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Too Weird for Words: An Analysis of the Weird Across Media

by

Joshua Lee Winston

Under the Direction of Calvin Thomas, PhD

A Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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ABSTRACT

This thesis draws on recent scholarship and criticism within speculative fiction in order to present a contemporary definition of the notoriously elusive weird fiction and investigates the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the weird as they ooze or seep beyond the confines of a purely literary existence. In doing so, the thesis also investigates how the weird absorbs and visually represents political and social issues and ideologies such as racism, post-humanism and climate change while also unearthing conflicts of identity, coherency and generic instability, within the mode. It first accomplishes this by revisiting the works of H.P. Lovecraft in order to assess their ideological implications, then moves through literature and film, to expand the historically binary relationship between literature and film or television as it is mediated through the speculative fiction mode and replace it with a spectrum or continuity of artistic and philosophical expression befitting our contemporary medium-ambivalent culture.

INDEX WORDS: Weird, Weird Fiction, Science Fiction, Sci-Fi, VanderMeer, Lovecraft, Annihilation

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DEDICATION

For Mark Fisher.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Weird Fiction

Weird does not so much articulate the crisis as that the crisis cannot be articulated.

— China Miéville

It is tempting to classify weird fiction as simply another sub-genre of speculative fiction cobbled together from pieces of other speculative genres such as sci-fi, horror, fantasy, and the gothic. And indeed, weird fiction can be thought of as a Frankenstein's genre, monstrously constructed from the tropes and archetypes of its speculative counterparts. It borrows heavily from these stories, taking the aliens, ghosts, robots, death, decay, the numinous and phantasmagoric, the sublime and the uncanny, and warps them past their already distorted and disturbing literary existence. This mode of writing is inextricably tied to horror writer H.P. Lovecraft because of both his paradigmatic short stories and his own enduring definition of the weird as "A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces" (Machin 2). He cites gothic writers Edgar Allen Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne as major influences on his writing. Lovecraft and other early weird authors have continuously drawn on the decadent and excessive horror of gothic tropes. And so, their weird stories do bear a palimpsestic resemblance to the gothic and other early forms of speculative fiction but differ by being less categorically stable and intelligible as a coherent genre. For instance, Lovecraft, endlessly inspired by the haunted house narratives of Poe and Hawthorne, sets his short story "The Shunned House" in a similarly spectral domestic setting, but replaces the ghost infestation with a fungus-oozing, subterranean creature living underneath the house. Weird fiction often travels along the paths of other genres before making sharp right turns into others. Lovecraft's

weird fiction follows a gothic sensibility before veering off into sci-fi and horror. Weird fiction shrugs off the already loose constraints of genre, moving into a polyvocal, multimodality that is uniquely suited to our modern generic ambivalence. It therefore exists as tension between other speculative genres, compelling us to classify it, to name it so that we may know it. We want to pin it down as its own genre or relegate it to sci-fi, horror, fantasy or the gothic to relieve the tension. But it is because of the tension that the weird throws all modes into question, and even threatens the stability of literature itself.

Weird fiction entertains all of the strange, horrific, supernatural, and otherworldly notions which characterize speculative genres, but transcends these generic expectations by refusing to reconcile their strangeness or their narrative uncertainty with any easy explanation which is readily intelligible. These are not stories in which the human race triumphs over the little green men from Mars or neatly contain ghosts within the haunted house of human psychological trauma. Weird fiction engages with these well-worn literary tropes but approaches them from the opposite position. If traditional speculative fiction places the human at the center of a sprawling universe in direct opposition to ghosts, aliens, robots, monsters and technologically advanced forms of government surveillance, weird fiction identifies us as merely another rung on the ontological ladder. Humans exist in weird fiction as mere participants in a larger cosmology, not the brave space-exploring, robot-fighting, ghost hunters that populate traditional speculative fiction. In a literary Copernican revolution of sorts, weird fiction strips us of our privileged position at the center of the speculative fiction universe. Again, Lovecraft illustrates this vividly and horrifically as his foundationally weird stories are often about ancient beings who exist both in our reality and far beyond it. They enter our dimension to threaten the human race both physically as they lay waste to human civilization, but also epistemologically as an unknown

entity from an incomprehensible dimension. Somewhere between aliens and gods, his "ancient ones" are indescribable beings from distant times and places and his stories are often just as much about these creatures and their effects as they are about the human beings witnessing them, if not more so.

Lovecraft's "The Color Out of Space" is about a mysterious alien presence crash landing in a meteorite on the outskirts of a small New England farm town and the devastating impact it has on the surrounding landscape. All that remains of the farm and its previous owners is a burned-out plot of land the locals refer to as the "blasted heath." The narrator recalls chillingly how professors and scientists were stupefied by the meteorite's strange qualities: Its uncharacteristic softness, its ability to remain hot indefinitely and disappear completely. Most notable was its "strange colour," which was "almost impossible to describe; and it was only by analogy that they called it colour at all" (Lovecraft 442). Lovecraft characteristically situates his "monsters" already outside of any human scientific or philosophical understanding. A Lovecraftian creature necessarily disturbs our epistemological foundations and pushes us to the very edge of our limited human perspective.

Strange occurrences take place on the farm and to the Gardner family living on it shortly after the meteorite arrives. At first, their crops grew very large but were discovered to be inedible, contaminated to the point of rot by something in the soil. Their animals started to behave unusually before altogether disappearing and it was said that the snow melted faster around their farm than it did elsewhere. The Gardner family is unable to grasp what is happening to their farm and to themselves. Lovecraft makes sure the reader is even less aware, only leaving them with a foreboding sense of slowly impending doom. The farmhouse and surrounding land turn the same indescribably "phosphorescent" color as the meteorite, and the living inhabitants of the farm slowly go mad, their psychological decay mirroring that of the sickly deteriorating landscape

around them. The story ends after the farm is resolutely destroyed by whatever landed in the meteorite and Lovecraft makes no effort to uncover what it was exactly. This inaccessibility of weird entities, such as whatever landed on Earth in "The Colour Out of Space," disturbingly reveals the inadequacy of our human perspective when confronted with the sublime enormity of deep space and time. It is a narrative technique integral to weird fiction and one that has become an essential trait of the weird as a theoretical perspective. Weird entities push or supersede the limits of human understanding and consequently destabilize human material reality by either violently tearing through it like the meteorite or by more subtle, but no less disruptive means. From these weird stories, the weird as a theoretical and philosophical mode begins to coalesce.

1.2 **The Weird as Theory**

As weird fiction became more of an identifiable and coherent body of work because of authors and theorists such as China Miéville and Jeff VanderMeer, so too did a defining ideology emerge. Writers like Mark Fisher and James Machin have identified underlying philosophies of the weird, drawing on them to understand other media beyond literature and applying their findings as a framework to understand our contemporary social reality. In *The Weird and the Eerie*, Fischer moves beyond literature to apply the weird to other popular media (television, films, music), expanding it from a niche literary subgenre to a comprehensive model of cultural analysis. From the stories of H.G. Wells and H.P. Lovecraft, the music of English post-punk band The Fall, and the films of David Lynch, Fischer defines a continuum of weirdness, breaking the monolithically nebulous literary concept down into more specific and identifiable theoretical characteristics. It is through this weird framework that Fisher analyses the increasingly bizarre, uncanny, and remote qualities of life that have come to define the twenty-first century.

The work of weird theorists often seeks to bestow agency and centrality to nonhuman consciousness, but in a more general sense, re-prioritizes any form of non-dominant thought or ideology. Fischer describes his work as a "demonstration and reinforcement of Lovecraft's argument that 'memorable fragments' of the Weird are to be found *everywhere*" (Machin 11). Lovecraft's weird creatures obscure or overwhelm any human perspective, freely ripping holes in the fabric of our reality and intruding upon it at will. In the same sense, weird theory unearths the already present weirdness of contemporary everyday life. Like the small New England town in "The Color Out of Space" being invaded by the meteorite, our social reality is revealed to be susceptible and permeable. In a theoretical sense, this implicates reality not by the constant threat of invisible alien entities, but by exposing our cultural institutions as themselves exterior forces (Like race, capital and gender) imposed upon us by a symbolic order or society that is paradoxically separate from us yet contains us within it. Fisher calls this a "cognitive weird," a psychological experience in which what is normally taken for granted to be real, transhistorical, and inalienable, is discovered to have been contingent, malleable and fabricated. To illustrate, Fisher quotes a passage from Phillip K. Dick's novel *Time Out of Joint*, describing an "unworlding" in which a character is able to "see through" the world, "peeking through a crack and seeing — emptiness." This, for Fisher, represents a kind of weird which permeates everyday life, a weird that comes from the understanding that even in the absence of some otherworldly exterior force, the very fabric of society is itself an external intervention into human subjectivity. Social constructions (race, gender, gas stations, roads, capital) are merely ornaments hanging on a vast tapestry concealing the fictional nature of our social reality and that it is imposed upon us like a Lovecraftian creature tearing through our universe.

