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**Decolonizing Cosmic Horror: An Analysis of Contemporary
Lovecraftian Fiction through a Postcolonial Lens**

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1 Introduction

When the Nigerian American writer Nnedi Okorafor won the World Fantasy Award in 2010, it sparked a widely debated controversy in the science fiction and fantasy community. However, it was not the fact that Okorafor won the award that led to this controversy but the face that was depicted on the award's statuette. Since 1975, the award, which is nicknamed "the Howard", has been cast in the image of the famous American horror and science fiction author Howard Phillips Lovecraft (cf. Saler 51). In a blog post that Okorafor published on the 14th of December 2011 she described her conflicted feelings about receiving an award statuette that depicts the face of a known racist: "[A] statuette of this racist man's head is in my home. A statuette of this racist man's head is one of my greatest honors as a writer" (Okorafor). As Okorafor states in her blog post, by expressing her conflicted feeling towards the award, she hopes to create "some discourse about what it means to honor a talented racist" (ibid). Yet, it was only in 2014 after the American fantasy and young adult fiction writer Daniel José Older started a petition and collected over 2,000 signatures to replace Lovecraft's face on the WFA that the topic "received wide media coverage and spurred extensive online discussion" (Saler 51) about Lovecraft's legacy as a writer. Finally, in 2015 the organizers of the World Fantasy Convention and issuers of the award announced that they would henceforth no longer use Lovecraft's face as a trophy (cf. ibid. 52). This decision, too, was controversially discussed in the media and even led to the famous Lovecraft scholar and biographer S.T. Joshi returning his own WFA trophies in protest (cf. Flood).

However, an arguably more important development resulting from this controversy was that due to Nnedi Okorafor's call for a discussion about the legacy of the racist author, critical readings of Lovecraft's work that highlighted racist and xenophobic tendencies in cosmic horror fiction also received more attention. As the English fantasy author China Miéville suggests, Lovecraft's personal racism cannot "be divorced from the writing at all, nor should it be" (Weinstock, *Age* 231). Moreover, as was suggested in the context of the online debate that was surrounding this controversy, the racist narratives of Lovecraft's work "can be combatted by the promotion of more inclusive counternarratives" (Saler 52). Indeed, as Michael Saler points out, "[f]ollowing the WFA controversy, numerous writers from groups whom Lovecraft ignored or denigrated, such as women and minorities, began to reclaim his imaginary

worlds, writing stories celebrating cosmopolitanism and gender equality" (Saler 52). And it is in this very context that the three works of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction that will be analyzed in this master thesis were written. It seems like no coincidence that the protagonist of one of these contemporary Lovecraftian novels, Atticus Turner in *Lovecraft Country*, learns the extent of Lovecraft's racism in the same way that Nnedi Okorafor describes in her blog post, by being shown the same, lesser known, racist poem about Black people.

Since the WFA controversy, a wide variety of contemporary Lovecraftian works has been published. As already mentioned, many of these novels also challenge Lovecraft's depiction, or rather lack of depiction, of women in his works. Notable examples of these are, for instance, Ruthanna Emrys's *Innsmouth Legacy* series that offers a new perspective on the events of Lovecraft's novella "The Shadow over Innsmouth", or Silvia Moreno-Garcia's novel *Mexican Gothic* which provides a feminist reimagining of both Gothic fantasy and Lovecraftian fiction. However, in order to provide a more focused analysis of the ways in which contemporary Lovecraftian fiction challenges racist and xenophobic themes within Lovecraft's work and allow for a better comparison, I have deliberately chosen novels that deal with the issues of racial othering, anti-blackness and systemic racism in the United States as well as the legacy of diaspora and slavery.

In Matt Ruff's novel *Lovecraft Country* that was published in 2016, only a year after the WFA controversy, the Black protagonist Atticus Turner is not only a fan of horror and science fiction literature but often directly references Lovecraft's work. Arguably, it is in this novel that the conflicted feelings towards Lovecraft's legacy, as described by Nnedi Okorafor, are most explicitly depicted. The novel, which is set in the United States during the era of Jim Crow laws, follows the Turner family who research and publish "The Safe Negro Travel Guide" which provides Black travelers with helpful information about safe routes and motels. Consequently, the story is in large parts depicted as a road trip. Early in the novel, Atticus and his family encounter a white supremacist cult called "The Order of the Ancient Dawn". After Atticus's father Montrose discovered the cult while researching the family history of Atticus's mother, he was taken prisoner by the Braithwhite family, the leaders of one of the cult's lodges called "The Sons of Adam". When Atticus tries to rescue his father, he learns that he himself is a descendant of the lodge's original founder which gives him magical powers and makes him valuable to the cult despite their racist feelings towards him. They try to sacrifice Atticus during a ritual, but he is saved by Caleb Braithwhite, the son of the

lodge's current leader, who then takes control of the lodge in a coup. Throughout the novel, Caleb tries to contact and manipulate various members of Atticus's extended family as each character faces separate challenges that vary from living in a house haunted by a racist ghost to interplanetary travel or an elixir that turns the user into a white woman.

Victor LaValle's novella *The Ballad of Black Tom,* which was published in the same year, takes a different approach to challenging Lovecraft's racist legacy. The novella is a retelling of "The Horror at Red Hook", one of Lovecraft's most racist short stories, from the perspective of the Black musician Tommy Tester who is not featured in Lovecraft's original work. Tommy, who shares a small apartment with his father in New York, works not only as a street musician but also as a self-proclaimed hustler who locates and retrieves occult items for his rich white customers. When Tommy meets the eccentric occultist Robert Suydam, the villain in Lovecraft's original short story, Suydam hires him as a musician for one of the gatherings in his house. As Tommy learns, Suydam surrounds himself with various immigrant groups of New York to gain their presumed occult knowledge. He promises them the end of their oppression once they bring back "The Sleeping King", one of the cosmic beings that is called Cthulhu in Lovecraft's stories. Meanwhile, the police detective Thomas Malone, who is the protagonist of Lovecraft's original work, suspects the occult dealings of Suydam and tries to investigate his plans through Tommy. Although Tommy at first dismisses Suydam's plans to bring back The Sleeping King, he changes his mind after a private detective kills his father in alleged self-defence and is then protected by Malone. He then becomes the titular Black Tom and rises to be Suydam's second-in-command while secretly following his own plans.

P. Djèlí Clark's novella *Ring Shout* that was published in 2020 is arguably the least explicit in its intertextuality to Lovecraft's work. It neither mentions Lovecraft directly nor does it reference a particular story or feature one of his creations. The novella is set in an alternate history of 1920s Southern United States where the second Ku Klux Klan not only rose to nationwide fame but was infiltrated by demons called "Ku Kluxes". These Ku Kluxes appear as normal human beings to everyone who does not possesses an ability termed "The Sight". The novella's protagonist Maryse is one of the people with this ability and, together with her companions, fights the Ku Kluxes in a group of Black resistance fighters. Maryse is aided in her fight not only by a magical sword that is strengthened by the souls of Africans who were sold into slavery but also by three fox-like haints, cosmic beings who appear in front of her as "Black Aunties".

As Maryse finds out in the course of the story, the Ku Kluxes were created by a group of extraterrestrial beings only referred to as "The Collective" who use the hate of white racists in the United States in order to turn them into demons. According to their leader Butcher Clyde, their plan is to merge humanity into their great collective and thereby also eliminate racism and oppression. Both the Aunties and The Collective want to use Maryse as a champion in their cosmic fight against each other. However, Maryse finds out that she must first confront her own traumatic past in order to defeat the Ku Kluxes and liberate her community.

Due to the significant and enduring influence that Lovecraft's writing had on weird fiction and cosmic horror, the term Lovecraftian fiction is often used synonymously and will also be used this way in this master thesis. The genre combines both elements from horror, fantasy and science fiction and, as the name cosmic horror already suggests, emphasizes the themes "cosmic dread" and "cosmic indifference": the idea that "the wishes, hopes, and values of humanity are matters of total indifference to the bland, blind cosmic mechanism" (Lovecraft qtd. in Zeller 6). In regard to Lovecraft, the term cosmic horror is used to describe his later works that are summarized under the term "Cthulhu Mythos" (cf. Harms viii). Lovecraft creates this feeling of cosmic dread in his story by introducing various cosmic entities, Cthulhu being the most famous. Indeed, the emphasized superiority of these extraterrestrial beings, which are usually referred to as the "Old Ones", is utilized in "service of the decentering and reduction of mankind on a cosmic scale" (Timss 14). Moreover, these Old Ones existed on earth for millions of years, have remained hidden from the broader population and threaten to take over the planet again. In Lovecraft's work, not Western science but Eastern occultism, spiritual practices, and traditions of non-white populations serve as the link to these extraterrestrial beings. Thus, the import of forbidden knowledge through foreign cultural influences and non-white immigrants are not only portrayed as causes and symptoms of the decline of Western civilization but also as a threat to humanity as a whole. The various themes within the genre cosmic horror will be described in detail in the respective chapters of this master thesis. However, it is important to note that Orientalist stereotypes, racial othering and a fear of cultural hybridity and miscegenation are linked to the themes that define the genre.

In this master thesis, I argue that three important themes, or tropes, of cosmic horror are utilized by writers of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction to subvert the original racist and colonialist conceptions of the genre. The three themes, namely the figure of the outsider, forbidden knowledge as well as the depiction of a threatening and

encroaching past, will be analysed in separate chapters. Each of the chapters will offer a critical reading of one work by Lovecraft that depicts the theme in question most clearly in order to demonstrate its significance both in the genre and from a postcolonial perspective. After the significance of the Lovecraftian theme is established, the use of this theme in the three works of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction, as well as their strategies of subversion, will be examined and compared in detail. Since each of these themes is incorporated into the three works in different ways, not all subchapters will focus on each of the three works equally and sometimes even analyse only one novel to highlight the importance of a particular aspect. Moreover, since there exists a wide variety of postcolonial theories and terms that are relevant to the chosen topic, it would exceed the scope of this master thesis to elaborate on each of them in the following theoretical chapter. Therefore, I will limit the focus of the chapter on the concepts "decolonization", "intertextuality" and "writing back". However, whenever it is necessary, the respective postcolonial theory or term will be described directly in the analytical chapters when they are relevant.

Lastly, one can argue that this master thesis's approach, which often includes a consideration of Lovecraft's personal views when analysing his works, contradicts with conceptions of intertextuality by scholars like Roland Barthes. However, I maintain that it is useful for the analysis of Lovecraftian fiction in particular to consider the views of Lovecraft himself because the genre is so inseparably linked to one single author. Moreover, as S.T. Joshi points out, as an inherently philosophical genre, "in effect writers of weird fiction are attempting to convince us of their view of the world" (*Decline* iiii). As will be demonstrated in the course of this thesis paper, writers of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction are not only writing back to the genre but to Lovecraft himself who is featured in these works in various ways. If writers of weird fiction are indeed trying to convince us of their view of the world, one can argue that writers of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction are directly referencing and rejecting Lovecraft's world view while offering the reader alternative perspectives.

2 Relevant Concepts: Decolonization, Intertextuality and Writing Back

2.1   Decolonization

The term "decolonization" is often falsely equated with postcolonial liberation and the formal independence of colonies. However, just like "postcolonialism" refers to a wide variety of approaches and theories, decolonization, too, is complex, multi-faceted, can take different forms and operates in many different areas. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin emphasize "[d]ecolonization, whatever else it may be, is a complex and continuing process rather than something achieved automatically at the moment of independence" (*Key* 59). Indeed, in many historical examples of colonial independence "where the process of resistance was conducted in terms or institutions appropriated from the colonizing culture itself", the new rulers opted not for a "rejection of colonialist culture [but] to adopt its practices" (ibid. 56). Moreover, due to globalization, "political independence has not effected the kinds of changes in economic and cultural control that the early nationalists might have expected" (ibid. 57). Therefore, it is necessary that decolonization must include "the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms", not only the economic and political conditions but also "hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved" (ibid. 56)

Taking this into account, Ato Quayson points out that postcolonialism and decolonization have to simultaneously consider "two seemingly contradictory emphases […,] the pull towards discourse analysis [… and] the need to attend to the material, social and economic factors within which any discourse is framed" (6). Yet, both approaches are essential for the "process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome" (Hulme qtd. In Loomba 21). Moreover, as Jessica Langer suggests, a decolonization process that accomplishes this disengagement necessarily "also includes the building of a decolonized society with a distinct identity" (6). She defines decolonization as "the ways in which a society forms itself in the wake, however long ago, of colonization" (ibid. 7). In this process of disengagement and identity formation, language and culture take on a significant role. Since it is this form of decolonization that is most relevant to this master thesis, the focus of this subchapter will be primarily on decolonization that focuses on language and culture, or more broadly, of knowledge.

This process of decolonization through disengagement and identity formation is further complicated through "the continuing influence of Eurocentric cultural models" (Ashcroft et al., *Key* 57) which leads to a privileging of "colonial languages over local languages; writing over orality and linguistic culture over inscriptive cultures of other kinds" (ibid.). One of the most influential works that addresses this problem in decolonization is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind*. In his book, Ngũgĩ presents a decolonizing model that advocates for linguistic decolonization. He argues that language is not just a means of communication but also a carrier of culture and as such also a tool of power (cf. Ngũgĩ 13). Language, according to him, is another weapon that is wielded by the colonial powers and which he terms a "cultural bomb" (cf. ibid. 3). The effect of this weapon is that it "annihilate[s] a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity" and ultimately leads to them "identify[ing] with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own" (ibid. 3). Therefore, decolonization for Ngũgĩ and other proponents of this model must focus on the decolonization of language and culture which includes a return to indigenous language.

