in its presenting itself as ‘only’ a model. The trace model of thought presents itself as continuous with its generation but its discontinuity is in the noise or variation within any such pathway or structure. But, following from this, a different order of continuity and discontinuity follows from the emphasis on models and traces—namely, that the artificiality of the model emphasizes our separation (at least functionally) from the world, whereas the notion of trace puts a kind of complicity between its creation and the world in which it indexes. The limitation or danger of the model is that it leads to false confidence whereas for the latter there can be an emphasis on hopeful monsters or miracles. In the former contingency falls towards potential control, whereas in the latter on the side of unpredictability.

The question becomes how these differing modes articulate deep and deeper time relative to how we want to think the emergence of life, and how that life or those life forms respond to this contingency. Those thinkers who worked for and against Darwin immediately following the publication of *The Origin of Species* (during Huxley’s and Bowler’s so-called eclipse) endorse strange forms of temporality, which can be summed up as a kind of ‘monkey panic’ in the response to the generative capacities of contingency put forward by Darwin’s synthesis of functionalism and morphology manifested in

19 Geochemist Clair Patterson famously found the (still-standing) age of the Earth by comparing ratios of lead isotopes in a meteorite to that of a sample from the ocean floor. See “Age of Meteorites and the Earth,” in *Geochimica et Cosmochimica Acta* 10 (1956): 236–37.

the question of species (how a species differs from a variation). By monkey panic I mean a kind of extreme genealogical anxiety about our own status as biological beings—we cannot deny while simultaneously refusing to believe that we are merely animals. This is why progressive recapitulation (related to Lamarckianism), developed by thinkers such as E. D. Cope, would still see themselves as Darwinian even though they deny the depths of contingency. They would reassert purpose or teleology back into evolution, and this linear or progressive form would continue in different guises for at least 100 years.

Lovecraft's materialism would seem to deny recapitulation as a means of reasserting purpose or direction into the biological in a way that would benefit human vanity. While it might appeal to him in the sense of humans being above other animals, it would violate his cosmism—namely, that there is nothing inherently significant about humanity when considered at the cosmological scale. This in turn would seem to trickle down to the geological and biological scales (evolution on the Earth), but the possibility of alien intelligence in Lovecraft's fiction complicates this implication. Lovecraft would appear as a transition between the failure of progressive recapitulation and the models of the biometricians. It is clear from "At the Mountains of Madness" that he fantasizes about the possibilities of technology which requires a level of intelligence beyond that of human beings (at the time and perhaps as such):

The effect of the monstrous sight was indescribable, for some fiendish violation of known natural law seemed certain at the outset. Here, on a hellishly ancient table-land fully 20,000 feet high, and in a climate deadly to habitation since a pre-human age not less than 500,000 years ago, there stretched nearly to the vision's limit a tangle of orderly stone which only the desperation of mental self-defence could possibly attribute to any but a conscious and artificial cause. We had previously dismissed, so far as serious thought was concerned, any theory that the cubes and ramparts of the mountainsides were other than natural in origin. How could they be otherwise, when man himself could scarcely have been differentiated from the great apes at the time when this region succumbed to the present unbroken reign of glacial death?²⁰

Here Lovecraft expresses the central tenant of his cosmism, namely, given the age of the cosmos, there is no reason to believe that there could not be an intelligence ancient and powerful enough to act in a godlike manner. This kind of awe is translated onto the biological realm and the biopolitical capacities of the Great Old Ones:

20 H. P. Lovecraft, *Complete Works of H. P. Lovecraft*, vol. 10 (Delphi Classics, 2013), 1144.

The things once rearing and dwelling in this frightful masonry in the age of dinosaurs were not indeed dinosaurs, but far worse. Mere dinosaurs were new and almost brainless objects—but the builders of the city were wise and old, and had left certain traces in rocks even then laid down well-nigh a thousand million years . . . rocks laid down before the true life of earth had advanced beyond plastic groups of cells . . . rocks laid down before the true life of earth had existed at all. They were the makers and enslavers of that life, and above all doubt the originals of the fiendish elder myths which things like the Pnakotic Manuscripts and the Necronomicon affrightedly hint about.²¹

But before looking into “At the Mountains of Madness” in more detail, the question becomes how to integrate or fail to integrate the ramification of biological, geological, and cosmological contingency threaded through the material traces and available models and theories. How to avoid monkey panic or what then would be a productive or constructive aspect of the integration of deep time? Jessica George has argued that Lovecraft attempts to construct a eugenical utopia where isolated and ‘strong’ cultures defend themselves from those they view as inferior. However, this vision seems to rely upon a portability of mind independent from body, which thereby denies mind’s materiality contra Lovecraft.²² How then do we understand the fact that deep time, in its various forms, for Lovecraft seems to unravel consciousness? And, from this, how do we understand intelligence as something which overcomes contingency and yet still needs to rely upon racist narratives of eurocentric evolutionary progress? While this relation could be contested in the split of the Old Weird from the New Weird (fearing versus embracing the Other),²³ there still remain the ways in which an indifferent material universe is aesthetically represented. While the human narration of Lovecraft’s tales can be justified (as we will see below) by the contingent fact that we are humans telling stories, the privileging of a particular form of that fact requires either external (via the material universe) or internal (human judgments and meaning) forms of justification.