Fisher expands upon these observations, analyzing various types of cultural media in order to fill in the gaps and spaces existing in the nascent theoretical concept of weirdness. He argues, “the notion of *the between* is crucial to the weird” (Fisher 28). “The centrality of doors, thresholds and portals” constitute textbook weirdness as it is concerned with liminality and instability. “The weird de-naturalizes all worlds, by exposing their instability, their openness to the outside” (29). Fisher threads this out from the speculative fiction trope of intrusions and invasions of extra-dimensional creatures into our material and social reality. The unseen alien presence arrives on Earth for no apparent purpose other than to frighten and confound our epistemological understandings. These are classic senses of the weird, senses which are concerned with the binary oppositions between our world and the worlds of the ontological other colliding in traumatic and seemingly perverse ways. But Fisher moves beyond this particular sense and into a less binary relation. To identify weirdness in the real world, to practice the weird in theory, is to look inward as well as outward. Weirdness, in the absence of extra-dimensional creatures, seeps into ourselves. The doors, thresholds, and portals of the weird turn in the opposite direction from exits out of our social reality into entrances through which deeper levels of our sociology and our psychology become, if not wholly accessible, then at least visible. We may not know where the meteorite came from or what it wants, we may not be able to describe the color of its strange glow. But we at least know it’s there.

As these weird interactions take place, as we become aware of the ontological other, we also learn to “denaturalize” our own understanding of the world. Fisher cites H.G. Wells’ “The Door in the Wall,” as an example of this when a man begins seeing a red door appear to him, seemingly out of nowhere, in different parts of London. Only one time does he enter it, and within he finds a kind of surreal garden with “an atmosphere of languid joy, while a diffuse sense

of kindness seems to emanate from all of the people he meets there" (Fisher 26). No monsters inhabit this garden scene, no extra-dimensional beings threaten to destroy the man's world. The man eventually leaves and spends the rest of his life trying to return to the tranquil garden behind the door, no longer satisfied by the incomparable mundanity of his life. Fisher contrasts this with the reality exploding stories of Lovecraft. The weirdness, in this instance, does not lead outward into an inhuman and hostile dimension, but further inward into the psychology of the man forever looking for the door in the wall. His encounter with the weirdness of the door and the garden has made him aware of the inadequacy of his small life. It has made him obsessively aware of other possibilities, and in its strange vibrancy, has drained his real life of any color. Thus, the weird-as-theory moves inward as well as outward, destabilizing individual lives as well as whole societies. And, in its wake, leaves only irreconcilable tensions between the real and the symbolic, real life and fantasy, and the individual and the societal. As weird fiction borrows from the other genres of speculative fiction, so too does the weird-as-theory cobble together a dizzying montage of cultural analysis, drawing from Marxism, postmodernism, psychoanalysis, speculative realism, ecocriticism and post-humanism, among others.

1.3 **Too Weird for Words**

While the weird is inherently unstable, it has also increasingly become at least a coherent literary mode and theoretical perspective as a result of theorists such as Mark Fischer and Timothy Morton. And as I've become more familiar with the weird through my research, I have noted a specific tension or inherent resistance to language itself that remains relatively unexplored by existing work on the subject. Kahn Faassen and Pieter Vermeulen argue the weird is contingent upon a limited human perspective, a perspective dependent on language to make meaning of its perceptions, but which ultimately fails in encounters with the weird. Returning to

Lovecraft as an example, we can note that his monsters almost always defy any stable and meaningful linguistic description. In Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*, the narrator attempts to describe the eponymous creature: "If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing" (Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu* 7). He tries feebly to attach a human frame of reference to the creature. His description flickers between familiar animals but settles nowhere, revealing the inadequacy of human language to effectively grasp Cthulhu. "Even though categories and taxonomies fail, language doggedly carries on, confronting its users and readers with the inadequacy of their conceptual understanding […]" (Faassen 7). If the theoretical agenda of the weird is to "de-naturalize all worlds" then this certainly must also implicate language, the foundation of our human world.

The weird then seems to always be at odds with the medium in which it is contained. Literature is composed of words and the weird appears to be too much, too vast and contentious to be contained by an imperfect system. Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Annihilation* further illustrates the incapacity of language as its protagonist, simply called the biologist, encounters a formless and indescribable being called the Crawler at the end of the novel. The presence of the Crawler quickly overwhelms the biologist's ability to describe what she is experiencing. "*No words can...no photographs could…"* (VanderMeer 176). She tries inadequately to describe the Crawler shifting and morphing into different forms, different stages of being. Sometimes solid, sometimes entirely composed of rapidly color-changing light, sometimes both — "a wall of flesh that *resembled* light" — the Crawler grows to overwhelm all of her senses (VanderMeer 177). She begins to lose any distinction between her own consciousness and that of the Crawler, if consciousness is what can be attributed to a weird entity like that. VanderMeer describes this

encounter wildly and incoherently. The language of the novel effectively breaks down, mirroring the breakdown of the biologist's perception of the events happening before her. The sentences lining the pages of this chapter "doggedly carry on" but become increasingly nonsensical and even stop abruptly as the biologist repeatedly faints and comes to. The weird is often concerned with these types of encounters and phenomena as they attempt to represent the unrepresentable and what is not accessible by the human mind. At the end of this encounter, the biologist asks, "What can you do when your five senses are not enough?" (VanderMeer 178). The weird confronts us with this question often, and in place of an answer, only leaves a vague awareness of our limited human perspective.

Outside of language and the symbolic order, the weird seeks to reconcile itself with the real, with that which cannot be represented. The "doors, thresholds and portals" so integral to the weird then become exits out of our world of language, out of our methods of making meaning. In the presence of weird entities, language simply breaks down and is swept away like loose sand. It is through unspeakably traumatic encounters with exterior forces, as well as a gently creeping and inarticulable awareness of things which lie beyond our immediate perception, that the weird encompasses such a speechless silence.

By its very nature, this new weird paradigm eludes any attempt at stable definition or categorization. Its open thresholds refuse to contain any stability or theoretical rigidity in the face of academic study, and I believe this is a strength which should be embraced and celebrated. However, in its nascency, it also leaves room for conversation between other theoretical models and philosophies, against which the weird may be bolstered or articulated through exterior concepts. For instance, the weird is frequently attached to the work of speculative realist Timothy Morton and his theories of object-oriented ontology and hyperobjectivity. Such

frameworks lend the weird an almost scientific tangibility and structure that are otherwise sublimated in its philosophical miasma of terror, dread, and unspeakability. Morton extends object-oriented ontology, the belief that objects are fundamentally inaccessible or unreachable except through translation, to give us the hyperobject. Morton's hyperobjectivity describes objects or phenomena that are too monumental to be thought of directly, things which are "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton, Hyperobjects 1). He cites black holes and global warming as apt examples of hyperobjectivity, but this quality may also be found in the weird. It may be located in the unexplainable phenomena which populate speculative fiction, in which events happen on a planetary or dimensional scale, too physically large or too chronologically extended to be perceived by the human mind. Hyperobjectivity, like the weird, also draws on classical notions of the sublime, the experience of human perception at its very limits. It folds them into this newer framework by denying humans the psychological distance on which the Kantian sublime depends, bringing this overwhelming, all-encompassing sublime experience to humans directly and unmediated. This can also be said of the weird as it "punctures the supposed membrane separating off the sublime, and allows swillage of that awe and horror from 'beyond' back into the everyday" (Mieville 511). The weird and Morton's hyperobjectivity become likely bedfellows as they transcend the limits of medium and perception to reach out and entangle their audience in a tentacled mass of "awe and horror," awareness and introspection.