The most radical forms of this model of decolonization subscribe to the nativist idea that "precolonial cultures can be recovered in a pristine form by programmes of decolonization" (Ashcroft et al., *Key* 58). As Jessica Langer points out, "decolonization […] has often been conflated with nativism: the systematic removal of all vestiges of colonial power and influence and a reversion to a precolonial, 'Edenic' state" (6). However, this idea has been dismissed by critics like Simon Gikandi who argues that "many decolonizing practices were predicated on the assumption that African cultures and selves were natural and holistic entities which colonialism had repressed" (Ashcroft et al., *Key* 58). As he points out, the impossibility to recover such a state, makes these practices "inadequate ways of analysing and correcting the problems and conflicts of the post-independence condition" (ibid.). Other scholars like Homi K. Bhabha and writers like Salman Rushdie focus on the cultural hybridity of postcolonial nations and embrace the idea that a new transnational identity needs to be created (cf. ibid. 59). However, scholar like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o also recognize that merely a return to indigenous language is not sufficient and "will not itself bring about the renaissance in African cultures if that literature does not carry the content of […] anti-imperialist struggles" (Ngũgĩ 29). As will be elaborated on in the following subchapters, through the act of "writing back", postcolonial literature can also utilize the English language to engage in

this anti-imperialist struggle, challenge colonial narratives and thereby support the process of decolonization.

This decolonization of language and culture can also be extended to a broader perspective: namely the decolonization of knowledge. In his work on Orientalism, Edward Said "not only presented a thorough-going critique of the arcane discipline of Oriental Studies but opened up the question of the production of knowledge from a global perspective" (Bhambra 116). Edward Said examines the connections between knowledge and power and points out that the colonial discourse, "the way of knowing the 'Orient' is a way of maintaining power over it" (Ashcroft et al., *Key* 64) which makes the "object of such knowledge […] inherently vulnerable to scrutiny" (Said 32). According to Said, decolonization, therefore, "should provoke a fundamental […] crisis that fractures the complacent rendering of the 'other' as passive and docile and which challenges the assumptive conceptual framework" (Bhambra 116).

In this context, it is useful to consider the concepts "modernity/coloniality" and "decoloniality" that were created by Anibal Quijano and further developed by Walter Mignolo. Quijano argues that "the coloniality of power, expressed through political and economic spheres, […] was strongly associated with a coloniality of knowledge (or of imagination), articulated as modernity/rationality" (Bhambra 117). As part of this fiction of modernity, the colonial power's "strong belief that their knowledge covered the totality of the known brought about the need to devalue, diminish, and shut off any other totality that might endanger [this] epistemic totalitarianism" (Mignolo and Walsh 195). Thus, "European knowledge production was accredited as the only valid knowledge [whereas] indigenous epistemologies were relegated to the status of primitive superstitions or [were] destroyed (Mendoza 114). Moreover, these conditions "enable[d] Europeans, both individually and collectively, to affirm their sense of self at the same time as making invisible the colonial order that provides the context for their 'self'-realization [… and] disrupted the social patterns, gender relations and cosmological understandings of the communities and societies it invaded" (Bhambra 118). Therefore, as Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh argue, in order "[t]o end coloniality it is necessary to end the fictions of modernity" (109). He proposes that a decolonization of knowledge that disrupts these fictions of modernity "occurs in acknowledging the sources and geo-political locations of knowledge while at the same time affirming those modes and practices of knowledge that have been denied by the dominance of particular forms" (Bhambra 118). His concepts "delinking" and "border thinking" are important in this context. Mignolo both wants to "[open] up a way of

thinking that delinks from the chronologies of new epistemes and new paradigms (modern, postmodern, […] etc.)" (Mignolo 274) and that shifts the focus to the "borders of the modern/colonial world" (ibid. 276).

Due to its ability to reveal and draw attention to hidden power structures and to challenge dominant narratives, literature can "participate uniquely in this process of decolonization" (Langer 8). Postcolonial writing can aid in the decolonization of knowledge by "re-inscribing 'other' cultural traditions into narratives of modernity and thus transforming those narratives" (Bhambra 116). As Homi K. Bhabha puts it, postcolonial writing can "interrupt the Western discourses of modernity through […] displacing, interrogative subaltern or postslavery narratives and the critical theoretical perspectives they engender" (241). This strategy of decolonization also fits the subject matter of this master thesis to examine how contemporary authors try to redefine cosmic horror fiction, delink harmful genre conventions and shift the focus to those that have been othered in Lovecraft's original works. In this context, one can argue that the use of intertextuality, particularly the strategy of "writing back", can aid in the subversion of dominant literary genres and the creation of new literary forms that reflect the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities.

2.2 Intertextuality

The term "intertextuality" was coined by the Bulgarian-French literary critic Julia Kristeva in her 1966 essay "Word, Dialogue and Novela" and it describes in the broadest sense "the various relationships that a given text may have with other texts" (Baldick 128). However, the practice and study of texts relating to each other predates her theory by millennia: As Marko Juvan points out in his book *History and Poetics of Intertextuality*, from as early as antiquity,

> [i]ntentional copying, mystifying, plagiarizing, adapting, reworking, combining, continuing, varying, ironizing, mixing, deforming or deconstructing familiar texts became part and parcel of literature; collecting, commenting, analyzing, interpreting and paraphrasing them became common in other discourses, for example in philosophy, theology and philology." (15)

As prominent examples of this practice, he mentions for instance how "Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* reworked and tied together an oral mythological and epic tradition that existed long before him" (ibid.). It is not only this long tradition but also "[t]he ambiguous status of the concept of intertextuality in contemporary critical discourse […] and] persistent questioning of the validity and usefulness of the concept" (Kucala 31) that further complicates its study. It is therefore not surprising that intertextuality "has

come to have almost as many meanings as users, from those faithful to Kristeva's original vision to those who simply use it as a stylish way of talking about allusion and influence" (Irwin 227). In consideration of this wide variety of theories and conceptions of intertextuality, this section will focus on giving a brief overview of the related concepts that seem most relevant to the analysis of postcolonial Lovecraftian fiction and the ways that it references its source material.

Intertextuality according to Julia Kristeva's use of the term, which draws upon both Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of double-voicedness and on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology (cf. Tryniecka 176), views "text as a dynamic site in which relational processes and practices are the focus of analysis instead of static structures and products" (Alfaro 268). Thus, a work of literature must be understood as "a site of words and sentences shadowed by multiple potentialities of meaning" (Allen 12). They are not self-contained and static but "traces and tracings of otherness, since they are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures" (Alfaro 268). For Mikhail Bakhtin, this perception is not limited to literature, and instead he views all language and utterances as "dialogic, their meaning and logic dependent upon what has previously been said and on how they will be received by others" (Allen 19). Unlike Saussure's linguistics, his study of language focuses more on the "social, ideological, subject-centred and subject-addressed nature [of language]" (ibid.). Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality combines Saussure's distinction in language between signifier and the signified with Bakhtin's conception of the dialogical nature of language (cf. ibid. 11) into a "semiotic approach [that] seeks to study the text as a textual arrangement of elements which possess a double meaning: a meaning in the text itself and a meaning in what she calls 'the historical and social text'" (ibid. 36).

A more radical stance towards the dynamic meaning of text that also relates to the study of intertextuality is taken by Roland Barthes in his 1967 essay "The Death of the Author". Barthes, who was also influenced by the linguistics of Saussure, "announces the death of the author on the basis of a recognition of the relational nature of the word" (Allen 14). Similar to Kristeva, his argument is based on the "recognition that the origin of [a] text is not a unified authorial consciousness but a plurality of voices, of other words, other utterances and other texts" (ibid. 70). Thus, the biography and extrapolated intentions of the author should not be put into consideration when determining the meaning of a text. Instead, Barthes argues, "[t]he text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture [… and] the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original" (149). Thus, since a text can be

"transformed into a new entity, capable of producing the infinity of meanings" (Tryniecka 176), a text can lead "the reader into a network of possible discourses and seems to emanate from a number of possible perspectives" (Allen 14).

A structuralist approach to intertextuality is postulated by the French literary theorist Gérard Genette who in his work *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* constructs a map of the various forms in which intertextuality can occur, which he terms "transtextuality" (cf. Allen 95). Transtextuality which refers to the "textual transcendence of the text" (Genette 1) encompasses "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other text" (ibid.). He identifies and describes five subcategories of transtextuality: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality and architextuality (cf. Tryniecka 178). The first subcategory, which he terms intertextuality, for Genette refers to both "a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts […] and typically the actual presence of one text within another" (Genette 1–2), such as quotation, plagiarism, and allusion.

Paratextuality, on the other hand, "marks those elements which lie on the threshold of the text and which help to direct and control the reception of a text by its readers" (Allen 100). It can be further subdivided into peritext, which consists of "elements such as titles, chapter titles, prefaces and notes" (ibid) and "epitext consisting of elements – such as interviews, publicity announcements, reviews by and addresses to critics, private letters and other authorial and editorial discussions – 'outside' of the text in question" (ibid.). Moreover, "the 'foretext' of the various rough drafts, outlines, and projects of a work can also function as a paratext" (Genette 3). According to Genette, paratext "does not simply mark but occupies the text's threshold – the space which is both inside and outside" (Allen 100) and thus influences the interpretation as it "assist[s] the reader in establishing what kind of text they are being presented with and how to read it" (ibid. 101).

The third subcategory of transtextuality is called metatextuality. As Genette states, this category, which is often referred to as commentary, "unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it (without summoning it), in fact sometimes even without naming it" (4). Thus, it encompasses commentary through both explicit and implicit references in a text. However, the subcategories of transtextuality by Gérard Genette that are arguably most relevant to Lovecraftian fiction are hypertextuality and architextuality. Hypertextuality to Genette is "any relationship uniting a text B [which he calls hypertext] to an earlier text A [which is referred to as

hypotext], upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (5). As an example of this subcategory, he states that both "[t]he *Aeneid* and *Ulysses* are no doubt, to varying degrees and certainly on different grounds, two hypertexts (among others) of the same hypotext: the *Odyssey*" (Genette 5). As Graham Allen points out, Genette's hypertext "is termed by most other critics the inter-text, that is a text which can be definitely located as a major source of signification for a text" (104). This relationship between hypertext and hypotext can, for instance, assume the form of the pastiche, parody, travesty and caricature (cf. ibid. 105). The last subcategory, which is similar to hypertextuality, is referred to by Genette as architextuality and means "the textual relation to certain genres, sub-genres or conventions" (ibid. 99). As he points out, this relationship between text and genre "is completely silent, articulated at most only by a paratextual mention" (Genette 4). However, it still can have a significant influence on "the reader's expectations, and thus their reception of a work" (ibid.), and authors may therefore choose to hide this relationship or explicitly proclaim it.

Another structuralist approach to intertextuality is forwarded by the Polish scholar Ryszard Nycz who views "intertextuality as a 'category' embracing these aspects of texts and these relations between the given texts that condition the reception of the work in connection with 'architexts'" (Tryniecka 180). It is a particularly broad definition of intertextuality that includes all relations that influence a text's "creation and reception as relying on knowing other texts and arch-texts (genre rules and stylistic and performative norms) among the participants of the communication process" (Ryszard Nycz qtd. in Szyszkowska 6). In this approach, he distinguishes between three types of intertextuality, namely "text–text," "text–genre" and "text–reality" (cf. Tryniecka 180). Whereas the intertextual relations on the levels "text-text" and "text-genre" roughly correspond with the respective forms of transtextuality by Genette, his idea of intertextuality on the level "text-reality" is particularly interesting as it takes into account the social, historical, and cultural contexts that influence a text. It is especially this level of intertextuality that is relevant to this master thesis and to the studies of postcolonial literature in general as it "encourages one to revise glorified narratives from the past and acknowledge the presence of the so-far omitted, yet deeply striking, 'backstage' characters" (ibid. 182).

In this context, the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, which influenced Julia Kristeva's approach to intertextuality, are also particularly relevant for the aim of this master thesis. As Graham Allen points out, the "employment of Bakhtin's notion of 'double-voiced discourse' is significant [because i]t allows a critical focus which can

capture the 'otherness'" (156) not only of women's writing but also the writing of racially marginalized groups in society. Bakhtin argues that because "the dialogic aspect of language foregrounds class, ideological and other conflicts, […] society, manifested in state power and those elements of society which serve state power, will frequently attempt to put the lid on such aspects" (Allen 21). One can argue that Bakhtin's double voiced discourse, the idea that it "serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author" (Bakhtin 324), allows for a "clash between languages and utterances which can foreground not only social division but a radically divided space of discursive formations within an individual subject" (Allen 161). As Allen points out, the idea that the "postcolonial writer […] exists as a 'split' subject whose utterances are always 'double-voiced', their own and yet replete with an 'otherness'" (ibid.) also relates to W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness. Du Bois describes his experience as a Black man as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (8) and emphasizes the "two-ness [of being …] an American [and] a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (ibid. 11). In accordance with this idea, it becomes clear that the postcolonial writer possesses "a 'palimpsestic self' always in the process of being constructed, and thus always able to form resistances to monological definitions of racial identity which would deny the dialogic, intertextual 'in-betweenness' of the writing self" (Allen 162).

Lastly, one can argue that intertextuality is not only a relevant concept for this master thesis because it plays a crucial role in postcolonial literature. Intertextuality is also an important tradition in the genre of cosmic horror fiction and, as Conny Lippert argues, was essential "in keeping Lovecraft's fictional universe alive long after the man himself was gone" (41). The mythopoeia at the center of Lovecraftian fiction, the Cthulhu Mythos, "is a series of allusions spanning three quarters of a century and the works of hundreds of authors" (Harms vii). Although it was only formally established after Lovecraft's death by one of his friends, the writer August Derleth (cf. ibid. x), already during Lovecraft's lifetime he encouraged other authors of pulp stories to borrow from his works and also did so freely with the works of other writers: "This group often sent their stories back and forth for criticism, and […] began inserting allusions to each others' creations into their stories" (ibid. ix). One can argue that this tradition is still practiced today, since "[a]nyone is free to write a Mythos story and publish it, and may break the conventions of the source material freely" (ibid. vii). Thus,

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although the writers of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction that were chosen for this master thesis challenge problematic themes of cosmic horror fiction and offer perspectives that the original author would certainly have dismissed, one can argue that by "writing back" to Lovecraft they also continue a tradition that is essential to the genre.