21 Lovecraft, 1158–59.

22 Jessica George, “Deadly Light: Machen, Lovecraft, and Evolutionary Theory,” (PhD Thesis, University of Cardiff, 2014), 268–69.

23 In this vein see Marijeta Bradić, “Towards a Poetics of Weird Biology: Strange Lives of Nonhuman Organisms in Literature,” *Pulse: the Journal of Science and Culture* 6 (2019).

HIDEOUSLY AMPLIFIED WORLD:
“AT THE MOUNTAINS OF MADNESS”

One central theme of Lovecraft’s work and one that runs from his cosmism to his nativism is that the uncaring physicality of the whole great material universe can be viewed as nothing other than an assault on the gray delicacies of the human brain. As Mark Fisher once put it, Lovecraft’s stories

depend for their power on the contrast between the terrestrial-empirical and the Outside. That is why they are almost always written in the first person (‘The Dunwich Horror’ is the most famous exception to this rule): if the Outside gradually encroaches upon a human subject, its alien contours can be appreciated; whereas to attempt to capture ‘the boundless and hideous unknown’ without any reference to the human world at all is to risk banality. At the same time, Houellebecq is correct to emphasize that, by contrast with someone like Richard Matheson, Lovecraft has ‘no wish to spend thirty or even three pages describing an average American family.’ (51–52) Lovecraft deploys the human world in as formulaic and perfunctory way, for much the same reason that a painter of a vast edifice might insert a standard human figure standing before it: to provide a sense of scale.²⁴

Fisher’s statement opens the question of to what extent does Lovecraft care about the human, both in terms of its familiar perspective and in terms of its attempt to find moral and ethical grounding as well as existential meaning. In one sense humans appear as simply psychical or literal fodder to unthinkable horrors, but in the other it is only through some degree of sympathy or at least species-familiarity that the shock of Lovecraft’s odd creations can be registered. Lovecraft’s great failing then, as we have already seen above, is to claim that an atavistic clinging to a particular set of cultural norms is the only rational response to such a threat, which would alibi his unbounded racism (in the sense of a ‘natural’ hierarchy of races). The aim of the following section is to show how the deployment of geological deep time, and cosmological deeper time, is intermixed in Lovecraft’s racism in exposing the broader and older logic of scientific racism.

In this sense Lovecraft’s “At the Mountains of Madness” is an incredible exercise in combining temporal and spatial scales. The opening paragraphs

24 Mark Fisher, “Lovecraft and the Weird: Part 1M,” *K-Punk* (blog), May 2007, <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/009329.html>.

not only interlace numerous descriptions of the massive peaks and mountains of the “aeon-dead world” of the Antarctic with fictional portrayals (such as Poe), but also combines geographically distant geological structures (Quebec, China, Russia, etc.).²⁵ This is repeated perhaps most dramatically when the mountains of the story’s title are viewed by the main characters:

I think that both of us simultaneously cried out in mixed awe, wonder, terror, and disbelief in our own senses as we finally cleared the pass and saw what lay beyond. Of course we must have had some natural theory in the back of our heads to steady our faculties for the moment. Probably we thought of such things as the grotesquely weathered stones of the Garden of the Gods in Colorado, or the fantastically symmetrical wind-carved rocks of the Arizona desert. Perhaps we even half thought the sight a mirage like that we had seen the morning before on first approaching those mountains of madness. We must have had some such normal notions to fall back upon as our eyes swept that limitless, tempest-scarred plateau and grasped the almost endless labyrinth of colossal, regular, and geometrically eurythmic stone masses which reared their crumbled and pitted crests above a glacial sheet not more than forty or fifty feet deep at its thickest, and in places obviously thinner.²⁶

Quite telling is not only the narrator’s description of geological or inorganic grotesqueness, but also the fact that the unfamiliar is maximized to the limit as a violation of natural law in the comments that follow the above. Though much of the story is filled with scientific detail particularly in the form of reports wired back to civilization, Lovecraft’s split worldview is particularly evident in discussing Nature (with capital ‘N’) and in the articulation of the psychological states of the expedition members. As several of the team take flight to investigate the radio silence of the other encampment, the narrator says:

Every incident of that four-and-a-half-hour flight is burned into my recollection because of its crucial position in my life. It marked my loss, at the age of fifty-four, of all that peace and balance which the normal mind possesses through its accustomed conception of external Nature and Nature’s laws. Thenceforward the ten of us—but the student Danforth and myself above all others—were to face a hideously amplified

25 Lovecraft, *Complete Works*, 1108.

26 *Ibid.* 1143–44.

world of lurking horrors which nothing can erase from our emotions, and which we would refrain from sharing with mankind in general if we could.²⁷

The emphasis on scale while denying any mystical, religious, or humanist buffer, has increasingly delirious effects on the human mind. But while the natural formations of the Antarctic are hideous and fiendish, the constructed environments made by the Great Old Ones are impressive and awesome in their apparent technological and mathematical impossibility. In the materialist terms of Lovecraft's cosmism the capacities of matter (the Old Ones technology) are simply interfering with other capacities of matter (human nervous systems).

Throughout "At the Mountains of Madness" Lovecraft makes repeated reference to the Russian painter Nicholas Roerich and, in particular, his paintings of the Himalayan mountains and mystical cities there. The way in which Lovecraft invokes Roerich's imagery (especially as grotesque or fiendish) seems to be against the grain of the atmosphere and coloration of the painter's works (though the dead city might be a prominent exception). The very notion of an inorganic grotesque (especially not one that is meant to represent an idol or statue) itself suggests that Lovecraft is relying upon a pre-modern aesthetics of the natural world (specifically of nature as a kind of pastoral, or untouched realm). Lovecraft seems to have the disgust for those who still believe in teleology and in a god-planned world but without god. The description of his characters' reactions seems similar to those god-fearing explorers who found mountains and geological outgrowths ugly and potential signs of god's lack of care in building the Earth in the 16th and 17th centuries.²⁸ But Lovecraft does not seem to fit into the modern reabsorption of natural immensity as beauty or sublimity either. While it is tempting to invoke the Burkean or Kantian sublime in addressing Lovecraft's work, it seems to lack the humanism of the latter and the rational safe-distance of the former. As Vivian Ralickas has argued, Lovecraft's cosmic horror would seem to deny the possibility of an experience of the sublime because: "In Lovecraft, the subject suffers from a violation of its sense of self, but it is graced with no consolatory understanding of the human condition to mollify its fragmented psyche. With its identity and the foundations of its culture destroyed, the subject who experiences cosmic horror always succumbs to one of three comparably dreadful fates, judging from the standpoint of a balanced, rational mind: insanity,

27 Lovecraft, *Complete Works*, 1128.

28 See Thomas Moynihan on the natural theologian Thomas Burnet in *X-Risk: How Humanity Discovered Its Own Extinction* (Urbanomic, 2020), 141; as well as Emily Thomas, *The Meaning of Travel: Philosophers Abroad* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

death, or the embracing of its miscegenated and no longer human condition.”²⁹ While the reference to miscegenation is not explicit in “At the Mountains of Madness” (and is connected to “The Rats in the Walls”), it is indirectly invoked in the fact that, again as mentioned by Ralickas, human evolution is portrayed as an unplanned offshoot of alien biological experimentation.³⁰ The creation of the human species is the result of an uncleaned petri dish at the geological scale. But rather than accept the bitter pill of his own cosmism, there is always a defense mechanism put in its place, the radically conservative gesture of holding on to the supposedly changeless.

Of course, the most famous aspect of “At the Mountains” is no doubt the protagonists’ encounter with the Shoggoth which is in effect a bio-engineered slave of the Great Old Ones. Thus the cosmicist horror of being merely an accident, or of there being a greater intelligence in the wide dark universe, is supplanted by the possibility of a slave revolt:

Formless protoplasm able to mock and reflect all forms and organs and processes—viscous agglutinations of bubbling cells—rubbery fifteen-foot spheroids infinitely plastic and ductile—slaves of suggestion, builders of cities—more and more sullen, more and more intelligent, more and more amphibious, more and more imitative—Great God! What madness made even those blasphemous Old Ones willing to use and to carve such things? And now, when Danforth and I saw the freshly glistening and reflectively iridescent black slime which clung thickly to those headless bodies and stank obscenely with that new unknown odour whose cause only a diseased fancy could envisage—clung to those bodies and sparkled less voluminously on a smooth part of the accursedly re-sculptured wall in a series of grouped dots—we understood the quality of cosmic fear to its uttermost depths.³¹

It is here we can return to where we began and to the denial of evolutionary contingency that at the time has a structure and cannot said to be an absolute

29 Vivian Ralickas, “‘Cosmic Horror’ and the Question of the Sublime in Lovecraft,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 18, no. 3 (2007): 364–98. In a contrasting view Rebecca Janicker argues that, at least in visual adaptations of Lovecraft’s work, there is an impartial or destabilized encounter with the sublime. See Rebecca Janicker, “Madness and Monstrosity: Notions of the Gothic and Sublime in Comic Adaptations of H. P. Lovecraft,” in *Monsters and Monstrosity from the Fin de Siècle to the Millennium: New Essays*, eds. Sharla Hutchinson and Rebecca A. Brown (McFarland, 2015), 187–205.