Fisher and Morton both offer unprecedented definitions of their fields and it is their work in tandem that structures this thesis. In combining their theories, my thesis will examine both the book and film versions of *Lovecraft Country* and *Annihilation.* In doing so, my analysis of what can be termed weird cultural objects will also broach larger questions about the weird and its

destabilizing relationship to media. As literature stutters and stumbles to fully and faithfully represent weirdness, I believe the weird should be considered beyond the boundaries of any one mode. Weird literature that has been made into film provides an interesting case study in how weirdness is affected by medium, how the representation of a seemingly inarticulable philosophy may be represented visually and sonically as opposed to merely literarily. Fischer was certainly interested in this as well as he analyzed music, television and films, identifying the weirdness of these modes, and he very well may have undertaken a similar project were it not for his untimely death. However, as enlightening as his illuminative scholarship on the weird is, it has also only inspired more questions. He does not comment explicitly on the technical relationship between literature and other forms of weirdness, the many resonances and dissonances which exist between weird literature and film. And so my work will be to examine literature, film and television, not in an attempt to pit them against each other, but to take them together as a necessary continuum of weirdness; to continue Fisher's work in expanding the theoretical awareness of weirdness from a predominantly literary perspective to a multimodal experience able to be communicated based on its core principles.

CHAPTER 2

1.4 From Sci-fi to the weird

Weird fiction and television are worthy of this type of study because of the radical departure they represent from previous weird cultural objects such as more traditional science fiction books and their film adaptations. Science fiction, now a staple of our media landscape, was also once considered philosophically or ideologically revolutionary. A lot of early science fiction was predicated on radical and emancipatory politics, on the imagination of a liberal utopia

that never came, and the unsuccessful prevention of a hyperreal, late-capitalist milieu. However, it was capitalism that would have the more profound effect on science fiction as it forced writers to abandon the utopian potential of the present and turn their narrative attention towards the future, towards the "horizons of a new revolutionary dawn" (Suvin 115).

Many notable writers have identified this shift in our cultural imagination from a sense of optimism and hope in the present to an ambivalently anxious anticipation of a utopian or dystopian future, precipitated by the withering grip of consumer capitalism. Darko Suvin argues as much in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction:* "The instauration of capitalist production as the dominant and finally' all-pervasive way of life engendered a fundamental reorientation of human practice and imagination: a wished-for or feared future becomes the new space of the cognitive (and increasingly of the everyday) imagination" (115). Many science fiction writers abandoned the genre's engagement with the present, thereby impoverishing the collective cultural imagination and perpetually postponing it's "new revolutionary dawns" into a future that would never materialize. Toni Morrison takes this idea even further in her essay, "The Future of Time, Literature and Diminished Expectations," in which she argues that our cultural imagination, instead of being merely delayed or displaced into the future, has been withered away entirely, corrupted by not just our economic reality but also our social one in which racism and prejudice further poison society: "The loudest voices are urging those already living in dread of the future to speak of culture in military terms—as a cause for and expression of war" (56). As Morrison describes, depictions of the future characterize it as a site of conflict or struggle, a perpetually delayed battle to be fought for and won or lost to apocalyptic consequences.

Instead of enriching cultural imagination with utopian ideas of progress precipitated by technological advancement, science fiction instead became an early rehearsal for the dance that

takes place between neoliberal capitalism and its adversaries – a dance in which challengers to the economic status quo may appear to lead for a time, only to be subsumed back into subordination, robbed of any real revolutionary potential. It's a routine that has now been perfected, playing itself out in the safely distilled "revolutionary" messaging of such sci-fi franchises as *The Hunger Games* and the *Divergent* series. These book-to-film adaptations can be considered counterpoints to the type of relationship I am identifying between weird fiction and film. They're a legacy of science-fiction storytelling in which the possibility for radical societal change is delayed indefinitely into a militarized and technocratic future.

Conversely, weird adaptations reopen the present and past as a site of possibility and change. They openly acknowledge their complicity in consumer capitalism and describe the inevitability of such a position. They are incredibly aware of their enmeshment inside the profit machine, the publishing industry, the film industry, app stores, and record labels. The weirdness of capital itself is not lost on weird theorists as it is "conjured out of nothing," yet "exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity" (Fischer 11). They are not working against the machine from the outside, but rather working within it, articulating the bizarre and surreal qualities of present-day modern life as they are mediated through neoliberal markets. Their writing is concerned with the inarticulable reality of such a situation, with the inescapable sense of being confined to this specific reality, this time and this place. It reveals this position to be untrue by exposing its boundaries to be tenuous and porous, creating a rupture in "the very fabric of experience itself" (Fisher 22).

1.5 **Lovecraft and Lovecraft Country**

Matt Ruff's 2016 novel *Lovecraft Country* and its subsequent 2020 television adaption by showrunner Misha Green represent this very "rupture" as they both grapple with the racism

haunting America's past and present. They do so through an examination of the weird's racist underpinnings, namely the works of its icon Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Both the book and show address the weird's problematic relationship to Lovecraft, and through this self-reflexive critique, simultaneously address racism and prejudice at large. *Lovecraft Country* functions as a literary exorcism of sorts as it attempts to settle the racist ghost of Lovecraft and mount a larger theoretical rumination on race relations in America.

The book and television show emerge out of a recent resurgence of horror noire, a genre of horror film which translates the drama and terror of racism into supernatural, blood-soaked spectacle. Films such as Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019) have dominated box office sales and critical attention as they transform the tragedy of institutional racism in the United States into thrillingly macabre horror. Similarly, *Lovecraft Country* commandeers the creatures and entities from Lovecraft's own oeuvre and turns them into physically monstrous manifestations of oppression and bigotry. It's a strong metaphorical structure which reclaims the creatures of Lovecraft's stories as well as the monstrously racist and xenophobic opinions which inspired them.

Lovecraft was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1890, and even at a young age possessed a precocious talent for prejudice. In his essay "The Economy of Fear, H.P. Lovecraft on Eugenics, Economics, and the Great Depression," Sophus A. Reinert describes Lovecraft's early preoccupations with ideas of biological supremacy and Darwinian evolution. Already a "professed anti-Semite" at age 15, Lovecraft wrote a "succinct poem on racial politics" in honor of the anti-abolitionist William Benjamin Smith (Reinert 257). He became deeply invested in ideas of atavism and eugenics and took these beliefs into a career in journalism where he wrote about the "violations of race" taking place against "the Teuton" in World War I. He also wrote

about the Nordic race as the "summit of evolution," who possessed a "vast superiority to the rest of mankind" (257).

In 1924, Lovecraft married Sonia H. Greene and moved to New York City. Where previously Lovecraft's encounters with immigration and multiculturalism had only been academic or abstract in nature, they were now inescapably real, and his writing evolved to encompass the fresh horror that the city's diversity became to him. Lovecraft and Sonia later divorced, a split his Jewish wife later attributed to his "harping hatred of Jews" (258). He ended up living alone and unemployed in Brooklyn, and the city he once called "a thing of Dunsanian beauty" eventually became to him a "mirage of doom." Lovecraft drew endless amounts of inspiration from taking walks around the city. In letters, he would describe the "'semi-African jungles of Harlem', out of which 'flabby, pungent, grinning, chattering niggers!' oozed." His ex-wife admitted to his "'livid rage' upon seeing 'racially mixed crowds,'" which he would then channel into violent and eerie cosmic horror (258). Lovecraft drew on his own fears and prejudices stemming from his misguided beliefs in biological supremacy and atavistic notions of societal degeneration and the retrogradation of the human race. He then spun these fears into what is now considered the Lovecraftian weird, sublimating his racism into supernatural horror, and projecting his loathing of the cultural other onto incomprehensible and formless beings which threaten to overtake humanity.

Lovecraft's racism and xenophobia can be traced back to pseudo-scientific beliefs and opinions that were in circulation during the early 20th century, namely beliefs that were emerging in the fields of eugenics and biological evolution. Lovecraft believed that the Nordic race was endowed with a specific rigidity and structure of moral and aesthetic value, that they had reached the heights of human evolution, and that it was their responsibility to "save existence from a

sense of chaos & futility by rebuilding the purely aesthetick & philosophical concept of character & cosmic pseu-do-purpose" (264). Lovecraft wrote inspired by the knowledge and fear that mankind had emerged evolutionarily from the primordial sea, and to these origins it might eventually return. "If evolution truly was random […], then might not man go forwards and backwards on the path" (265) Or worse, Lovecraft thought, the "less evolved" might rise up against the "supernal glory of blond heroes," or bring about the degeneration of the Nordic race through miscegenation. Lovecraft transfigured these fears and anxieties into his famous brand of cosmic horror. They often take on an indescribable formlessness – a miasmic muck or oozing shapeless goo which threatens to dissolve the biological superiority of the Nordic race. This palpable fear of dissolution haunts Lovecraft's fiction and can be understood as the literary manifestation of his atavistic horror. It represents the potential reversion of mankind back to its primordial state as it is dragged back there by its "less evolved" members.