2.3   Writing Back

The concept "writing back" in postcolonial studies originated from a 1982 newspaper article in the *The Times* where Salman Rushdie uses the term "The Empire Writes Back" as a pun on the movie *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (cf. Bartels et al. 189). However, it was Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* who adopted and defined the term which refers to the ways that postcolonial writers engage with and challenge the literary canon of the colonial center. This binary of the center, on the one hand, and the margin or periphery, on the other hand, of course, refers to the relationship between the center of the empire and the colonies on its margins.

However, in this context, it specifically refers to language, literature and other cultural production as part of this relationship. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out, "the study of English and the growth of Empire proceeded from a single ideological climate and […] the development of the one is intrinsically bound up with the development of the other" (*Empire* 3). Thus, "when elements of the periphery and margin threatened the exclusive claims of the centre they were rapidly incorporated" (ibid. 3–4) which often coerced the periphery to "immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become 'more English than the English'" (ibid. 4). The act of "writing back" can thus be understood as a way of "engaging in the power of imperial discourse, not by writing 'for' the center but 'against' the assumptions of the center to a prior claim to legitimacy and power" (Bartels et al. 189).

In their book, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin not only give a theoretical account of a wide variety of postcolonial writing but also define what they regard as postcolonial literature. As they point out, "[t]he semantic basis of the term 'post-colonial' might seem to suggest a concern only with the national culture *after* the departure of the imperial power" (Ashcroft et al., *Empire* 1, my emphasis), but they, in fact, include in this definition "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (ibid. 2). Moreover, they maintain that "[t]he literature of the USA should also be placed in this category" despite the fact that

"its post-colonial nature has not been generally recognized" (ibid.). In fact, they argue that the historical example of the United States "and its attempts to produce a new kind of literature can be seen to be the model for all later post-colonial writing" (Ashcroft et al., *Empire* 15). In this context, they distinguish between four different descriptive models of postcolonial writing.

While the national or regional models "emphasize the distinctive features of the particular national or regional culture" (ibid. 14), race-based models, like the "Black Writing" model, are based on "the idea of race as a major feature of economic and political discrimination and draws together writers in the African diaspora whatever their nationality" (ibid. 19). The comparative models, as the name suggests, focusses on and compares linguistic, historical, and cultural features across the literature of multiple post-colonial countries (cf. ibid 14). As the authors point out, they have formed the "bases for a genuine post-colonial discourse" and can take the form of comparisons between countries of the white diaspora, the Black diaspora and "those which bridge these groupings" (ibid.). Lastly, there are comparative models that "argue for features such as hybridity and syncreticity as constitutive elements of all post-colonial literatures" (ibid.) based on the theories on hybridity of Homi K. Bhabha and others. As the authors point out, this blending of cultures and ideas is essential for achieving the goal of postcolonial literature to find ways out of the past and construct a future since "[b]oth literary theorists and cultural historians are beginning to recognize cross-culturality as the potential termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation" (ibid. 35). As will be shown in the three Lovecraftian works, "in any discussion of post-colonial writing a number of [these models] may be operating at the same time" (ibid. 14–15).

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin also examine the various textual strategies of writing back with which postcolonial writers challenge the literary canon of the colonial center. In this context, the authors distinguish between "English" as the language of the colonial center and "'english' which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world" (Ashcroft et al., *Empire* 8). The authors argue that since language functions "as a medium of power" (ibid. 37), postcolonial writing challenges this power by "seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place" (ibid.). Here, the concepts "abrogation" and "appropriation" are especially relevant. The former refers to the decolonizing practice of postcolonial writers to reject "the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its

assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words" (ibid.). The latter, namely appropriation, describes "the process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience" (Ashcroft et al., *Empire* 38).

Among the strategies with which postcolonial writers can emphasize cultural distinctiveness is both the use of untranslated words (cf. ibid 63) and so called "glossing" where parenthetic translations of individual words are used to "foreground the continual reality of cultural distance" (ibid. 60). In this context, the authors also emphasize that the strategy of appropriation is essential here because without it "the moment of abrogation may not extend beyond a reversal of the assumptions of privilege" (ibid. 37–38). Yet, it is important that, instead of mere inversion, these strategies must remain productive and seek "an identity of postcolonial cultural experiences on a separate but equal footing" (Daroy 94). The authors point out that postcolonial writing is inherently cross-cultural and by utilizing both the processes of abrogation and appropriation, writers are able to "negotiate a gap between 'worlds'" (Ashcroft et al., *Empire* 38). They identify three important features in all postcolonial writing: "the silencing and marginalizing of the post-colonial voice by the imperial centre; the abrogation of this imperial centre within the text; and the active appropriation of the language and culture of that centre" (ibid. 82).

However, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out, strategies of abrogation and appropriation are employed by postcolonial writers not only to challenge the borrowed language of the center, but "post-colonial texts offer a radical questioning of the cultural and philosophical assumptions of canonical discourse" (76). In an approach that is similar to the previously established conceptions of intertextuality, John Thieme terms these types of postcolonial writings "that take a classic English text as a departure point […] for contesting the authority of the canon of English literature" (1) as so called "con-texts". As he points out, a study of these texts is complicated both by the wide variety of postcolonial cultures but also the fact that "the [canon] texts to which they were responding were unstable objects that were, in effect, being constructed anew by each postcolonial writer's gaze" (ibid. 2). Moreover, he maintains that these texts are "counter-discourses that write back to the canon in a multiplicity of ways" (ibid. 4), rather than labelling them simply as oppositional which could pose the "the danger of the adversarial discourse becoming locked in a complicitous relationship with the discourse under fire" (ibid.). Thus, the chosen term "con-texts" is supposed to emphasize the dialogic nature of these texts, namely that they "engage in direct, if ambivalent, dialogue with the canon by virtue of responding to a classic English text"

(ibid.) which is also referred to as "pre-text". He also points out that "[o]ften the English pre-texts are only invoked as a launching pad (pretext) for a consideration of broader concerns" (Thieme 5).

Thieme identifies a wide variety of counter-discursive strategies that postcolonial con-texts employ when they are writing back to the English canon. There are, for instance, con-texts that use a canonical text as the basis to "tell the other side of the story" (ibid. 172), A prominent example of this variety is Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* which writes back to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* by telling the story of the first Mrs. Rochester who is "caught between Afro-Caribbean and English worlds" (ibid. 77) and othered by both. There are also those postcolonial writings "that suggest the fluidity of colonial archetypes […] as a way of opening up possibilities for transforming identities" (ibid. 172). One prominent example of a postcolonial text that employs this strategy is the Trinidadian writer Samuel Selvon's novel *Moses Ascending* which, writing back to Daniel Defoe's pre-text, "disturbs former colonial hierarchies through a playful repositioning of Friday and Crusoe" (ibid. 58). As Thieme points out, many postcolonial con-texts also "provide supplements to their 'originals': prequels, sequels or simply developments of elements that are omitted or suggested but left undeveloped in the pre-texts" (ibid. 172). This can make the con-text appear more complete and authentic than the original, thereby questioning the colonial assumptions "underlying the production of the texts of the metropolitan canon […] that only certain categories of experience are capable of being rendered as 'literature'" (Ashcroft et al., *Empire* 87). As John Thieme states, the common link between all approaches employed by postcolonial writers who write back to the center "is a consensus about the need to change the ground of the 'original': to bring the supposed margins to the centre; to tell a plurality of stories; to break down stereotypes; to interrogate the very notion of individual source-texts" (173).

It is also important to point out that the notion of postcolonial literature "writing back" to the center, "that Anglophone Literatures are inevitably characterized by a postcolonial rewriting of Western master texts" (Bartels et al. 190), has been rejected and criticized by some authors and scholars from the global South. They maintain that this idea is contrarian to its stated goals because it "reduces postcolonial writers to 'writing back to the center' and reinforces and reinstates the West in being the main 'center'" and presents postcolonial literature merely as "an anti-art in relation to European literature" (ibid.). In the book *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality*, Evan Maina Mwangi examines postcolonial texts that "depart from the

tradition of 'writing back'" (1) and focuses on a self-affirming and self-reflexive approach. As he points out, "the texts resist the West by erasing it from local discourses on postcolonial cultures, aesthetics, and politics of identity" (Mwangi 1).

Other scholars like Rita Barnard proclaim that we need to replace the "stale old notion of postcolonial literature as 'empire writing back' and accept that the relationships in the texts are not unidirectional" (121). Lastly, the postcolonial author Salman Rushdie, too, has stated that he does not agree with the one-sided antagonistic relationship that the term "writing back" seems to suggest. Rather, according to Rushdie, "[w]hat seems […] to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonized by language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, […] carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers" (64). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the multidirectional and transformative nature of postcolonial fiction and to recognize that "writing back" only constitutes one of many approaches that writers of postcolonial literature may adopt.

3 Stranger in a Strange Land: The Racialized Outsider in Lovecraft's Works and Contemporary Lovecraftian Fiction

As the term "cosmic horror" suggests, Lovecraft's work as well as other Lovecraftian literature are generally classified under the broader genre of horror fiction. However, Lovecraftian horror is notable for its tendency to incorporate other genres of speculative fiction. Indeed, Joseph Vernon Shea points out that "the basic themes of science-fiction, the reachings out into time and space, had very much to do with the body of [Lovecraft's] work" (138). One can argue that the figure of the outsider, "[t]he Stranger, or the Other, and the Strange Land – whether actually empty or filled with those Others" are not only "deep and abiding twin signifiers in science fiction" (Langer 3), but also recurring elements in Lovecraft's short stories and novellas. His stories and characters are composed around divisions between "us" and "them" and often focus on the transgressions of boundaries, whether they are geographic, cultural or racial. Indeed, Lovecraft's work can be viewed "as almost pathological in its use of [outsider] characters [who are] alienated from normal human society" (Dziemianowicz 160).

What makes Lovecraft's work interesting both for an analysis from a postcolonial lens and the potential for writing subversive Lovecraftian fiction is the variety and ambivalence of his depictions of these outsider characters. Depending on the

novella or short story, the figure of the outsider can be a nameless traveler who visits a strange land, a scientist who gets in contact with the "outside" and becomes alienated from society or, as it is the case in Lovecraft's novella "The Dunwich Horror", the outsider is racially othered by his neighbors because of his mixed heritage. Moreover, these hybrid outsider characters are often portrayed as harbingers of doom since "Lovecraft authored fiction wherein miscegenation, social collapse, and dark-skinned others represented the advent of the end of the world" (Zeller 15).

While the Old Ones, as ancient extraterrestrial beings beyond human comprehension, represent the ultimate other, "the Outsideness of natural and physical laws" (Berruti 371), outsider characters like Wilbur Whateley in "The Dunwich Horror" are meant to cause anxiety through their hybridity. As the author Michel Houellebecq points out in his book *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, "it is not one particular race that represents true horror [for Lovecraft], but the notion of the half-breed" (112). Unlike the Old Ones who are completely "outside the natural world" (Will 19), it is the hybrid character's remnants of familiarity that makes them particularly scary to Lovecraft. Just as "the stranger with the 'right' passport might cause particular trouble [because he] risks passing through" (Ahmed 162), to Lovecraft, the hybrid poses the risk of infiltration. Or as Judith Butler describes it: the risk "that some physical distance will be crossed, and the virgin sanctity of whiteness will be endangered by that proximity" (18). Whether they are actual representations of racial mixing or, as in "The Dunwich Horror", of procreation with cosmic beings, in Lovecraft's works, hybridity signifies "that the human species is experiencing a blasphemous incursion upon its domain" (Joshi, *Decline* 126).

However, it is precisely this liminal position of racially othered characters that creates ambivalence in Lovecraft's depiction of the outsider and opens up subversive potential for contemporary Lovecraftian fiction to rewrite and reclaim harmful tropes of the genre. As Anna Powell points out, "[t]he Lovecraftian Anomalous is a disruptive thing that catalyses systemic change […] and shatter[s] epistemological categories: self and other, inside and out" (263). It is this liminal position of being "[u]nfit to live in the world of human beings, unable to live anymore in the world [they] once knew, [and being] forever trapped between two worlds" (Dziemianowicz 165) that links the common Lovecraftian protagonist with the racialized outsider in his stories. The former often arrives at this position by gaining forbidden knowledge, the latter simply by existing, but both share the role of "an outsider; a stranger in this century and among those who are still men" (Lovecraft, "Outsider" 89).

3.1   The Racialized Outsider in Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror"

Lovecraft's novella "The Dunwich Horror" is regarded as one of the central stories of the so called "Cthulhu Mythos". The prominent Lovecraft scholar S.T. Joshi claims that it was the story's "luridness, melodrama, and naïve moral dichotomy [… that] were picked up by later writers" and made "the rest of the 'Cthulhu Mythos' […] possible" (*Dreamer* 274). However, one can argue that today, it is not the simple good vs. evil struggle of the story but it*s* depiction of the racialized outsider character Wilbur Whateley that make the story especially significant for writers of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction who try to decolonize and reclaim the genre.