30 See also Bennett Lovett-Graff, “Lovecraft: Reproduction and its Discontents: Degeneration and Detection in ‘The Lurking Fear,’” *Paradoxa* 1, no. 3 (1995): 325–41.

31 Lovecraft, *Complete Works*, 1192–93.

contingency. If the pre-moderns (pre-1700s) saw the geological in its unevenness as a curiosity given theologically infinite wisdom, and the moderns saw our human rationality and judgment as embracing the sublime, Lovecraft's 20th century advantage is that most of the known cosmos was devoid of life: Lovecraft accepts humans are in fact susceptible to not only degeneration but to extinction. If there is a way to use Lovecraft not only against himself but against the eugenicists discussed above, it is to show that even from a universe postulated as a blob of matter,³² this is no barrier to the instigation of a cultural politics based upon a supposedly pre-set racial hierarchy. Because all systems of meaning and value are arbitrary, no particular system can be valued against the other, and it is simply that the one that wields the most technical power and control will win out in the end. Elizabeth Bear's "Shoggoths in Bloom" puts the point quite well:

The shoggoths were engineered. And their creators had not permitted them to think, except for at their bidding. The basest slave may be free inside his own mind—but not so the shoggoths. They had been laborers, construction equipment, shock troops. They had been dread weapons in their own selves, obedient chattel. Immortal, changing to suit the task of the moment. This selfsame shoggoth, long before the reign of the dinosaurs, had built structures and struck down enemies that Harding did not even have names for. But a coming of the ice had ended the civilization of the Masters, and left the shoggoths to retreat to the fathomless sea while warm-blooded mammals overran the earth. There, they were free to converse, to explore, to philosophize and build a culture. They only returned to the surface, vulnerable, to bloom.³³

There is something radically modern and self-exposing about how this takes form in Lovecraft in that it highlights the barrenness of human-centered aesthetic categories in the face of the infinite. The mythical, the uncanny, and the sublime become the Gothic, the eerie and the weird. In the context of race and its purported aesthetic separation from the material or scientifically joint-cut world, we can say that the Gothic is the transplantation of the

32 While Lovecraft explicitly emphasizes mental damage and trauma, there is much to be said about corporeality and materiality in his works. See for instance Alison Sperling, "H. P. Lovecraft's Weird Body," in *Lovecraft Annual* 10 (2016): 75–100.

33 Elizabeth Bear, "Shoggoths in Bloom," in *The Book of Cthulhu* (Night Shade Books, 1st Edition, 2011), 187.

European world into the ‘New World’ (as in Poe).³⁴ Following Mark Fisher, the eerie is the absence of what should be there while the weird is the presence of the strange that should not be there.³⁵ This ‘progression’ is from the point of view of the arrival whereas for the colonized the situation of affects and effects would be reversed (a strange appearance, an emptying, a world we do not recognize). Yet in “At the Mountains of Madness,” Lovecraft’s move is a regressive recapitulation where ‘our progress’ is repeated at higher levels across deeper times which involves a slide from a rational hierarchy of beings to a material hierarchy of ever more rational beings that nonetheless are dominating those ‘beneath’ them with insufficiently suppressed savagery. This falsely modest rejection of biological contingency over time in the name of ‘western culture’ and coded in the psychic trauma of the ‘civilized’, continues to alibi the perpetual return of eugenics.³⁶ Or, put otherwise, even in a fully material universe those who evolve the technological capacities to discover and alter that material universe are granted the right to do so since only the swirling of matter itself is said to grant rights. □

34 The traditional Gothic story relied upon ancient rites and long family lineages by way of the depth of European history and its haunted castles. Because of the colonization of the Americas Poe could borrow imagery but not plot from this tradition, and this may have perhaps also contributed to Poe’s emphasis on psychological horror above all else.

35 Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater Books, 2017).

36 In an odd way the story is an inverse of Kubrick’s *The Shining*, where the repetitive spiral of trauma is the exhibition of the one-sidedness of colonial trauma and the way out is the internalization of a different form of trauma to construct an affinity with the dead.

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