Lovecraft's short story "The Color Out of Space" is deeply saturated with these fears and anxieties. It's considered one of Lovecraft's finest stories, frequently appearing in anthologies such as *Masterpieces of Science Fiction*. But it is also no different from many others in which a formless and incomprehensible alien being – a thinly veiled racist metaphor – threatens the biological and metaphysical integrity of a New England farm. The eerie fate of the Gardener family at the hands of whatever lands on Earth in the meteorite is gruesome and tragic, yet deeply compelling storytelling. But it is also entirely representative of Lovecraft's atavistic opinions. The half-deteriorated remains of the family's children are found at the bottom of the family well in pit of sludge under which, the narrator describes, "There was not bottom at all. Just ooze and bubbles and the feeling of something lurking under there" (Lovecraft 463). They are despairingly undone by whatever presence has landed from outer space; their family unit

literally dissolved by the alien corruption. The metaphorical resonance of an alien being effectively destroying the patriarchal family unit and its honest farmland livelihood is textbook Lovecraftian horror; a fantastically absorbing and dreadfully eerie weird tale that is ultimately predicated on Lovecraft's extraordinarily racist views of eugenics and evolution. The genius of *Lovecraft Country* lies in its acknowledgment of this legacy and its ability to confront it with wit and humor. And by engaging with Lovecraft in this way, both the book and film chart a path beyond him into more meaningful conversations about race and more thoughtful representations of racism in popular media.

Lovecraft Country was written by Matt Ruff and published in 2016 by HarperCollins. It was then picked up by HBO and turned into a 10-episode season written and developed by Misha Green. The show follows Ruff's original narrative fairly closely. Both begin with protagonist Atticus Turner traveling from Florida back to his hometown of Chicago in order to locate his recently missing father. Upon his return, he reunites with his uncle George and childhood friend Letitia and they head off together towards Ardham, Massachusetts, a variation of the same Arkham county in which Lovecraft's "The Color Out of Space" takes place. A scene occurs in both show and novel in which Atticus, an avid reader of science fiction, tells his uncle George about his father's reluctance to let him read Lovecraft when he was a child.

His father brings up Lovecraft's own "willful misconceptions about evolution" and seemingly drops the conversation, only to return a few days later with Lovecraft's poem "On the Creation of Niggers" (Ruff 15). A continuous point of conflict in the narrative is the experience of being Black in a world that was never constructed with Blackness in mind. Later, George shrugs this off, telling Atticus, "stories are like people […] Loving them doesn't make them perfect. You try to cherish their virtues and overlook their flaws. The flaws are still there, though

[…] "They do disappoint me sometimes […] Sometimes they stab me in the heart" (Ruff 13). Both of these exchanges also happen in the tv show and the dialogue is delivered almost verbatim as it appears in the novel. Both versions of the story are frequently preoccupied with the lasting trauma of racism, but their meditations on the subject often fall short, never quite reaching any sense of reconciliation or relief. George instructs Atticus to simply "overlook their flaws," to live with the disappointment and heartache symptomatic of living in a racist society.

Where the novel conveys this stark racial reality in so many sad words, the television show uses its cast and their relationships to themselves and each other to convey the psychological damage of racism. Or rather, it does so by omitting them all together. The pacing of the show moves wildly, with each episode bringing the main characters into increasingly close calls with dangerous monsters, powerful magic, and cartoonishly evil white supremacists. It takes on a monster-of-the week narrative structure with a Scooby-Doo style flair. And while this is probably conducive to casual viewing practices, it doesn't exactly lend itself to satisfying character development. In "What Lovecraft Country Gets Wrong About Racial Horror," Hannah Giorgis laments how "the show spends so much time focusing on its white characters' near-comic monstrousness that it undercuts the development of its Black leads." The show has been criticized for its anemic characterization of its main characters as its critics bemoan being "left wondering who Atticus, George, and especially Letitia, (a classic 'Strong Female Character' archetype) really *are"* (Giorgis). This development so yearned for by audience and critics alike arrives too late or simply doesn't come at all. It gets continually overshadowed by "convoluted" plot lines which repeatedly position the main characters as simple counterpoints to the vile caricatures of racism and white supremacy. Critics of the show fault it for this – for the way it "inadvertently simplifies the realities of white supremacy with its monster allegory, while

treating the Black cast less as characters in their own right and more as vehicles for a sweeping critique of American racism" (Giorgis).

From a viewer perspective, it does feel at times like the show is sacrificing the humanity of its characters for an overly simplified racist spectacle. In episode 4, "A History of Violence," Atticus, George and Letitia are sent on a convoluted adventure narrative reminiscent of classic adventure films like *National Treasure* and *Indiana Jones*. The episode pays full homage to these genres, putting its protagonists through all manner of booby-trapped caverns and treasure-filled temple ruins, but never stops to answer *why* the characters are doing this. The show often lacks character motivation beyond monolithic depictions of racism and its utilization as a plot device. However, this can be viewed as a strength of the show as much as it can be seen as a weakness. It might seem like the show denies its characters any nuance and personal complexity or that these things are overshadowed by the racist cops and bizarre white supremacist cults that they face each week. But I think this can also be viewed simply as a reality of racism. *Lovecraft Country* may have failed to create a compelling character driven drama, but it tragically succeeds in conveying the real, personality-destroying effects of prejudice and bigotry.

Both show and novel wrestle with the horrors of racism and the legacy of Lovecraft in different ways but they become most philosophically significant when they are considered together. Their big idea is located somewhere beyond both show and book, like a painting whose vanishing point lies outside of its frame. By this, I mean that the tv show and the novel are explicitly concerned with the devasting effects of racism, but neither is able to conquer or reconcile it on its own. In their own way and in their own failures, each version of *Lovecraft Country* proves the futility of such an endeavor and deconstructs traditionally binary media hierarchies in the process. The novel bleeds into the show and the show seeps back into the novel

in evocative ways. Weird cultural objects such as *Lovecraft Country* necessitate new forms of thinking and new ways of experiencing narrative not as discrete or insular instances of storytelling but as a continuum of fiction. They encourage us to think through things like racism differently and represent them in more expansive ways, beyond any one medium.

One of the ways in which *Lovecraft Country* attempts to reconfigure perceptions and representations of racism is by characterizing it as a hyperobject, which Timothy Morton defines as objects "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton 1). Hyperobjects include things like black holes and global warming. They elude or confound human perception by being too large to be perceived directly and are visible only by their effects on the environment. In *Lovecraft Country,* racism is treated as a sublimely metaphysical force only visible in the actions of the characters and the motivations of its white supremacist antagonists. The characters in both the show and novel are physically and psychologically compelled by it. Morton describes how "hyperobjects seem to beckon us further into themselves, making us realize that we're already lost inside them" (Morton 55). Atticus, George, and Letitia find themselves "lost" in many different forms of racism from sundown towns in which cops threaten them with violence after the sunsets, to the geographical heart of Lovecraft's white supremacist fiction in Massachusetts, "beckoned" there by forces beyond their control. Viewing the incomprehensible reality of racism through the framework of hyperobjectivity gives us new, more thorough ways of representing it. *Lovecraft Country* and other weird tales draw on knowledge and experience beyond the limits of their pages or runtimes of their shows. And in doing so, they materialize the racism and xenophobia of their source material far beyond the scope of any one medium.

I want to return to Lovecraft himself for a moment in order to more thoroughly consider the intersection of his beliefs and his fiction. *Lovecraft Country* directly addresses these intersections, often bringing them to the forefront of its narrative with all the melodramatic flair of an HBO supernatural drama. But what's also necessary, and what both novel and show omit, is the degree to which Lovecraft's prejudices informed his work. In "I Just Called to Say Cthulhu: Xenophobia and Antiquarianism in H.P. Lovecraft's Mythos," Timothy Letteney observes, "Lovecraftian scholars typically mention his xenophobia as an unfortunate character flaw that only had bearing on a few of his tales" (3). However, as Letteney goes on to argue, his racial hatred actually forms the basis or "core theme" in many of his most celebrated works. Prominent Lovecraft scholars such as S.T. Joshi and Michel Houellebecq dismiss Lovecraft's racism as merely an eccentric thread of existentialism, misanthropy, or a general aversion to modernity. These perspectives discount Lovecraft's sharp and unrelenting focus on minorities in particular.