The horror novella "The Dunwich Horror", like the majority of Lovecraft's work, is set in a fictional version of New England, commonly referred to as "Lovecraft Country". In the small decrepit town called Dunwich, Lavinia Whateley, who is described as an "deformed, unattractive albino woman", gives birth to a child whose paternal ancestry is unknown and widely speculated upon by the town's inhabitants. The reason that is given for this speculation is not only the fact that Lavinia lives isolated together "with an aged and half-insane father", only referred to as Old Whateley, but also because her son, Wilbur, is in contrast with his mother's complexion described as a "swarthy child" (Lovecraft, "Dunwich" 16). From the start, Lavinia's position brings to mind the obtrusive scrutiny that mothers of mixed-race children are often confronted with. Moreover, the town's people view it as surprising and misguided that both Lavinia and her father, of "whom the most frightful tales of wizardry had been whispered", are "strangely proud of the dark, goatish-looking infant" (ibid. 14).

Of course, the reason for this pride is later revealed to be that Wilbur's father is Yog-Sothoth, a cosmic entity that would end humanity's dominion over earth, a plan that the wizard Old Whateley wants to accomplish. Nevertheless, when Old Whateley addresses the townspeople about his grandson's paternal ancestry, it can easily be read a plea for more tolerance:

> I dun't keer what folks think—ef Lavinny's boy looked like his pa, he wouldn't look like nothin' ye expeck. Ye needn't think the only folks is the folks hereabaouts. Lavinny's read some, an' has seed some things the most o' ye only tell abaout. I calc'late her man is as good a husban' as ye kin find this side of Aylesbury (ibid.15).

Whereas Lavinia and Old Whateley embrace Wilbur's hybridity, to the townspeople and to Lovecraft himself, the mixed-race Wilbur Whateley signifies that "human species is experiencing a blasphemous incursion upon its domain" (Joshi, *Decline* 126). Moreover, although Wilbur is a hybrid between human and Old One, which according

to S.T. Joshi are "horrifying precisely because [they] exhibit none of the traits attributable to any sentient being on this planet or perhaps in the known universe" (*Weird Tale* 91), the way that his appearance is described has familiar racialist connotations and makes explicit references to ethnicity. Wilbur, who is sometimes referred to as "Lavinny's black brat" is described as having "dark, almost Latin eyes", and it is stated that there is "something almost […] animalistic about his thick lips, large-pored, yellowish skin, coarse crinkly hair, and oddly elongated ears" (Lovecraft, "Dunwich" 17).

Furthermore, the way that the story constantly describes the fear induced by his quickly growing body and states that "his size and accomplishments were almost alarming" (ibid. 18) is reminiscent of what Frantz Fanon describes as the focus on the Black man's corporeality: In a white supremacist society, "[t]he Negro symbolizes the biological […, his] puberty begins at the age of nine, and by age ten they have children" (Fanon 144). Similarly, it is stated that "Wilbur was growing up uncannily, so that he looked like a boy of ten as he entered his fourth year" (Lovecraft, "Dunwich" 19). This in turn leads to even more scrutiny and increases his status as an outsider in the community: "[F]or the first time people began to speak specifically of the dawning look of evil in his goatish face" (ibid.).

As Sara Ahmed points out, "[s]paces acquire the 'skin' of the bodies that inhabit them", therefore, in a white supremacist society, "[s]paces are orientated 'around' whiteness, insofar as whiteness is not seen" (157). For someone like Wilbur Whateley, who is racially othered, this leads to heightened visibility and scrutiny. Moreover, this heightened visibility means that "even a single body can be seen to be taking up more physical space than it actually occupies" (Puwar 48–49). Wilbur, whose height even in early adolescence is described as "having reached the normal adult limit" (Lovecraft, "Dunwich" 23), becomes increasingly spatially restricted in Dunwich. This applies even more to Wilbur's twin brother who "looked more like the father than he did" (ibid. 59) and therefore needs to be constantly locked in the farmhouse. His more profound otherness and even more rapid growth compared to Wilbur makes it necessary for the Whateleys to constantly modify the farmhouse in order to keep him hidden from the outside.

One of the ways that spatial restrictions are enforced on Wilbur Whateley is through the presence of dogs. It is stated that "[d]ogs abhorred the boy, and he was always obliged to take various defensive measures against their barking menace" (ibid. 17), making it necessary for him "to carry a pistol in order to traverse the countryside in

safety" (Lovecraft, "Dunwich" 19). In fact, Wilbur later in the story gets killed by a dog while trying to break into the Miskatonic University, the fictional university featured in many of Lovecraft's stories whose library holds a copy of the forbidden book Necronomicon. The role of dogs is significant here because, as Lovecraft writes in his short story "The Whisperer in Darkness", "dogs and other beasts always hated the [Old] Ones" (Lovecraft, "Whisperer" 127). Therefore, in his stories, dogs often function as means to warn against, keep out and, to some extent, control extraterrestrial outsiders. One can argue that this depiction is reminiscent of "dogs as an instrument in the oppression of African Americans" (Stewart 206). Moreover, it seems significant that Wilbur, as a racialized outsider, is killed while trying to gain access to a university. Since his status makes it impossible for him to be accepted into such an institution, Wilbur is only able to gain knowledge on his own:

> Wilbur was by this time a scholar of really tremendous erudition in his one-sided way, and was quietly known by correspondence to many librarians in distant places where rare and forbidden books of old days are kept. (Lovecraft, "Dunwich" 23)

When he finally decides to visit the university in the city of Arkham in person, we can see that his appearance and status as a racialized outsider exudes "a menacing presence that disturbs and interrupts [… the] white […] sense of public institutional space" (Puwar 42). Entering the university library, he is described as a "dark and goatish gargoyle" who is "[a]lmost eight feet tall" (Lovecraft, "Dunwich" 25).

Significantly, it is not only his appearance that makes him stand out, but also his "uncouth of dialect" (ibid. 25). One can argue that this phrase does not merely reflect an attitude of condescension of the urban population in Arkham against a member of the uneducated rural community. Because earlier in the story, it is stated that Wilbur's "speech was remarkable […] because of its difference from the ordinary accents of the region [, …] reflect[ing] some elusive element wholly unpossessed by Dunwich and its denizens" (ibid. 17). It seems that here, too, the aversion to his language and conduct is clearly informed by racial and cultural prejudices. This becomes even more obvious when it is noted that Wilbur "would sometimes mutter an unfamiliar jargon, and chant in bizarre rhythms which chilled the listener with a sense of unexplainable terror" (ibid. 19). This terror in the face of the culturally foreign also reflects the personal fears of Lovecraft himself. Since "evidence was accumulating throughout his lifetime" (Joshi, *Decline* 76) that race is a social construct, not a biological attribute, "[c]ultural differentiation was all Lovecraft was left to lean on, and he did so emphatically and

even with a certain desperation" (Joshi, *Decline* 77). Thus, one can argue that Lovecraft not only depicted Wilbur as a racial hybrid but also a cultural one.

As Anna Powell points out, only his "[d]eath reveals the full extent of Wilbur's own hybridity" (270): After the dog has killed Wilbur and he is found by the police, it is revealed that "the torso and lower parts of [his] body were teratologically fabulous, so that only generous clothing could ever have enabled him to walk on earth unchallenged or uneradicated" (Lovecraft, "Dunwich" 31). His "tightly buttoned attire" (ibid. 16) can therefore be seen as an instrument for passing as human in public and explains why "the disarrangement or threatened disarrangement of which always seemed to fill him with anger and alarm" (ibid. 16). However, even though Wilbur Whateley represents Lovecraft's fear of hybridity, both racially and culturally, he is not the main antagonist of the story and does not represent the titular horror that comes to the town of Dunwich.

Instead, it is his nameless twin brother who, being locked inside the Whateley farmhouse, breaks out after Wilbur's death and terrorizes the area around the town. The twin brother can be viewed as a more overt case of hybridity because he possesses "a greater share of the outsideness" (ibid. 59): His body is described as "a octopus, centipede, spider kind o'thing, but [with] a haff-shaped man's face on top of it" (ibid. 58). Furthermore, the twin brother still poses the threat of infiltration because his body is completely invisible to the human eye. He is referred to as an "invisible blasphemy" that can only be defeated when "the unseen horror [is given] a moment of visibility" (ibid. 53). This monstrous outsideness and fear of infiltration can be read as a manifestation of Lovecraft's fear of immigration: As S.T. Joshi points out, "[w]hat Lovecraft wanted was simply familiarity—the familiarity of the milieu in a racially and culturally homogeneous Providence that he had experienced in youth" (80) which in Lovecraft's own words was under threat by "the rashly and idealistically admitted flood of alien, degenerate, and inassimilable immigrants" (qtd. in Joshi, *Decline* 137). In the novella, the same xenophobic rhetoric is used in a speech by Henry Armitage, the academic that helps to defeat the Dunwich horror, in which he describes the Whateleys and what they represent:

> It was—well, it was mostly a kind of force that doesn't belong in our part of space; a kind of force that acts and grows and shapes itself by other laws than those of our sort of Nature. We have no business calling in such things from outside, and only very wicked people and very wicked cults ever try to. (Lovecraft, "Dunwich" 58)

Furthermore, when Armitage glimpses a passage of the Necronomicon at the library, the text states that Wilbur's real father "Yog-Sothoth is the key and guardian of the gate [… and] knows where the Old Ones broke through of old, and where They shall break

through again" (Lovecraft, "Dunwich" 26). It is stated that through a sort of immigration, the Old Ones, who represent the ultimate other, will infiltrate our world and "shall soon rule where man rules now" (ibid. 27). In Lovecraft's stories, they represent the fear "that mankind is cosmically trivial and will eventually be superseded by other races" (Joshi, *Decline* 106).

Therefore, one can argue that Wilbur Whateley and his twin brother not only represent racialized outsiders who, through their status as hybrids and their potential for passing, pose the threat of further racial mixture, but also embody Lovecraft's own racist fears about immigration as a catalyst for the decline of the West, which in his worldview, "heralds the decline of the whole planet" (ibid. 140). However, even on a literal level, "The Dunwich Horror" and many other stories by Lovecraft make it clear that, while humanity as a whole is threatened by a return of the Old Ones, non-white people are positioned on the side of the alien invaders. The "Old Ones [who] deploy their alien multiplicity in a project to overrun and recolonise the cosmos" (Powell 266) are mirrored and sometimes actively aided in their plan by the figure of racialized outsider. Because in Lovecraft's view that is represented in his work, "the human race IS the white race and those who fall outside that narrow definition of humanity are aligned with dark powers that will eventually destroy all that the human race has built" (Marvel 11).

3.2   The Racialized Outsider in Contemporary Lovecraftian Fiction

The figure of the outsider in Lovecraft's work appears in a variety of forms: They range from racialized outsiders like Wilbur Whateley to "romantics or visionaries who find the real world too crass and uncompassionate for their sensitive natures" (Dziemianowicz 163), to scientists who become alienated from normal society, to alien visitors or the figure of the lone stranger who finds himself stranded in a foreign and hostile land. In works of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction, many of these different roles are blended into one character. Indeed, the protagonists in *Lovecraft Country*, *Ring Shout* and *The Ballad of Black Tom* are not only racialized outsiders, the usual sources of terror in Lovecraft's work, but also characters who enter a foreign and hostile place, the role of the common protagonist and point of identification in Lovecraft's stories. Therefore, one can argue that they represent what John Thieme describes as a "fluidity of colonial archetypes [in postcolonial writing,] opening up possibilities for transforming identities" (Thieme 172).

In the three chosen works of Lovecraftian fiction, the strange and hostile environment that is visited by the Black outsider characters is not an alien planet or a mysterious isolated town but Jim Crow America. Moreover, unlike in Lovecraft's work, the horror that is presented here does not come from an alien intrusion from the outside but originates in the place and is hidden for those that do not have to experience it directly. By employing intertextuality on what Nycz terms the "text-reality" level that takes into account the social and historical contexts, contemporary Lovecraftian fiction "make[s] it possible to think of white racism as itself weird or eerie" (Kneale 95). In this context, it is relevant to analyse not only how Lovecraftian fiction depicts the journey of the outsider characters through these mundane but terrifying places but also how the authors of these works engage with categories like whiteness and the distinction between human and monster.

3.2.1   Reclaiming Horror Territory: The Outsider, Strange Places and Racial Othering

In Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country*, the central elements of cosmic horror that were already established in the analysis of Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror" are present right from the beginning of the novel: An outsider character who is alienated in society, a journey through strange and hostile lands and a book containing secret or forbidden knowledge. The story starts with Atticus Turner, a Black man who, after leaving the army, wants to return home to his family in Chicago. However, in order to get home, he must travel through the hostile territory that is Jim Crow America, only aided by the knowledge contained in a book called "The Safe Negro Travel Guide". The book which is collected, written and published by Atticus's father Montrose Turner contains a road atlas not only with information about motels and restaurants that are available to him as a Black man but also a list of places he must avoid under all circumstances for his own safety (cf. Ruff 1). The significance of this guidebook is perhaps most poignantly shown when a visual translation of the book by Atticus's cousin Horace is described:

> Major Negro population centers like Chicago's South Side were represented as shining fortresses. […] Isolated hotels and motels were inns with smiling keepers. […] Less friendly parts were populated by ogres and trolls, vampires and werewolves, wild beasts, ghosts, evil sorcerers, and hooded white knights. In Oklahoma, a great white dragon coiled around Tulsa, breathing fire onto the neighborhood where Atticus's father and Uncle George had been born. (ibid. 20)

Whereas the secret knowledge contained in Lovecraft's Necronomicon in "The Dunwich Horror" represents a way for Wilbur Whateley to end his outsider status and therefore lift the spatial restrictions that are posed upon him, for Atticus and other Black

travelers, The Safe Negro Travel Guide, which can also be seen as a forbidden book, is simply a means of survival.

Although the knowledge in the book is not explicitly forbidden, it becomes clear that it represents something unsettling to the white population. When a state trooper stops Atticus on the way from Florida to Chicago, he ultimately is forced to let him go but still insists on "keeping [the] guidebook" (9). To the police officer whose job it is to enforce spatial restriction on Black people, a Black visitor in a white space represents a "menacing presence that disturbs and interrupts" (Puwar 42). But more importantly, a Black traveler with a guidebook for safe travel, just like "the stranger with the 'right' passport" (Ahmed 162), poses the risk of infiltration, a fear that is widely represented in Lovecraft's work by outsider characters or alien forces. However, the protagonists in contemporary Lovecraftian fiction are not, like in many of Lovecraft's stories, "authorities or other individuals [who] suppress information […] for the supposed betterment or salvation of the human race" (Joshi, *Decline* 129) but individuals who are themselves suppressed and constrained.

In a country where "[f]or black drivers [,] road's only constant [is] uncertainty" (Seiler 1099), the guidebook provides them with a level of constancy and control. This uncertainty that Black travelers have to face is also described in the epigraph of the novel's first chapter, a quotation from the fictional The Safe Negro Travel Guide:

> JIM CROW MILE—A unit of measurement, peculiar to colored motorists, comprising both physical distance and random helpings of fear, paranoia, frustration, and outrage. Its amorphous nature makes exact travel times impossible to calculate, and its violence puts the traveler's good health and sanity constantly at hazard. (Ruff 1)

This epigraph not only represent an example of Genette's conception of paratextuality, a peritext which serves "to direct and control the reception of a text by its readers" (Allen 100). The contained description of paranoia and uncertainty is also reminiscent of how Frantz Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* describes the Black body being surrounded by an "atmosphere of certain uncertainty" (90) when visiting white majority places. The novel implies that it is this atmosphere that leads to Black people like Atticus developing some type of intuition or sixth sense for danger: When Atticus travels with his uncle George and his childhood friend Letitia to search for his father, "[h]e knew right away there was going to be trouble in Simmonsville" (Ruff 31).

Simmonsville is one of many so called "sundown towns" which existed mostly in the Southern United States during the Jim Crow era. As a state trooper describes the concept to Victor, a black traveler and contributor to The Safe Negro Travel Guide: "If I'd caught you here after dark, it'd be my sworn duty to hang you from one of these

trees" (Ruff 22). This experience together with Atticus's own stop in Simmonsville, where he and his family visit a restaurant that is mistakenly regarded as safe but has changed its owner, highlight the importance of the knowledge contained in the guidebook. As Dan Hassler-Forest points out, "reliable and current data are […] essential in a white-centered society where Black lives are considered disposable" and books like The Safe Negro Travel Guide that contain information "about geographical boundaries, social norms, and precise time measurement were all vital to Black travelers" (179).

This depiction of white spaces as strange and hostile to Black travelers can also be found in the novella *The Ballad of Black Tom* by Victor LaValle. The protagonist Thomas Tester works as a musician, or rather, he plays "the part of the dazzling, down-and-out musician" (LaValle 11) in front of white audiences because he cannot compete with the singers and guitar players in the streets of Harlem. He also sometimes locates and delivers rare and forbidden occult items for his rich white customers. However, even though the story is set in multicultural New York City, the concept "sundown town" seems to exist here too. When Tommy delivers a forbidden book to one of his customers, a witch called Ma Att who lives in a white neighborhood, she warns him that "[he] shouldn't be in this neighborhood when the sun goes down" (ibid. 16). However, as Tommy observes, "[s]he didn't sound concerned for him" (ibid. 16), suggesting that even an outsider character like a witch does not want to be seen associating with a Black man because it would increase suspicion towards her. Tommy meets Ma Att at her doorstep but is not invited in because, as he guesses, "[w]hat would the neighbors say if this woman had Negroes coming freely into her home?" (ibid.14). As Sara Ahmed points out, "'some bodies' more than others are recognizable as strangers, as bodies that are 'out of place'" (126). In the United States as depicted in *The Ballad of Black Tom* and *Lovecraft Country,* Black people "are known as belonging to other places, outside civil places" (Puwar 50). And when they enter a white space, "they represent the unknown and the potentially monstrous" (ibid.). At the same time, white people who are actually connected to the occult and the dark arts, like the witch Ma Att, are able to remain invisible.

Nirmal Puwar states that "[for] those for whom the whiteness of these spaces provides a comforting familiarity, the arrival of racialised members can represent the monstrous" (50). However, to a Black man like Tommy or Atticus, it is precisely these white spaces that possess a monstrous quality. This becomes especially clear when Tommy gets hired as a musician and invited to the house of the white occultist Robert

Suydam. Tommy's father Otis warns him that he should not "walk into that white man's house unarmed or unaware", and Tommy notices that "he'd never before seen his father look so scared" (LaValle 35). Indeed, after Tommy leaves "the safety of Harlem" (ibid. 37), "[he] understood the journey now as a travel to another universe" (ibid. 35). Moreover, Tommy points out that "the journey felt more threatening because the sun was down" (ibid. 37) and compares "[a] Negro walking through [a] white neighborhood at damn near midnight [… to] Satan strolling through Eden" (ibid. 45). Like *Lovecraft Country*, the novella uses the concept of the "sundown town" to rearrange the popular horror trope of nocturnal danger and thereby subvert racist preconceptions about safe white spaces. Matt Ruff, the author of *Lovecraft Country*, points out that in Lovecraft's novella "The Shadow Over Innsmouth", the white protagonist fleeing from the hostile townspeople could "with just a few changes […] easily be the story of a black traveller caught in the wrong place after dark" (qtd. in Kneale 100).

Furthermore, both works contrast these strange and hostile white spaces with the safety of "neighborhoods, inhabited by the Black community exclusively [where] they can feel comfortable and at ease, and going into the streets does not involve hateful stares and the need to avoid eye contact with white people" (Woźniak 95). This depiction is consistent with Frantz Fanon's observation that "[a]s long as the black man remains on his home territory […] he will not have to experience his being for others" (89). Fittingly, in the visual translation of The Safe Negro Travel Guide in *Lovecraft Country*, these Black neighborhoods are "represented as shining fortresses" (Ruff 20). However, this idea of a safe Black space is arguably more meaningfully depicted in LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*. Because as a rewriting of Lovecraft's hypotext, the short story "The Horror at Red Hook", the novella's depiction of Harlem can be seen as a direct response to Lovecraft's portrayal of Black and multicultural neighborhoods.

In "The Horror at Red Hook", often described as "one of Lovecraft's most explicitly racist short stories" (Tyree 144), he describes the immigrants' influence on multicultural New York City as "a hopeless tangle and enigma; Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements impinging upon one another, […] a babel of sound and filth" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 154). As S. T. Joshi points out, the explicitly racist narration is uncommon even for Lovecraft, and the "amount of editorialising points to the fact that this whole issue was so close to [his] innermost concerns" (Joshi, *Decline* 128). In *The Ballad of Black Tom*, Victor LaValle directly confronts Lovecraft's views by quoting the narration of "The Horror at Red Hook" and including it in a speech of his own story's villain, the white occultist Robert Suydam. When he tries to convince Tommy to

help him awaken The Sleeping King, he tells him: "Your people are forced to live in mazes of hybrid squalor. It's all sound and filth and spiritual putrescence" (LaValle 47). It is in LaValle's novella that one can observe most clearly John Thieme's conception of "writing back" as con-texts that "engage in direct, if ambivalent, dialogue with" (Thieme 4) an earlier pre-text. LaValle creates ambivalence by making a small alteration to the statement that was originally uttered by Lovecraft's narrator in "The Horror at Red Hook". As James Kneale points out, just by adding the word "forced", LaValle "lays the blame for Red Hook's slums elsewhere, by implication at the door of white New York" (103). This is further emphasized when the policeman Thomas Malone states about Red Hook that staying separated from white New York "was all that society demanded of such neighborhoods" (LaValle 92) and, in consideration of Suydam's statement, also all that it provided.

Furthermore, as can be ascertained by Tommy's reaction to Suydam's speech, this description of Black and immigrant neighborhoods is informed by racist prejudice and ignorance. Tommy responds: "I'm trying to understand what in the hell place you're talking about. It doesn't sound like anywhere I've ever lived" (LaValle 47). Indeed, the portrayal of these neighborhoods in LaValle's novella stands in stark contrast to the characterisations that are provided by Lovecraft or the character Robert Suydam in the story. Harlem is portrayed as more than just a place, it is described as a living organism and collective being, a hybrid outsider that is in a similar position as its inhabitants. However, instead of "a maze of hybrid squalor" (ibid. 47), "[h]is New York is flush with ordinary people doing their best to get by despite oppressive circumstances" (Witzel 565). As Tommy describes it, "[w]alking through Harlem first thing in the morning was like being a single drop of blood inside an enormous body that was waking up. Brick and mortar, elevated train tracks, and miles of underground pipe, this city lived; day and night it thrived" (LaValle 12). In contrast to the racial othering that Tommy experiences in white places, Harlem provides him with a sense of belonging. This contrast becomes especially clear when Tommy returns home after he visited Suydam's mansion:

> HARLEM. ONLY AWAY FOR A NIGHT, but he'd missed the company. The bodies close to his on the street, boys running through traffic before the streetlights turned, on their way to school and daring each other to be bold. As he descended the stairs from the station, he smiled for the first time since he'd left Suydam's mansion. (LaValle 59)

Moreover, this difference in portrayal does not only extend to a Black neighborhood like Harlem but also the immigrant places that Lovecraft specifically linked to the infiltration of evil cults as the "sole cause of civilisation's future collapse" (Joshi,

Decline 141). At the beginning of *The Ballad of Black Tom* when Tommy delivers the book to the witch Ma Att, he describes the so-called "Victoria Society" in a similar manner as secret cults are portrayed in Lovecraft's work: "It's called the Victoria Society. Even the hardest gangsters in Harlem are afraid to go there. It's where people like me trade in books like yours. And worse." (LaValle 15). Only later when Tommy visits the meeting house of the Victoria Society does he learn that it is just a regular Caribbean social club with "men playing card games or bones [… and] men in lounge chairs smoking and listening to music played at a respectable volume" (ibid. 29). With Tommy wondering if he had "simply assumed terrible things about this wave of West Indian immigrants" (ibid. 29), to the reader, this question now also extends to "The Horror at Red Hook" and the rest of Lovecraft's work. David Kumler states that LaValle structured his story this way to give the reader the impression "that Lovecraft's telling of the story is a redacted and altered account, a strange but ultimately "much more palatable" version of the true events LaValle narrates" (Kumler 58).

As James Kneale points out, "both LaValle and Ruff invert Lovecraft's weird geographies in order to challenge his racism" (103). By subverting the racist stereotypes that are prevalent in his fiction and making his common strange places mundane and harmless while simultaneously portraying white places as strange and hostile, Lovecraftian fiction tries "to reclaim horror genre territory for black America and beyond" (Ellen E. Jones qtd. in Tejada 47).

3.2.2 The Mark of Cain: Black Hypervisibility and Invisible Whiteness

In *Lovecraft Country*, when Atticus and his companions, relying on outdated information in The Safe Negro Travel Guide, visit a restaurant in Simmonsville, they are immediately racially othered by the customers and employees. Based on Horace's visual translation of the guidebook, the place has turned from one of the sanctuaries, the "inns with smiling keepers" into an exclusively white space "populated by ogres and trolls, vampires and werewolves, wild beasts, ghosts, evil sorcerers and hooded white knights" (Ruff 20). The presence of the travelers is met with "eyes turning to slits [… and] eyes going wide as if George, Atticus, and Letitia were Green Martians who'd teleported in from Barsoom" (ibid. 34). In this section, Ruff describes the so-called "white gaze", a look "taking place, often without verbal communication, in everyday spaces in the city" (Puwar 41). According to Frantz Fanon, this white gaze limits the agency and movement of Black people, it fixes the Black body "the same way you fix a preparation with a dye" (Fanon 89). In *The Ballad of Black Tom*, it is this gaze that the

white occultist Robert Suydam exhibits when he "glared at Tommy as if he'd caught a burglar breaking into his home" (LaValle 45). It is a look "which abnormalises [the] presence" of the recipients and signals to them that they are "occupying spaces they are not expected to be" (Puwar 41–42).

However, as Nirmal Puwar points out, "at the same time as the black body is fixed by a white gaze, the white gaze itself is disorientated by the close proximity of these foreign bodies" (42). This disorientation is depicted in *Lovecraft Country* not only by the wide-eyed gaze of the employee but also by his uncertainty about how to react to these outsiders: "This look of startlement lasted for all of a second before being replaced by a mask of poorly feigned indifference". The white inhabitants of this space are startled by the intrusion and have to regain their composure, often only after being directly confronted. In P. Djèli Clark's novella *Ring Shout*, the Black protagonist Maryse has a similar experience when she walks into the shop that belong to the story's villain Butcher Clyde. As she describes her experience: "A white lady and her son sitting nearby watch me open-mouthed. I stare back until she turns away" (Clark 81). Black visitors in white places, like Atticus, Tommy or Maryse, are perceived "[a]s 'space invaders' [… which are] highly visible bodies that by their mere presence invite suspicion and surveillance" (Puwar 54). As Sara Ahmed describes it, bodies "become hyper-visible when they do not pass, which means they 'stand out' and 'stand apart'" (159). Moreover, when these highly visible bodies enter an area that they are excluded from, "their numbers become amplified and they come to threateningly fill the space in much larger numbers than they literally do" (Puwar 48), with the "assumption that the coming together of these bodies is a potential act of aggression" (ibid. 53). This phenomenon is portrayed in *Lovecraft Country* when the employee of the restaurant makes a phone call and Letitia overhears him "talking about these scary Negroes who'd taken over the restaurant" (Ruff 38). Even the harmless action of ordering a coffee in a restaurant can be seen as a hostile act when it is performed by someone who is seen as an outsider.