Beyond his masterful prose, what becomes so compelling about Lovecraft's sci-fi mythos is how it springs forth from his essentially fictional scientific beliefs about biology and evolution. It's clear through the correspondence he left behind that his connection to reality was tenuous and malleable and that his handle on reality was frequently undermined by his racism. In his edited autobiography, he writes:

> As the year has passed the squalid old Brooklyn setting has become less and less of an active outrage and horror and more and more a grotesque and even fascinating legend. The ruffled dignity of thinking I have dwelt in such a place gives ground to a dreamy doubt of my ever having actually been there – the episode becomes a tale told in the third person. (*Lord of a Visible World* 167)

Lovecraft famously detested the racial and ethnic diversity of New York and here he has completely detached himself from the reality of it. He calls it a "grotesque and even fascinating legend." He further characterizes his time in New York as "dreamy" and a "tale told in the third person," mirroring the language of his own stories and expressing a level of disgust and psychological detachment that commonly results from reading them.

As Letteney also points out, Lovecraft's descriptions of New York's immigrant communities echo the language of his fiction:

> The organic things-Italo-Semitico-Mongoloid...could not by any stretch of the imagination be call'd [sic] human. They were monstrous and...moulded [sic] from some stinking vicious slime of earth's corruption, and slithering and oozing...in a fashion suggestive of ... deep-sea unnamabilities [sic]. They... seem'd [sic] to ooze, seep and trickle through the gaping cracks in the horrible houses...and I thought of the avenue of Cyclopean and unwholesome vats, crammed to the vomiting-point with gangrenous vileness. (Letteney 4)

Letteney compares his description to one found in Lovecraft's short story, "At the Mountains of Madness:

> We looked up from those headless, slime-coated shapes to the loathsome palimpsest sculptures and the diabolical dot groups of fresh slime on the wall beside them – looked and understood what must have triumphed and survived down there in the Cyclopean water city. (4)

Lovecraft's linguistically dehumanizing word choice and frequent characterization of New Yorkers as alien creatures blur the boundaries between his fiction and his reality and call into question his ability to distinguish between the two. "His descriptions of the nightmare

entities that populate the Cthulhu cycle spring directly from this hallucinatory vision" (Houellebecq 126). Both Houellebecq and Letteney pick up on Lovecraft's repeated use of language pertaining to dreams. Houellebecq notes the "poetic," "trancelike" cadence of his description as though Lovecraft were himself in a trance, a fantasy or delusion predicated on his prejudiced beliefs. It's a provocative realization that Lovecraft labored under such delusions, and consequently that his mastery of the fantastic might stem partially from his own illusory beliefs about race and human biology.

This connection is being uncovered and addressed by contemporary weird writers at a time when society at large is also reckoning with the monstrous effects of misinformation and racial antagonism. *Lovecraft Country* explores the very foundation of Lovecraft's racial animosities, but other weird cultural objects have done so from a more detached perspective, placing a heathy distance between the work of Lovecraft and their own. Weird authors will likely never completely detach themselves from Lovecraft's work, and many would not want to in the first place. But some are at least attempting to recast the harsh racial realities of his fiction into more inclusive and equitable storytelling. If *Lovecraft Country* was about explicitly acknowledging the racism and bigotry of Lovecraft, what follows will be an examination of how weird cultural objects are addressing and challenging the legacy of Lovecraft from a contemporary perspective befitting the complexities of our current cultural moment.

CHAPTER 3

1.6 Beyond Lovecraft

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.

— **Jeff VanderMeer**

In a 2012 article posted to *weirdfictionreview.com* titled “Moving Past Lovecraft,” Jeff VanderMeer emphasizes the need for a critical and popular perception of the weird that is not centered around Lovecraft and his writing. He rightfully argues that the weird exists so far beyond the legacy of Lovecraft and in so many varied permutations which are often overshadowed or eclipsed completely by his enduring prominence. It is frustratingly true that the deceased author and his works have maintained a mythical and particularly lucrative status among popular culture and academic criticism. His name stands behind an ever-growing list of books, TV shows, board games and films. And a rather ghastly sculpture of Lovecraft’s distorted visage adorns the World Fantasy Award trophy, a prestigious and highly sought-after recognition in the speculative fiction community and one VanderMeer initially mistook for an “ugly ghost.” Beyond the award, Lovecraft’s work continues to reverberate into flashy HBO adaptations, modern literary retellings and academic criticism such as this. Lovecraft has become a necessary entry point into the weird for many, a heavily commodified cultural touchstone for an admittedly murky and at times incoherent mode. And it is because of this enduring prominence, as well as the relatively unexamined ideological concerns of his work, that he should be scrutinized and de-centered. The shadow of Lovecraft blots out and renders invisible so many other authors striving to write engaging and equitable stories for more heterogeneous audiences. “The point isn’t to reject Lovecraft,” VanderMeer admits, “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” (VanderMeer, “Moving Past Lovecraft”).

VanderMeer also expresses a level of frustration at comparisons made between his work and Lovecraft's. As I examine Lovecraft's *The Color Out of Space* in relation to VanderMeer's *Annihilation,* I want to make clear that I do not posit an implicit connection between the two. My analysis is rather an appraisal of their similarities in an effort to more thoroughly reveal their differences. When compared, their shared characteristics throw their ideological uniqueness into sharp relief as Lovecraft's original conception of the weird is contrasted with a more contemporary and equitable conception of it.

Despite his protest, I believe VanderMeer warrants comparison to Lovecraft not because of his own respect or imitation of Lovecraft, but because of his authorial and editorial status. VanderMeer can be considered a weird golden boy of sorts in that few weird authors today have achieved his level of commercial success and critical praise. He occupies a level of prominence comparable to Lovecraft himself and a similarly authoritative position in which he has also greatly contributed to the critical articulation of the weird as a philosophical, literary and artistic mode. VanderMeer and his partner and wife Ann VanderMeer have edited two anthologies, *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* (2007*),* and *The New Weird* (2013), and the *Weird Tales* magazine (2007- 2011). They also co-edited *The Big Book of Science Fiction* (2016) and Jeff VanderMeer has won a number of literary awards for his speculative fiction, such as the Hugo, Nebula, and Shirley Jackson Award. He has also won the previously mentioned World Fantasy Award, taking home the tiny yet disturbing little bust of Lovecraft himself. In his achievement, he has firmly situated himself at the forefront of weird fiction in a way reminiscent of Lovecraft's own success.

VanderMeer won both the Nebula and Shirley Jackson Award for his 2014 novel *Annihilation,* about a group of scientists' expedition into a marshy, swamp-like coastal landscape

that has begun to mutate in bizarre and increasingly inexplicable ways. The story is told from the perspective of a character known only as "the biologist" as she ventures into the mysterious environment aptly titled "Area X." However, what exactly is causing the landscape to change and mutate is not the only unknown variable. For much of the story, the true nature of Area X and its effect on the organisms within it remains a mystery enshrouded behind VanderMeer's elegantly opaque prose. The characters themselves are either unable or unwilling to recognize the truth of what's happening to them and their reluctance to do so eventually leads to a dissolution of sorts. They are not so much killed as they are undone by the effects of Area X. The already tenuous boundaries between the human exploration group and their environment are slowly eroded until nothing wholly human is left. They encounter inexplicable biological mutations of the creatures within Area X such as a dolphin with a human eye, a tower that extends paradoxically deep into the Earth, and an indescribable creature scrawling indecipherable messages on its subterranean walls. The book heavily implies that these creatures were once human, but have now been mutated into something else by the strange forces creating Area X.

Annihilation was adapted into a film by Skydance Media and directed by Alex Garland in 2018, quickly becoming a critical darling among the speculative fiction community. Garland took VanderMeer's story and translated it into a visual language that is as philosophically evocative and unsettling as its source material, yet fleshes out many of the narrative beats in a level of detail typically required of the visual medium. The film version renames Area X "the Shimmer" and implies that it is the result of a meteorite landing on Earth rather than its unknown origins in the novel. Whereas the border of Area X is described as invisible in the novel, in the film, it's represented as a CGI'd mass of shifting, kaleidoscopic color reminiscent of a soap bubble catching the light. The biologist is given the name Lena and played by Natalie Portman.