Moreover, these highly visible or hypervisible bodies are also limited in their movement because they are stopped more often. As Sara Ahmed describes this experience: "Who are you? Why are you here? What are you doing? Each question, when asked, is a kind of stopping device: you are stopped by being asked the question" (161). In *The Ballad of Black Tom*, this act of stopping is not only performed by police officers and state troopers, like in the encounters described in *Lovecraft Country*, but also by regular white citizens. When Tommy has to take the train in order to visit

Suydam's house in a predominantly white neighborhood, "people squinted at him [… and] at four different times white men asked him exactly where he was going" (LaValle 37). One of the ways that racialized outsider characters react to their hypervisibility in order to maintain at least a minimum level of mobility is through the act of disguise and role-playing.

Like Wilbur Whateley in Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror" who must hide the full extent of his otherness by wearing a "tightly buttoned attire" (Lovecraft, "Dunwich" 16), Tommy Tester in *The Ballad of Black Tom* has to employ "useful tricks for a black man in an all-white neighborhood [as s]urvival techniques" (LaValle 12–13). As Tommy describes it, "[m]en from Harlem were known for their strut, a lion's stride" (ibid. 13) but when walking through an all-white neighborhood, he could only survive by "[b]ecoming unremarkable, invisible, compliant" (ibid. 12). Since Black bodies are perceived as taking up more space than they actually do in "[s]paces [that] are orientated 'around' whiteness" (Ahmed 157), Tommy has to compensate by deliberately making himself smaller and less visible. Furthermore, when talking to white police officers, Tommy often resorts to playing a certain role that adheres to white people's expectations towards him: When Malone questions Tommy after seeing him talk to Suydam, "[Tommy] decided to play a role that always worked on whites. The Clueless Negro. 'I cain't says, suh,' Tommy began. 'I's just a simple geetar man.'" (LaValle 25). Tommy is aware that "[w]hen he dressed in those frayed clothes and played at the blues man or the jazz man or even the docile Negro, […] the role bestowed a kind of power upon him" (ibid. 32). As James Kneale describes it, "he can get others—white people— to do what he wants, within limits, by playing roles, being the person they want him to be" (101). And because the image of "The Clueless Negro" is expected and harmless to white observers, his hypervisibility is also reduced. When Tommy takes the train after his visit to Suydam's house, he is surprised that no white passenger pays attention to him and assumes that "[h]e must have looked feebleminded, and thus unthreatening, and thus invisible" (LaValle 58).

Indeed, Tommy constantly plays "the part of the dazzling, down-and-out musician" (ibid. 11) which white people can understand and expect of someone of his background. The way that Tommy is always aware of the expectations of white people towards him and tries to adhere to them can be viewed as a depiction of the concept "double consciousness" that is described by W. E. B. Du Bois in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*. He describes it as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused

contempt and pity" (Du Bois 8). This type of "second sight" will become particularly important in the next section which examines the distinction between human and monster as depicted in the three Lovecraftian works. However, LaValle in *The Ballad of Black Tom* emphasizes this conception of double consciousness by shifting the focalization from Tommy to Malone in the second half of the novella. When the narrator that focalizes Malone's perspective, for instance, observes about a group of young Black men that "the only side they were on was chaos" (LaValle 117) and describes the immigrant's beliefs as "superstitions and lowly faiths" (ibid. 91), LaValle attributes to him the same editorializing that the reader knows from Lovecraft's hypotext "The Horror at Red Hook". Moreover, by including Malone's racist perspective in the story, LaValle implements Bakhtin's double voiced discourse that foregrounds not only the social divisions and conflicting perspectives of the story but also emphasizes the necessity why Black people like Tommy need to adopt these defensive strategies.

As becomes clear, Tommy's strategies and "useful defenses" (LaValle 45) against the white gaze are not always successful: "Looking down at his feet abjectly often worked; a smile might sometimes do" (ibid. 45). Like in "The Dunwich Horror", where only a scientist who is also familiar with forbidden knowledge can reveal the invisible, in The *Ballad of Black Tom*, only characters like Robert Suydam and detective Thomas Malone who, because of their interest in the occult, are also outsiders are able to see through Tommy's disguise, leaving him "feeling exposed—seen—in a way he'd never experienced" (ibid. 26). As Suydam explains to Tommy:

> "Do you know why I hired you? Why I was drawn to you three days past? I could see you. And I don't mean this charade." Suydam extended one hand and gestured from Tommy's purposefully scuffed boots to his well-worn suit to his guitar. "I saw that you understood illusion. And that you, in your way, were casting a powerful spell. I admired it. I felt a kinship with you, I suppose. Because I, too, understand illusion." (ibid. 46)

Although LaValle's rewriting of the story does not elaborate on it, in Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook", Robert Suydam is also an outsider character who has to disguise himself. Suydam is the recluse but wealthy descendant of an ancient Dutch family who, after his relatives try to have him declared insane, is forced to hide his interest in the occult as well as his social relations to non-white immigrants which in Lovecraft's stories are inseparable from each other. Instead, he plays the role that is expected of him, is seen only "with clean-shaved face, well-trimmed hair, and tastefully immaculate attire" and marries "a young woman of excellent position" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 163).

In LaValle's story, Suydam recognizes these similarities between Tommy's and his own position as outsiders and refers to it as a kinship. However, LaValle also makes clear that, while both characters are outsiders, their positions are vastly different: Whereas Tommy's disguise and role playing are necessary for his survival, Suydam uses it to preserve his privileged position while seeking power, through occult knowledge, that goes even beyond it. As Sara Ahmed states, "[f]or the black man, consciousness of the body is 'third person consciousness' and the feeling is one of negation [, …] a restriction in what it can do". In predominately white spaces, Tommy has to hide his "lion's stride" because he is aware that "the white man […] had woven [him] out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories" (Fanon 91). A white man like Robert Suydam, on the other hand, can act as if "they are seen by black folks only as they want to appear" (Hooks, *Black Looks* 169) which LaValle emphasizes by depicting it as a type of magical power. When visiting Suydam's mansion, Tommy realises that a white "wealthy man's reality is remade at will" (LaValle 44). Whereas Tommy's illusions are merely "useful defenses" (ibid. 45), a white person like "[Robert Suydam,] by some power, [can make] his legs grow at will" (ibid. 43).

As James Kneale points out, in *The Ballad of Black Tom*, despite the fact that "magic, like other forms of power, is largely in the hands of white men—[…] magic is still associated with African-Americans" (101). This is also the case in in Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* where Ruby, the sister of Atticus's childhood friend Letitia, recalls her mother's habit of tricking white people who thought that she was a "magic Negro":

> For these folks, she'd put on a show. She would alter and throw her voice, and crack her toe and ankle joints to simulate ghostly rapping; a ruler hidden up her sleeve gave her the leverage to make the table jump even as her hands rested innocently atop it. Afterwards, Momma would laugh and joke about how gullible these people were. White folks' belief that Negroes were magically gifted struck her as the most absurd form of superstition. (Ruff 220)

Like Lovecraft himself, white characters in contemporary Lovecraftian fiction assume that Black people possess an affinity for the occult, they naturally possess forbidden knowledge that has yet to be sought out by their white compatriots. Atticus, who in the course of the story encounters a secret society called "The Order of the Ancient Dawn", is also aware of this fact. When the cult's leader Samuel Braithwhite wants Atticus to participate in an occult ritual, he replies: "You require me [… t]o be your magic Negro?" (ibid. 87).

The ambivalent associations of white characters and Black characters with occult knowledge in Lovecraftian fiction are perhaps most clearly depicted through the idea of the "mark of Cain" that is introduced as a symbol and spell in Matt Ruff's novel

Lovecraft Country. Historically, this biblical mark was used to justify slavery and revolved around the idea "that the mark [that] God put on Cain was actually dark skin and that everything bad that had befallen the Negroes […] was the result of their being Cain's descendants" (Ruff 260). However, in *Lovecraft Country*, the mark of Cain is depicted as a special protective spell that is exclusively used by a white supremacist cult. As Ruby points out, correcting the original interpretation of the biblical symbol, "Cain's mark was a protection; if the mark was his skin color, then god must have turned him white, not black" (ibid. 260). The mark is first mentioned in the novel when Atticus is ordered to meet Samuel Braithwhite, the leader of one of the secret order's lodges called "The Sons of Adam". As Samuel's son Caleb warns Atticus about his father, "[h]e may say things that make you want to hit him. But I'd advise you not to waste the effort. He's immune" (ibid. 82). The mark, therefore, is introduced as a protection from any consequence that could result from Samuel's racist behavior. As Atticus learns in the following conversation with Samuel, he and his ancestors, who founded the order, fear the emergence of a more tolerant society and thus try to prevent any radical social changes. As Samuel explains,

> [w]hen the Order of the Ancient Dawn was first founded, the age of kings was only just giving way to the age of the common man—and Titus Braithwhite's horror at that prospect was part of what drove him to take the chances he did. I can only imagine his horror today, after a hundred and eighty years of the common man. And all of that is nothing compared to what's coming in the next few decades. So you see, we need to act quickly. We're running out of time. (ibid. 86)

Therefore, one can argue that the mark of Cain also protects Samuel from having to conform to the sensibilities of a more tolerant modern society. The views of Samuel Braithwhite and his lodge are deliberately reminiscent of Lovecraft's fears about the decline of the West and his unwillingness to adapt his views. As Benjamin E. Zeller points out, "immigration […], opening sexual mores, women's suffrage, the rise of socialism, and new discoveries in science […] led to cultural transitions that Lovecraft himself abhorred and envisioned as indicative of the end of American civilization" (Zeller 5). Like in LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*, Matt Ruff challenges Lovecraft's personal views by assigning his voice to the story's antagonists.

As becomes clear throughout the story, the mark of Cain is not only a protection against physical harm but also a spell that grants a type of invisibility. After Caleb Braithwhite uses Atticus to take over his father's lodge, he grants their car "[a] dash of immunity" (Ruff 104) that makes it invisible to police officers and allows them to move "in a way no colored man should drive when headed into white Chicago" (ibid. 151). However, the novel also highlights that this type of protection is only magical to Black

people like Atticus and his companions, whereas to someone like Caleb Braithwhite, it is merely part of his white privilege. This becomes especially clear when Ruby receives a potion from Caleb that can transform her into a white woman, granting her the freedom of movement that only white people can experience. As Ruby finds out while visiting a store as a white woman, "[t]here was no side-eying, no pretending not to see her while wondering what she was up to; she didn't require attention. She was free to browse, not just individual establishments, but the world." (ibid. 235).

The above passage stands in stark contrast to the hypervisibility and increased surveillance that her and the other Black characters are confronted with during their visit at the restaurant in Simmonsville. As Sara Ahmed points out, "[s]paces are orientated 'around' whiteness, insofar as whiteness is not seen" (157). A white person's "body is emptied of its gender or race" and, as the privileged norm, has the "ability to be seen as just normal, to be without corporeality" (Puwar 57). In *Lovecraft Country*, this "transcendence of the body" (ibid.) that is ascribed to white people is challenged by the Black perspective that the novel offers. When Ruby first sees her new transformed self when looking in the mirror, her experience is portrayed as one of abjection with a strong focus on the white body:

> Ruby screamed again; the white woman in the mirror screamed with her. Ruby clapped her hands over her mouth; the white woman aped the gesture. The white woman: her. […] Just bright red hair, long and gently waved, and freckles, dense on her shoulders and upper arms, more sparse on her breasts and her flat white belly. Between her legs was another thatch of red: Viewed in the mirror from this undignified angle, it looked like some weird gingerfurred animal had crawled up in her lap. When Ruby looked down and saw that it was her lap, right there, she let out a yelp and went scooting backwards, as if by moving fast enough she could leave it behind. (Ruff 226)

This explicit description not only highlights the corporeality of the white body but, because it is given by a Black woman, also challenges the privilege that "white people can 'safely' imagine that they are invisible to black people" (Hooks, *Black Looks* 168). Because as the feminist writer bell hooks explains, "racist white people find it easy to imagine that black people cannot see them if within their desire they do not want to be seen by the dark Other" (ibid.). This characterization is also reinforced by Atticus who observes that white people who are exposed as racists "generally exhibited all the guile off five-year-olds, who cannot imagine that the world sees them other than as they wish to be seen" (Ruff 31).

As will be further elaborated on in the next section, this white privilege is also portrayed and challenged in P. Djèli Clark's *Ring Shout*, a novella that is set in an alternate history of the United States where the Ku Klux Klan has been infiltrated by

demons. At the beginning of the story, when Maryse witnesses a gathering of the Klan, she observes: "Not a one got their face covered. I hear them first Klans after the Civil War hid behind pillowcases and flour sacks to do their mischief, even blackened up to play like they colored. But this Klan we got in 1922 not concerned with hiding" (Clark 11). In the novella, the assumption of white invisibility and "white control of the black gaze" (Hooks, *Black Looks* 168) is subverted by a magical ability termed "The Sight" that only Black people possess and which allows them to recognize the demons under their human disguise. In Lovecraft's short story "The Dunwich Horror", the racialized outsider's invisibility posed a particular danger because he could only be defeated once he was exposed by the scientist characters of the story. In contemporary Lovecraftian fiction, on the other hand, it is the invisibility of white individuals that needs to be reversed in order to challenge their privileged position.