Her husband is named Kane and played by Oscar Isaac, a tight-lipped soldier who is called away on a clandestine government mission and returns feeling not quite himself. The film contours the sprawling narrative of the novel into a sleek Hollywood style plot with all the requisite horror narrative beats, but still manages to replicate the sensation of getting lost inside Area X or the Shimmer within those relatively narrow confines. Garland describes the film as “a memory of the book” rather than a direct adaptation. And indeed, his interpretation feels more like a half-remembered dream of the novel than an exact retelling.

In its dreamlike existence, the film incorporates a number of other influences much like a dream’s uncanny ability to refract the details of our waking reality into something only faintly recognizable. One of these references is none other than Lovecraft’s own “The Colour Out of Space.” In his review, Chris McCoy recognizes, “*Annihilation* is adapted from the novel of the same name by Jeff VanderMeer, but its concept has deep roots in H.P. Lovecraft's 1927 ‘The Colour Out of Space,’ where a meteorite brings a strange chromatic plague to the swamps of New England.” VanderMeer’s original novel never explains the origin of Area X, but Garland’s film adaptation reconstructs the plot around the implication that the meteor crashing into Earth has set the events of the film into motion. In doing so, he parallels Lovecraft’s short story and opens them both up to deep and evocative comparison. What exactly lands on Earth in the meteor is never fully understood and the expedition members completely abandon their desire to do so as its mutagenic effects take hold on the coastal environment and its inhabitants. In much the same way, the strange meteor that lands on Earth in Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space” begins mutating the land and its people, its deleterious effects taking the visual form of an “alien and undimensioned rainbow color” which appears in the farm’s plants and livestock (*The Complete Fiction* 658). Both stories emphasize the visual as well as genetic or invisible

infiltration of the alien presence, but differ in their reactions to it. Lovecraft focuses on the finite tragedy of such an occurrence while Garland and VanderMeer portray the invasion as a possible beginning or necessary transformation of life as we know it.

As both stories begin with a meteorite landing on Earth, they also focus on the geological and biological impact of a disembodied alien presence mutating the surrounding environment. Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space" opens on a brittle and crumbling New England landscape almost completely devoid of any human habitation. On the "gentle slopes" of his fictional town of Arkham "there are farms, ancient and rocky with squat, moss-coated cottages brooding eternally over old New England secrets"(475). Vacant and crumbling into decay, this collection of desolate cottages marks the site of the "blasted heath," an abandoned and seemingly charred plot of land that was once the site of a meteorite landing. A land surveyor has been sent there in order to survey it as the possible site of a new reservoir. But instead of simple farmland fallen into disuse, he finds "five acres of grey desolation that sprawled open to the sky like a great spot eaten by acid in the woods and fields" (638). No vegetation grows even though decades have passed since the meteor's landing, and everything is coated in a fine gray dust or ash. The land surveyor also quickly discovers the towns people are reticent to discuss both the "strange days" surrounding the blasted heath and what happened to the family whose farm the meteor landed on. Lovecraft wastes no time in attuning his readers to the desolate tone of the story by beginning it with the ruinous tableau of a post-human landscape emptied of any living beings. And the characters who remain are haunted into silence, unable or unwilling to acknowledge the trauma brought about by whatever landed in the meteor.

Conversely, Alex Garland's *Annihilation* opens on the pristine coastal wilderness that has become the Shimmer. Similarly devoid of human habitation, this post-human landscape is also decidedly more optimistic in its interpretation. Both the blasted heath and the Shimmer are reminiscent of large-scale environmental phenomena, of landscapes that, through either human action or natural processes, have undergone rapid and pronounced changes and now readily defy human understanding as a result. Throughout the entire film, the Shimmer is saturated in a wash of oozing, psychedelic light diffusing through the preternaturally lush vegetation. When asked about her time exploring the alien landscape, the only answer Lena can give is, "I don't know," unable to recall the specifics of the deaths or disappearances of her fellow expedition members. Lovecraft writes about the events of his narrative in a similarly occlusive way, employing mystery and the inarticulable as vehicles for his cosmic horror. His characters also stumble to communicate the strange appearance of the meteor, recalling that the bizarre glow "was almost impossible to describe; and it was only by analogy that they called it colour at all" (909). Later on, some boys are hunting woodchucks near the farm where the meteor landed and discover a creature whose body "seemed slightly altered in a queer way impossible to describe" (644). Lovecraft opens epistemological holes in language paradoxically writing about things "impossible to describe" or indirectly accessible "only through analogy." He leaves these holes for his readers, letting them fester into gaping fragments in which meaning or recognition is ultimately subsumed.

Annihilation does begin in much the same way, focusing on the unknowable or unrepresentable nature of events taking place in Area X, but then moves past these linguistic shortcomings to portray them visually. After Lena's questioning in the opening scene, the film moves into her direct experience of the Shimmer in which all of the "unspeakably" traumatic

phenomena are rendered in high-definition CGI. Creatures that Lovecraftian narrators would "stutter and stumble" to describe lumber across *Annihilation's* screen in frighteningly vivid detail. In one scene, a half dead bear with a skull for a face ambles into the abandoned house where the members of the expedition are seeking shelter for the night. The shimmer has mutated or distorted the bear into something almost unrecognizable; its tortured moaning resembles human screams and indeed, the expedition can hear the voice of their recently deceased comrade in the bear's throat. The members of the expedition believe a part of their fallen member's voice or consciousness fused with the bear somehow as it was killing her thanks to the strange forces of the Shimmer. The mutations are at times exaggerated and horrifying, as in the case of the bear, but in others they are quite beautiful. The film slips between classic b-movie, gore-filled horror, and lofty philosophical rumination more typical of science fiction. However, in all of the terrifying and sublime occurrences, the film combines the visual and the sonic to portray the liminal quality of the weird which Lovecraft frequently omits.

The film's inherently visual medium necessitates this departure from the Lovecraftian failures of language so essential to his brand of the weird. But even in the *Annihilation* novel, the inexplicable occurrences are described in a level of lurid detail which supersedes Lovecraft. The novel actually sublimates this tension between language and representation into its plot, addressing it explicitly through the characters and their interactions with Area X. Early in the narrative, the biologist and the rest of the expedition team discover a strange opening in the Earth and spiral stairs leading down into it. The group cannot agree on whether to call it a tower or a tunnel, struggling to name the paradox they encounter much like Lovecraft's own characters. However, VanderMeer distinguishes himself from Lovecraft by not wallowing in linguistic voids. The biologist decides to call it a "tower" while the rest of the expedition settles on

"tunnel." And while they clash on the specifics of its name, they nonetheless succeed in naming it. In doing so, they place it into not one but two taxonomies, countering Lovecraft's linguistic void with an excess of language.

As they descend further down into the tower/tunnel, they discover words lining its walls, a mysterious script written in "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" (VanderMeer 24). The biologist is able to make out the first few phrases that read, "Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share the worms that…"(23). The sentence trails off and the biologist recalls that a linguist was originally apart of their group but she backed out at the last minute. Why the linguist chooses not to come is never explored but her absence haunts the text nonetheless. VanderMeer frequently gestures towards the literal language of the novel and his character's ability to understand, dispute or manipulate it as it constitutes or subverts their reality.

Where Lovecraft simply abandons language in service of an inaccessible or remote sense of dread and terror, VanderMeer utilizes this ambiguity and tension to a more complicated effect, often making it the antagonizing influence in his narrative or a character in its own right, but also portraying it as a necessary confrontation or possible transformation into something new. Lovecraft brushes up against Jack Halberstam's theoretical notion of "wildness," an "unreadable type of 'inscription' which resist both the mode of decipherability and decipherment, in order to 'leave a mark as evidence of absence, loss, and death" (Greve 47). Lovecraft's original conception of the weird tale is rooted in this commitment to fear, loss and the unknown. In "Supernatural Horror in Literature" he writes, "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." (Lovecraft, "Supernatural

Horror in Literature" 105). Lovecraft frequently uses these gaps in language to represent gaps in our ontological understandings, implying that we should fear what we do not understand. In what follows, I argue that VanderMeer, Garland, and by extrapolation many other contemporary weird artists counter these fearful concepts of absence, the unknowable or the inaccessible with a more ambivalent and even optimistic perspective of them.