In fact, in *Lovecraft Country*, the white privilege of being invisible when it is convenient and being able to act and move freely, symbolized through the mark of Cain, is directly contrasted with the Jim Crow experience that Black Americans must endure. Therefore, it seems fitting that when Caleb Braithwhite is outwitted by Atticus and his companions at the end of the novel, his punishment is directed at this mark of privilege: "When Atticus pulled his hand away, there was still a mark on Braithwhite's chest, and it was still a mark of Cain—but a different one, the new a pun upon the old" (Ruff 362). The spell that Atticus casts on the Braithwhite's protective mark effectively gives him an alternative version of the Jim Crow experience. As they explain to him, he can no longer travel freely, "leaving him with a map marked with the black spaces he is now excluded from, a negative print of The Safe Negro Travel Guide" (Kneale 103). It is therefore not surprising that Braithwhite's subsequent threat that Atticus and his family will never be safe, no matter where they go, rings hollow to them (cf. (Ruff 365). Because as the publishers of The Safe Negro Travel Guide or simply as Black people in the United States, they are already closely familiar with this experience. As Atticus phrases it, "[y]ou think I don't know what country I live in? I know. We all do. We always have. You're the one who doesn't understand" (ibid. 366).

3.2.3   *Outside Humanity: Between Racist Dehumanization and Monstrous Agency*

The racialized outsider in Lovecraft's stories occupies a liminal position: They are hybrids that occupy a space between what is human and what lies outside of it. But Lovecraft's work is only one part of a long tradition of "fantastic fiction [that] has revolved around the figure of the Dark Other as racialized antagonist, forever

associating Blackness with [the monstrous]" (Hassler-Forest 181). David Kumler states that contemporary Lovecraftian fiction's "prominent response has been to draw on the Lovecraftian mythos to humanize those Lovecraft cast as less-than-human" (47). However, as he further points out, "[t]his becomes a significant problem when we recognize that 'human' is not a neutral category" (ibid. 47) and "[l]iberal humanism, in its commitment to the human, is unable to disarticulate itself from this colonizing politics of exclusion, accumulation, and assimilation" (ibid. 48). Therefore, one can argue that Lovecraftian fiction that tries to subvert racist and colonialist themes in the cosmic horror genre also needs to challenge anthropocentrism and draw upon the genre's tendency of "scrutinizing perceived definitions of 'reality'", of confronting "the very notion of any conceivable 'norm' until it is rather the subject's perception that is brought into question" (Dodd and Buckley 5).

Indeed, varying perspectives and perceptions about who is regarded as human and who is seen as monstrous are important themes in contemporary Lovecraftian fiction. In P. Djèli Clark's novella *Ring Shout*, which is set in 1920s Georgia, only those who possess an ability called "The Sight" can distinguish between human members of the Ku Klux Klan and the Ku Kluxes, demons who take on human form. While most people see the Ku Kluxes as regular white people, some Black observers who possess The Sight, like Maryse and her friends Sadie and Chef, can see their true form:

> The thing standing in his place now can't rightly be called a man. It's easily nine feet tall, with legs that bend back like the hindquarters of a beast, joined to a long torso twice as wide as most men. Arms of thick bone and muscle jut from its shoulders, stretching to the ground. But it's the head that stands out–long and curved to end in a sharp bony point. […] Every bit of the thing is a pale bone white, down to claws like carved blades of ivory. (Clark 21)

The body of the demon, of course, closely resembles the traditional dress-up of the Ku Klux Klan, thereby linking white supremacist ideology, instead of the racialized other, to the monstrous. The fact that the body of the demon is completely white further stresses this point. However, throughout the story, it is emphasized that these monsters that Maryse and her friends hunt down and kill are not to be equated with white people, even racist ones. In fact, Nana Jean, an old Gullah woman who is a mentor to Maryse and leader of the resistance fighters, is "very particular about […] not killing them who still human [because] every sinner got a chance to get right" (Clark 40).

Accordingly, the novella establishes a clear and consistent distinction between the categories "human" and "monster". And while it also distinguishes between the Black resistance fighters who recognize the demonic threat, on the one hand, and the unwitting white collaborators, on the other, both are human and ultimately belong to the

same group. They both are threatened by monstrous demons who, as revealed in the course of the story, are extraterrestrials who use the Ku Klux Klan in order "to merge [humanity] to [their] great collective" (ibid. 84). Consistent with the Lovecraftian themes of cosmic indifference and human insignificance, the novella challenges anthropocentrism by depicting powerful alien forces with superior intelligence that view humans as "just meat" (ibid. 151). However, one can argue that the novella still incorporates the common Lovecraftian conflict between humanity and non-human outsiders. And while it challenges Lovecraft's racist views "by incorporating racialized others into the sphere of 'full' humanity" (Kumler 47), it still attributes the same corresponding moral values to each side.

When Maryse describes one of the Ku Kluxes, she declares that "[t]he thing can't rightly be called a man" (Clark 21). Yet, as Sylvia Wynter points out, "not all humans are considered to be Man" (qtd. in Rahn 83), characterized as "a 'normalized' human with the privileged position to shape knowledges and determine powers" (ibid. 84). The denial of Black humanity has a long history and, as Frantz Fanon points out, if a Black man "has been made to ask the question whether he is a man, it's because his reality as a man has been challenged" (78). One can argue that a similar challenge to human identity is commonly depicted in cosmic horror fiction: The common theme of cosmic indifference depicts the experience of the Lovecraftian protagonist when he gains forbidden knowledge about the universe that reveals "terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 188) and challenges his identity as a knowing subject. In *Ring Shout*, P. Djèli Clark misses the opportunity to connect the experience of the racialized outsider with this central theme of cosmic horror. Moreover, the story preserves the binary between human and monster and merely shifts the role of the latter from the racialized outsiders to literal alien outsiders.

An arguably more interesting connection between racialized outsiders and the monstrous Old Ones of Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos is depicted in Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*. As David Kumler points out, the cultists who worship the cosmic monsters in Lovecraft's work are often racialized "because, after all, the dehumanizing function of racialization constructs racialized others as ontological impossibilities—human-but-not" (Kumler 57). Like the extraterrestrial Old Ones, "the racialized other's very being constitutes a fundamental challenge to the categories and frameworks that structure reality" (ibid. 57). Accordingly, LaValle's novella makes it clear that Black characters like Tommy Tester are better equipped to deal with these cosmic intrusions on reality. When the white occultist Robert Suydam achieves his goal of opening a door

that leads to one of the Old Ones, namely the Sleeping King called Cthulhu who "waits Outside" (LaValle 125), it is not Suydam who dares to walk through but Tommy: "Robert Suydam watched as Charles Thomas Tester grabbed the two handles and pulled the doors open. Then, to Robert Suydam's horror, Tommy walked through them and shut the library doors behind him" (ibid. 77). Tommy is not as afraid of coming into contact with the cosmic other because, as a racially othered outsider himself, Tommy knows that "[t]here is no inside except as a folding of the outside" (Fisher 11). The "other" only exists relative to the self or, as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock describes it, "human beings define that which is monstrous in relation to themselves [, …] the other, the inhuman, the 'not me'" (*Monstrous* 149). Thus, it makes sense that those who are racially othered and develop the consciousness "of perceiving oneself not merely as a subject, but simultaneously as the object of a racist gaze" (Bartels et al. 176) can better handle a confrontation with a cosmic perspective that questions these binaries and "reject the idea of human value altogether" (Kumler 48).

Accordingly, the novella *The Ballad of Black Tom* makes it explicit that monsters are created, not born. When Tommy learns that his father was murdered by the police, he starts to embrace Suydam's plan of awakening the Sleeping King and thereby ending humanity's reign on Earth. However, unlike Suydam, it is not a future reward that convinces Tommy to side with The Sleeping King but his detachment "from a humancentered perspective [that makes] the cosmically 'horrific' […] no longer primarily a terror but, rather, a potential source of liberation" (ibid. 57):

> Maybe yesterday the promise of a reward in this new world could've tempted Tommy, but today such a thing seemed worthless. Destroy it all, then hand what was left over to Robert Suydam and these gathered goons? What would they do differently? Mankind didn't make messes; mankind was the mess. (LaValle 76)

At the same time, when Tommy takes the name "Black Tom", he starts to embrace the monstrous identity that, as a racialized outsider, was already assigned to him. As he later explains to the police officer Thomas Malone: "Every time I was around them, they acted like I was a monster. So I said goddamnit, I'll be the worst monster you ever saw!" (ibid. 146). As a novella that questions traditional notions of what it means to be human, LaValle also makes explicit intertextual references to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Tommy Tester, like Frankenstein's monster, declares his war on humanity: "'I bear a hell within me,' Black Tom growled. 'And finding myself unsympathized with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me, and then to have sat down and enjoyed the ruin'" (LaValle 130). As this intertextual reference suggests to the reader, like Frankenstein's monster who grew resentful

because of the rejection from society, Tommy was not born a monster, "[he] was made one" (ibid. 130).

However, even though Tommy adopts this role as a monster due to external forces and conditions, he also seems to gain more agency by becoming Black Tom. When Tommy is usually confronted with the white gaze, he has to become "unremarkable, invisible, compliant" (ibid. 12) as a survival technique. Black Tom, on the other hand, does resort to such "useful defenses [like] [l]ooking down at his feet abjectly" (ibid. 45). When Malone meets Black Tom after his transformation, he notes that "[h]is demeanor, even his voice, was greatly changed from when they'd last met" (ibid. 104). In fact, instead of avoiding the white gaze, Black Tom "spoke with open disdain and returned Malone's stare so directly that it was Malone who looked away" (ibid 104). Moreover, Malone is shocked to learn that Black Tom has become "second-in-command, Robert Suydam's sergeant, [… who was] giving orders when the old man wasn't around" (ibid. 101). As Nirmal Puwar points out, "[o]ne thing that monsters do is defy conventional boundaries [and] 'black' bodies in senior positions also defy conventions" (50). Thus, it would make sense that Black Tom's leadership position would further increase his status as a monster. Following this logic, one could argue that Black Tom, by embracing the role as a monster, still adheres to the expectations and perceptions of white people, like earlier instances of him playing the role of "[t]he Clueless Negro" (LaValle 25). However, if one considers the fact that, after Tommy changes his name into Black Tom, he ceases to play any other placating roles, gains more agency and starts to deviate from Suydam's plan, the transformation seems to be more meaningful than that.

Indeed, after the murder of Tommy's father by a private detective, Tommy pledges his allegiance to the cosmic entity Cthulhu because he realizes that, "[a]s unsettling as the 'Outside' might be, the 'Inside,' so to speak, is where the true horror resides" (Kumler 57). Moreover, if one considers the fact that Tommy's transformation into Black Tom comes only after he steps "outside" (cf. LaValle 77), it seems that by going through the door that leads to The Sleeping King, his perspective fundamentally changed. In Lovecraft's stories, "[w]hen the human mind gets in touch with these 'alien elements', the only result possible is, indeed, alienation, in some cases even madness [because] human rationality is not able to bear the Outsideness" (Berruti 376). Moreover, James Kneale states that [t]his outside is often a nonhuman world, where human values are meaningless" (96). In adopting the cosmic perspective that he gained there, Tommy realizes not just that distinctions like racial hierarchies and binaries

between "human" and "non-human" are ultimately meaningless but also humanity's cosmic insignificance, "how little humanity's silly struggles matter to the Sleeping King" (LaValle 57).

As already stated, Tommy as a racialized outsider is better equipped to cope with these revelations than white characters. Robert Suydam, on the other hand, still expects to be rewarded by The Sleeping King and therefore seems to not realize the true meaning of human insignificance. Suydam and the police officer Thomas Malone, like most protagonists in Lovecraft's work, seek out forbidden knowledge but are driven mad in the process because this knowledge destroys their comforting illusions about man's place in the universe. This is what happens to Thomas Malone both in LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* and in Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook". At the end of the novella, when Malone gets only a glimpse of true cosmic monstrosity, "[a] pair of inhuman eyes [that] stared down […] from the heavens, shining like starlight" (LaValle 143), he "fell to the ground, screaming so hideously it made a horse drawing a carriage bolt forward […] and his mouth quivered as if he were about to bawl" (ibid. 143).

One can argue that in this regard H. P. Lovecraft resembles the protagonists of his stories. As the horror writer Thomas Ligotti points out, there is a fundamental contradiction in Lovecraft's writing. On the one hand, Lovecraft was "a perfectionist of cosmic disillusion" (60) and emphasized human insignificance in the face of a vast and indifferent cosmos. But on the other hand, he himself "reveled in protectionist illusions […like] his sentimental immersion in the past" (ibid. 60) and his racialist beliefs, both of which significantly influenced his writing. Accordingly, one can argue that LaValle not only rewrites and challenges "one of Lovecraft's most explicitly racist short stories" (Tyree 144) but thereby also offers a more uncompromising depiction of Lovecraft's own literary philosophy: The idea that "[c]osmic insignificance collapses the human, the less-than-human, and the nonhuman into indistinction" (Kumler 48).

4 Beyond the Placid Island of Ignorance: Forbidden Knowledge in Lovecraft's Works and Contemporary Lovecraftian Fiction

Forbidden knowledge is one of the central themes of Lovecraft's work. The protagonists in his stories, who are predominately scientists, are confronted with forbidden knowledge in various ways: By discovering ancient texts, deciphering cryptic inscriptions, or by witnessing the rituals of secret cults, all of which reveal cosmic truths

and "give them a burden of knowledge not shared by other men" (Dziemianowicz 175). The previous chapter pointed out a notable link between these alienated protagonists and the racialized hybrid as an outsider character in Lovecraft's work. Similarly, the positions of the two opposing groups who are connected to the theme of forbidden knowledge, the scientists and the cultists, are also closely linked with each other and thus deeply ambivalent. Both the scientist and the cultist pursue forbidden knowledge and both belong to a select group that stands out from the ignorant general population. Moreover, despite the fact that Lovecraft viewed "[r]eligion as the product of primitive man's ignorance of the world" (Joshi, *Decline* 100), in his stories, "human science basically operates imperfectly" (Matolcsy 179–80). Indeed, the existence of the Old Ones and their cosmic secrets is widely unknown to the scientific community and "have only been recognized by such counter-cultural and non-scientific trends as represented by Abdul Alhazred's Necronomicon" (ibid. 179), the forbidden book that functions as both grimoire and religious text of the cultists.