During a later scene, the interviewer accuses the Shimmer of "destroying everything," to which Lena replies, "It wasn't destroying everything, it was changing everything, it was making something new" (Garland). She goes on to describe how being in the Shimmer was like being in a dream. The interviewer interprets this to mean "nightmarish," but Lena explains it was not always scary and that "sometimes it was beautiful" (Garland). This sentiment is shared by other members of her expedition, specifically the astrophysicist, Josie Radek, played by Tessa Thompson. Near the end of the film, after all the other members of the expedition have either disappeared or been killed, Radek tells Lena, "Ventress wants to face it, you want to fight it, but I don't want either of those things." This ambivalence towards the horror and surreality of the shimmer is brought up frequently in the film. The characters, rather than experiencing abject terror at the monstrosity of the shimmer, are rather beguiled by its sublimity. It entices them to go deeper into the landscape often times at their own peril but not always to their immediate end.

One expedition member's fate stands out as being particularly emblematic of this weird entanglement of horror and beauty. In their travels through the shimmer, the expedition encounters an abandoned village much like the one at the beginning of "The Color Out of Space"; a series of dilapidated cottages lapsing into decay, being slowly reclaimed by the surrounding environment. However, in between the vacant houses are peculiar looking shrubs which resemble the silhouette of a human being. They have what appear to be two arms attached

to a shoulder and a neck culminating in a circular shape on top that looks eerily like a head. Lena examines a sample from the strange plants and discovers that they possess human Hox genes, the genetic sequence responsible for the human body plan and structure. Radek realizes the "shimmer is a prism" but instead of just bending light, "It refracts everything" radio waves, satellite signals and even DNA (Garland). Right after Radek delivers the line about not wanting to face or fight whatever is causing the shimmer, she gets up and walks into a field populated by these human shaped plants before the camera loses her entirely amongst a grouping of them, implying that she has become one of them herself. *Annihilation* is thematically preoccupied with this idea of becoming. It is true that many of the more significant story beats come from the horrific or violent sequences in the film but sequences such as this one are just as important. They allude to the film's preoccupation with the process of becoming or changing in some inexplicable and yet nonetheless fundamental way.

The film emphasizes this idea of transformation or transmutation even further through its soundtrack, scoring the chaotic beauty of its scenes with a sonic representation of its philosophical themes. In comparison to the novel, the soundtrack is notable because sound is one integral way in which film distinguishes itself from the literary. But music is also one way in which literature and film are connected; the written lyrics combining with moving sound to fill the empty spaces between the two. *Annihilation* explores this dichotomy as Crosby, Stills & Nash's 1969 song "Helplessly Hoping" plays multiple times throughout the film. The first three verses read:

> Helplessly hoping
> Her harlequin hovers nearby
> Awaiting a word
> Gasping at glimpses
> Of gentle true spirit
> He runs, wishing he could fly

Only to trip at the sound of good-bye

Wordlessly watching
He waits by the window
And wonders
At the empty place inside
Heartlessly helping himself to her bad dreams
He worries
Did he hear a good-bye? Or even hello?

They are one person
They are two alone
They are three together
They are four for each other

The song's placidly haunting guitar intermingles with their crooning harmonies as they sing about the trickiness of language and words in relation to human relationships. The song references two characters, an unnamed woman and her "harlequin," a name for a "stock character of the Italian commedia dell'arte and subsequently the pantomime traditions of other nations" ("Harlequin"). The character is sometimes portrayed as mute and in the case of "Helplessly Hoping" betrays a slippery and awkward quality of language. Crosby, Stills and Nash sing about waiting on it, tripping over it, and encountering the haunting recognition of its absence or unreliability. Beyond that, the chorus of "They are one person/ They are two alone/ They are three together /They are four for each other" is sung in a crescendoing sequence. Each melody is slowly laid on top of the previous one verse by verse until they approach a delicate four-part harmony in the final line. The song recognizes the absurdity of language and our even more absurd attempts to impose some sort of logic or permanence onto such an imperfect medium, much like the weird's own tendency to expose these limits and shortcomings. Both the lyrics and the act of harmonizing on the chorus reinforces this idea of transformation or combination, of becoming more than the sum of your parts and changing in relation to your environment to become something wholly new. Here, again, Garland utilizes the weird tension

between media not to incite terror but to communicate something beyond the limits of each one. *Annihilation* relies on many visual metaphors to communicate this philosophy but also includes the sonic or musical in relation to the visual. In much the same way, the weird moves past a solely literary or even visual existence to encompass auditory landscapes as well.

The book also digests this idea of transition and transformation accessed through the holes and gaps in language. In the novel, the biologist's specialty is "transitional environments" and the natural landscape of Area X transitions several times from fresh-water forests, to marshlands, to salt-water tributaries and beaches. Obviously, things are growing, changing, and mutating in relation to natural stimuli but also because of whatever is causing Area X to exist in the first place. Furthermore, the biologist calls a portion of the tower/tunnel a "transitional space" in which "nothing could touch us. We were neither what we had been nor what we would become once we reached our destination" (VanderMeer 15).

The novel's commitment to mutation and change is writ large on the surface of its prose much like the writings on the wall of the tower/tunnel. And indeed, the writings on the walls of the tower form a kind of Freudian id of the novel, unintelligible at times while suggestively emblematic of an unconscious thematic concern at others. In a later scene in the novel, the biologist and the surveyor descend even further into the tower/tunnel where they find more fungal writing lining its walls. It reads, "the shadows of the abyss are like the petals of a monstrous flower that shall blossom within the skull and expand the mind beyond what any man can bear …" (VanderMeer 61). They also find the remains of their fellow expedition member, "the anthropologist" who disappeared the night before, mangled almost beyond recognition. The novel plays in the type of enigmatically irreducible horror that Lovecraft was famous for, but it imbues it with its own sense of necessity and continuity. The contrasting image of the surveyor's

dead body beneath this living script reveals a move beyond Lovecraft into something less morbidly finite. Yes, the anthropologist is dead, but the words above her signal a rebirth or transformation of sorts, an expansion of "the mind beyond what any man can bear" (61). The finite and fatalistic nihilism of Lovecraft's fiction is superseded here by this "expansion." Humans are very often transformed into other states of being in Lovecraft's fiction but it is always an undesirable and often times racially-coded experience. In VanderMeer and Garland's work, these types of transformations are portrayed as neither wholly good nor bad, only necessary steps on a path of evolution.

In *"Annihilation,* and the Historicity of Horror," Benjamin J. Robertson argues the reason *Annihilation* has been so well received is because

> It does not so much offer a perfect representation of an historical moment as it offers an affect uniquely suited to such a moment, one in which the world as we know seems to be slipping away, requiring us to come to new understandings of what we are or should be and what our values in this new circumstance might look like. (Robertson 30).

Robertson is correct in picking up on the novel's insistence that we change with our rapidly changing environment or we perish. Be they social, climatological, racial, economic or political, *Annihilation* insists that we must meet these existential threats directly, and that on a fundamental level, we must transform ourselves as our world is transformed by them. This ethos stands in contrast to the nihilistic finitude of Lovecraft's "The Color Out of Space" and many of his other stories. The horror and doom of VanderMeer's and Garland's narratives is accompanied by a sublime optimism and beauty. The ending of both novel and film leave audiences with the distinct impression that, rather than witnessing the gruesome and inexplicable end, they are witnessing a beginning; the dawn of new ontology which may be incomprehensible now but

nonetheless essential for our survival. "While *Annihilation* does not tell us precisely what we must become in order to navigate the future, it insists, by way of an affect it produces appropriate to this moment, that we must become" (Robertson 32). This dictum that "we must become" extends far beyond the large-scale existential questions currently confounding our cultural understandings. It goes down deep into even how we engage with popular media, which are fundamental reflections of human culture. *Annihilation* is an important text in terms of understanding recent ideological shifts in speculative fiction, but its value also arises from how it illuminates the ever-shifting and distorting, fun-house mirror image of our society: the media.

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For my final discussion of the weird and its relationship to media, I want to draw again on Timothy Morton's idea of hyperobjectivity. It proved useful for thinking through the seemingly inaccessible or confounding illogic of racism and here it also proves relevant to what I believe *Annihilation* reveals about our media landscape. In no other time period has the idea of medium been such a fraught and tension filled area of study. The advent of video and film technology opened up a pandora's box of sorts, a murky matrix in which considerations of genre, medium, form, and function have extended beyond the written text and into innumerable digital dimensions. The weird evokes this interstitial space between traditional literature and so-called "new" media, closing the ideological gaps between the two, filling them with self-reflexive ruminations on ecology, philosophy, genre and medium. It's no secret that the challenges of the twentieth and twenty first century have pushed humankind to a series of inflection points. We've worn ourselves out trying and often failing to meaningfully confront hyperobjects such as climate change and racism with inadequate conceptual understandings of either of them. As the

biologist notes, “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” (VanderMeer 30). I don’t know if this is a war that can ever be won or if this project, like the biologist believes, amounts to a “futile attempt to save us from who we are” (30). But if we’re going to try, then the problems will need to be confronted with new understandings. The media is often considered a reflection of society but that distinction is fraught with tension and ambiguity. In light of that declaration, the weird poses the question, what if it were the other way around? “These hyperobjects require a radical new form of thinking to cope with it” (Morton 37). What if we took these forms *from* our media?

Lovecraft once wrote,“the most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents” (Machin 28). By this he meant that our limited human perspective shields us from the horrors of the unknown and that if we were somehow able to access these areas of knowledge or hyperobjects, we would either “go mad form the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age”(28). It probably comes as no surprise by now but I disagree with Lovecraft on this front too. Morton’s idea of hyperobjectivity offers us an alternative to the madness and it is through a deeper understanding of it that this alternative path unfolds. He offers 5 traits by which they may be identified and understood and I believe two of them are most relevant to weird media as it represents hyperobjectivity. The first is that they “occupy a high dimensional phase space” (Morton 40). By this he means that they are “partly invisible to us three-dimensional humans. They seem to come and go, like seasons. Yet really they continue to unfold elsewhere than we look” (40). Things like weather and black holes appear to us at times and in specific ways but exist far beyond our direct apprehension of them, only accessible by meteorological and and astrological equipment.

Morton's description of "phasing" echoes Lovecraft's idea that our limited human perspective shields us from these "terrifying vistas of reality" (Machin). However, in Morton's assessment of our limited perceptive faculties, he instead fills those conceptual gaps in our understanding not with phantasmagoric horror or fear, but rather with the idea of the hyperobject itself. We may not be able to see the black hole directly, but we at least know its there.

The second characteristic of the hyperobject is their "interobjectivity" which refers to an ontological flattening; the revelation that humans are on the same ontological playing field as everything around us. Morton argues that our experience of reality is not a unique function of our privileged brain evolution, but a mere microcosm of a larger interobjective, perceptual network he calls "the mesh." Through this mesh, we are existentially entangled in a series of connections and gaps that are irreducible to any one facet or node, like a fishing net. For humans, this looks like an intricate system of neurons firing inside our skulls, responding to electrical signals from else where in our body but also from external stimuli such as rain, heat, or light. We constitute a perceptual network intimately connected to the world around us, constantly processing this outside information as it perpetually flows through our connective organ systems. Certain threads of neuroscience hold that this might be all human consciousness is, a series of stimulations and reactions being translated by our neural networks into a seamless and seemingly stable human consciousness. Zoom out a little further and we can recognize that this consciousness is only recognizable as such when it is being translated by, say, another human, another set of neurons firing. What we call consciousnesses, Morton argues, becomes an "aesthetic effect," a translation of the material functioning of human physiology into something stable, recognizable, or essential. If we take this idea further, expanding it to our surrounding environment as Morton does, we find ourselves vastly entangled in the natural world. But more

than that, everything else finds itself also entangled with everything else. We leave behind marks or impressions on everything else like footprints left in the sand. Morton describes these impressions as histories in the common usage of the word meaning events but also in the Greek usage (historia) which means recording. To illustrate, Morton writes about the connection between rising ocean temperatures and nuclear fallout:

> Another footprint may well have been the Japanese earthquake itself, since the changing oceanic temperature may have changed the pressure on Earth's crust, resulting in an earthquake. The quake destroyed four nuclear reactors. Quanta from these reactors, known as alpha, beta, and gamma particles, inscribe themselves in soft tissue around the world. We are living textbooks on global warming and nuclear materials, crisscrossed with interobjective calligraphy. (Morton, 88).

People such as Kahn Faassen and Peiter Vermeulen have argued that Morton's brand of weird theory is inconsistent with actual weird fiction and that many theoretical reflections on the weird over emphasize this interobjective mesh or "ecstatic openness of the human subject to the nonhuman other" that Morton writes about. And they are right to point out the "subversion of the human/nonhuman binary […] is presented in actual weird texts as fraught and complicated. (Faassen and Vermeulen). However, I argue, if Morton and other weird theorists smooth over these tensions at times, it is not in service of oversimplification but rather an attempt to present an ideal. On the contrary, Morton presents their idea of hyperobjectivity, interobjectivity, and phasing, as a mapping of these tensions between the human and the other which are so integral to weird fiction. And this thesis adds one more level of tension to the mix, one between the written and the visual.

Consequently, the book and film versions of *Annihilation* erect between them a tension-filled interstitial space in which meaning, experience and perception is warped or shifted by the concomitant gravitation pull of the two weird objects like two binary stars encircling each other. This push and pull exists between other books and their film adaptations and between other forms of media that are based on other forms of media. But the weird is unique in the sense that its subject matter is often meta-textual. Its stories strain and pull at the edges of their respective media, sometimes threatening a total collapse of it. I briefly discussed the ending of the *Annihilation* book at the beginning of this thesis where I quoted a passage from the last chapter in which the biologist confronts the creature that has been writing the words on the wall of the tower/tunnel. She tries in vain to describe its form, admitting, "*No words can...no photographs could…"* (VanderMeer 176). The language of the novel literally breaks down or halts, "confronting its readers," Faassen and Vermeulen argue, "with the inadequacy of their conceptual understandings" but it also confronts them with the limitations of literature itself.

The film version of *Annihilation* concludes with a similarly confounding ending. The biologist character, called Lena in the film, reaches the lighthouse where the meteor landed at the beginning of the movie. There, she encounters an alien womb of sorts. The hole in the base of the lighthouse created from the meteor's impact is filled with what appears to be an intricate system of roots, as if the organic material of the meteor has germinated with the lighthouse. Everything is covered in thick, black coils slithering and slipping up and down the walls. Lena accidentally contaminates the alien organism with her own DNA when a drop of blood flies from her nose into the alien womb, which is represented by a floating spherical object made of what can only be described as plumes of black smoke coiling endlessly into itself. A figure begins to take shape in mid air as the alien organism replicates Lena based on her DNA sample. Lena and

her freshly birthed clone struggle to overtake one another only to find themselves evenly matched. The real Lena manages to slip a grenade into her clone's hands and escapes out the door of the lighthouse just in time to see her clone self engulfed in a halo of phosphorescent destruction. The sequence is silent except for the harsh swell of horns and other dissonant digital tones that have been distorted to give the impression of techno and house music being physically crushed, if such a thing could happen.

Both stories push up against the limits of literature and film, meeting paradoxically somewhere in between the two but also far beyond either. By this I mean that both versions of *Annihilation* necessarily draw attention to the shortcomings of their respective media while also signaling the need for a shift in how we consider narrative and storytelling in the twenty first century. In the age of endless adaptations, "built-in audiences," mass-media franchises and multimodal storytelling, *Annihilation* signals a series of becomings or evolutions in the way we approach our media. In doing so, it also meta-textually presents us with the conceptual frame works to understand not only our shifting media landscape but also the socio-cultural, environmental, and geo-political realities of our time. Faassen and Vermeulen are right to caution that "weird writers have only imagined the world in various ways; the mistake, however, is to mistake such imagining for change." These new understandings will not lead to any meaningful political action or change in and of themselves. There are no weird Super PACs or clandestine lobbying efforts on its behalf; reading books and watching films wont de-acidify the ocean or defund the police. Regardless, weird cultural objects like *Annihilation* and *Lovecraft Country* do signal a shift in our relationships to media. They betray the further dissolution of boundaries and binaries as our media landscape converges on itself to at least give us the conceptual tools that we might approach our problems in less anthropocentric or ethnocentric

ways. The weird will probably not save us from ourselves, but it at least lets us know that we should probably call for help.

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