However, Lovecraft's cultists are not only depicted as threatening because of their aims to gain forbidden knowledge. After all, both the cultists, "the aliens—the […] Old Ones—and the human protagonists are fired with a desire for knowledge and understanding" (Joshi, *Decline* 109). Indeed, it is a different type of forbidden knowledge that sets the cultists apart from the protagonists of Lovecraft's stories, namely the knowledge about foreign cultural practices. The cultists that worship the Old Ones are inextricably linked to immigrants, foreigners and everyone who does not fit into "his ideal of a purely Anglo-Saxon America" (Joshi, *Decline* 80). As J. M. Tyree puts it, in Lovecraft's work, "[r]esident aliens become the worshippers and handmaidens of actual and literal alien beings" (144). As a strict nativist and xenophobe, Lovecraft saw foreign cultural practices and traditions quite literally as forbidden knowledge, and he therefore demanded from non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants "a complete intellectual and aesthetic amnesia" (Joshi, *Decline* 80). One can argue that the cultists of his stories, with their various daemonic rituals, foreign traditions and belief systems, represent his "intense hatred for mixed and hybrid forms of culture" (Tyree 145).

Moreover, Lovecraft's cultists are depicted as a subversive force that is working against the established order by attempting to help the Old Ones recolonize earth. Stephen Shapiro and Philip Barnard see this fear symbolized in "the tentacle", which is not only part of the characteristic appearance of Lovecraft's most famous alien creature Cthulhu but has become emblematic of the genre Cosmic Horror as a whole: "One may speculate that this device appeals to Lovecraft because his social panic is haptic,

involving a fear of enfolding touch, due to intercultural jumbling" (139–40). This was all the more threatening to him because he viewed art and culture as "man's only anchorage against utter lostness in limitless space" (Joshi, *Decline* 44). Ultimately, both the anxiety about humanity's cosmic insignificance and the fear about cultural loss as well as his anxiety about foreign cultural influences are intertwined in Lovecraft's depiction of forbidden knowledge and the figure of the cultist.

4.1 Forbidden Knowledge in Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu"

H. P. Lovecraft's short story "The Call of Cthulhu" is perhaps his most famous and widely read work: It was not only "the first story to articulate clearly the cosmic perspective he had only suggested in earlier stories" (Dziemianowicz 174) but also the story that first depicts the cosmic entity "Cthulhu" which, through the Cthulhu Mythos, has become largely synonymous with Lovecraftian or cosmic horror. One can argue that it was also the one story that "has led to a literary subculture and a shared mythos employed by Lovecraft's successors" (Zeller 1), including the contemporary Lovecraftian fiction that this thesis is concerned with.

Indeed, many of the most important themes of Lovecraft's work, namely the dangers of gaining forbidden knowledge, humanity's cosmic insignificance and a fear of civilizational collapse, are all introduced already in the first paragraph of this short story. As the story's narrator, the Bostonian anthropologist Francis Thurston, states:

> The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 188)

It is already in this paragraph that Lovecraft connects the position of the scientists with that of the dangerous cultists. Although "[t]he sciences […] have hitherto harmed us little", it is their analytic ability of "piecing together […] dissociated knowledge" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 188) that poses a threat to humanity's state of blissful ignorance.

The short story consists of three separate accounts by characters that crossed paths with the secret Cthulhu cult, all of which are collected and passed on by Thurston: the account of his uncle Professor Angell, of the police officer John Legrasse and of the Norwegian sailor Gustaf Johansen. Therefore, one can argue that structurally, the short story itself is meant to represent the forbidden knowledge that the narrator managed to piece "together of dissociated knowledge […ight opening] up such terrifying vistas of

reality" (ibid. 188) to the reader. Although Thurston vows to "never knowingly supply a link in so hideous a chain" (ibid. 189), it is his uncle and him, both academics, that make this forbidden knowledge discernable to the general public. In Lovecraft's fiction, the scientist functions not only as a sort of gatekeeper for knowledge, someone who is able to piece together the information and then decides to "rid the world of horror it is better off not knowing about" (Joshi, *Decline* 130) but an imperfect one who seeks out forbidden cosmic knowledge, often unwittingly spreads it to the general population, and is thus unable to protect the "placid island of ignorance" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 188).

The effects on the human mind of this unknowable cosmic truths, as in most of Lovecraft's work, are also a major theme of this short story. As S. T. Joshi points out, "there is a well-nigh endless stream of characters in Lovecraft's fiction who, once having gained a certain type of knowledge, can never be the same again" (*Decline* 110). The narrator Francis Thurston, for instance, states that a "single glimpse of forbidden aeons […] chills [him] when [he] think[s] of it and maddens [him] when [he] dream[s] of it" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 188). By emphasizing that it was only a single glimpse, it is implied that a deeper understanding or longer exposure to this knowledge would be unbearable for the human mind. Indeed, when one sailor later in the story directly looks at the cosmic entity Cthulhu, he "went mad, laughing shrilly as he kept on laughing at intervals till death found him one night in the cabin" (ibid. 220).

The sailor Gustaf Johansen states in his description of Cthulhu that "[t]he Thing cannot be described—there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 219). Cthulhu like any "Lovecraftian Anomalous is a disruptive thing that [is feared because it] catalyses systemic change" (Powell 263). As we learn when the police officer John Legrasse interrogates one of the members of the Cthulhu cult, their plan is to "take great Cthulhu from His tomb to revive His subjects and resume His rule of earth." at which point "mankind would […] become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and moral thrown aside" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 205–206). One can argue that the aspect that the white scientists of Lovecraft's stories primarily fear about the Old Ones is their ability to destroy the existing order and, with it, their own privileged position of power and authority over knowledge. Furthermore, with the scientist's goal "to make sense of the world, to bring it under control where possible and to explain uncontrollable phenomena" (Langer 127), the very existence of the unknowable and uncontrollable Old Ones poses a challenge to their authority.

However, as S. T. Joshi points out, the various cults that worship the Old Ones "are grotesquely mistaken as to the true nature of these entities, who really care little about humanity or the earth at large" ("Mythos" 110) and are not gods but mere extraterrestrials. One can therefore argue that Lovecraft did not introduce the Cthulhu legend in this story to explain the actual nature and motivations of the extraterrestrials but to explain the goals of the cultists who project their own desires onto the Old Ones. In this context, one can view the "counter-cultural and non-scientific" (Matolcsy 179) groups like the Cthulhu cultists as challengers of Western science who try to usurp their claim to authority over knowledge. These non-white cultists, as any racialized body that enters an institutional space, "disrupt the naturalised relationship between authority, seniority and the associated competences with white bodies" (Puwar 116).

Like most secret cults in Lovecraft's stories, the Cthulhu cult, whose origin "lay amid the pathless deserts of Arabia" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 206), consists of non-white, often mixed-race, immigrant members and is closely aligned with what Lovecraft viewed as African, Creole as well as Oriental cultures. When the narrator describes a ritual gathering of cultists in the swamps south of New Orleans, he notes that the cult is "infinitely more diabolic than even the blackest of the African voodoo circles" (ibid. 197). The fact that these non-Western cultists possess knowledge about the universe that Western science is so far completely ignorant of poses a direct challenge to a system that prioritizes "the particular type of knowledge produced by colonial powers, at the expense of indigenous and colonized methods of knowledge production" (Langer 83). Indeed, it is implied that the Cthulhu cult's extent of knowledge causes significant anxiety to the Western scientists. This becomes especially clear when it is stated that the knowledge of the cultists "disclosed an astonishing degree of cosmic imagination among such half-castes and pariahs as might be least expected to possess it" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 200). One can argue that the forbidden knowledge presented in Lovecraft's fiction is not only forbidden because of its content but also because, since it was discerned by supposedly primitive cultures, it destabilizes Western self-perception.

In Lovecraft's stories, the figures that aim to preserve or restore order are not only scientists or governments who try to suppress the spread of forbidden knowledge to the public but also another form of institutional power, namely the police. In "The Call of Cthulhu", for instance, a meeting of the Cthulhu cult near New Orleans is broken up by Inspector Legrasse and the local police, after which several worshippers were shot, "[o]nly two of the prisoners were found sane enough to be hanged, and the rest were committed to various institutions" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 204). One can argue

that the disproportionate use of violence against a largely unarmed group of worshippers is reminiscent of the police killings of Black men. Indeed, the observations of Legrasse before and after the assault on the premise reveal an emphasis on the worshipper's race and cultural foreignness. He notes that "the prisoners all proved to be men of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type […] and a sprinkling of negroes and mulattoes, largely West Indians or Brava Portuguese from the Cape Verde Islands, gave a colouring of voodooism to the heterogeneous cult" (ibid. 203). Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on sounds and language. As the narrator states, "[t]here are vocal qualities peculiar to men, and vocal qualities peculiar to beasts; and it is terrible to hear the one when the source should yield the other" (ibid. 202). Lovecraft emphasizes the cult's otherness not only by describing how they "whipped themselves to daemoniac heights by howls and squawking ecstasies" (ibid.) but also having them speak in a fictional language with phrases like "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn" (ibid. 200). As Wouter J. Hanegraaff points out, "'unspeakable' words spoken by intelligent beings evoke associations with the sub-human, barbarous, archaic, irrational and demonic 'other'" (100).

One can argue that the narrator's observation and interpretation of the cultists' language and behavior, especially their cultural practices and rituals, reveal his viewpoint from a Western gaze, "a hegemonic Eurocentric perspective […] that subjectifies and objectifies all that it sees in its own image, through its own colored lenses, and from its own position of power" (Burney 26). Moreover, this Western gaze blends many different cultures, from the "deserts of Arabia" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 206) to what Lovecraft calls a tribe "of degenerate Esquimaux" (ibid. 199), into one single "Other" represented by the Cthulhu cult. This points to the fact that, as Edward Said argues, "such locales, regions, geographical sectors as 'Orient' and 'Occident' are man-made" (Said 5) and their identities constructed based on the observer's own philosophical system. Indeed, as shown in the following description, the portrayal of the supposedly Eastern cult largely adheres to Western conceptions about the Orient that Edward Said identified in his seminal work *Orientalism*:

> In a natural glade of the swamp stood a grassy island of perhaps an acre's extent, clear of trees and tolerably dry. On this now leaped and twisted a more indescribable horde of human abnormality than any but a Sime or an Angarola could paint. Void of clothing, this hybrid spawn were braying, bellowing, and writhing about a monstrous ring-shaped bonfire […] (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 202).

Here, the cultists, conforming to the Orientalist perception of the East, are presented "as fanatical, irrational, superstitious and cruel" (Schirato 46). On the other hand, the

Western police officers and scientist, who try to dispel the chaos that these groups spread, are contrasted with this depiction, and portrayed as rational and virtuous. When the policemen, for instance, first see the ritual of the cult and briefly recoil in fear, it is emphasized that to them, "[d]uty came first; and although there must have been nearly a hundred mongrel celebrants in the throng, the police relied on their firearms and plunged determinedly into the nauseous rout" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 203).

Furthermore, at several points in the story, it is emphasized that the police officers and scientists gain knowledge about the cult by conducting an "investigation of the utmost thoroughness" (ibid. 187) and act "with scientific minuteness" (ibid. 192). One can argue that the act of observation itself gives the scientists and police officers power over the cultists and makes the latter more vulnerable. As Edward Said points out: "The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny; [… t]o have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it" (32). Indeed, since the cultist are either hanged or committed to institutions, their perspective is silenced and all, except for one prisoner who is interrogated, remain voiceless throughout the story. And while the encounter between the two groups leads to the Cthulhu cult being dispersed and its members killed or imprisoned, the protagonist Francis Thurston expects that this "discovery would make [him] an anthropologist of note" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 189).

According to Edward Said, "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate" (3). The depiction of the rational and virtuous Western scientist in opposition to the irrational and cruel Eastern cultist can therefore be understood as a broader cultural conflict. As already stated, "Lovecraft felt an intense hatred for mixed and hybrid forms of culture" (Tyree 145) which also manifested in his fiction, often more ambivalently than his racialist beliefs. As S. T. Joshi points out, "Lovecraft's views on cultural differences between the races is a little more interesting that his rants about biological inferiority, and need to be studied in detail" (*Decline* 77). Indeed, Lovecraft saw art and culture not only as "man's only anchorage against utter lostness in limitless space" (ibid. 44) but also viewed foreign cultural influences, and what he "perceived [as] decadence […] in aesthetics" (ibid. 135), as the reasons for and symptoms of the decline of the Western civilization. Therefore, one can argue that art and culture play a significant role in the fears that inform Lovecraftian horror.

Accordingly, in "The Call of Cthulhu", it is not the scientists that are inherently perceptive of forbidden knowledge but the artists. As one of the Cthulhu cult members

who was taken as a prisoner explains about the Old Ones, they have gone "inside the earth and under the sea; but their dead bodies had told their secrets in dreams to the first men, who formed a cult which had never died" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 204). Thus, when Cthulhu is about to wake up again in the short story, there are worldwide reports of people having strange dreams and succumbing to madness. However, as Professor Angell observes, artists and poets are much more susceptible to these dreams than the general population:

> Average people in society and business—New England's traditional "salt of the earth"—gave an almost completely negative result […]. Scientific men were little more affected, though four cases of vague description suggest fugitive glimpses of strange landscapes, and in one case there is mentioned a dread of something abnormal. It was from the artists and poets that the pertinent answers came, and I know that panic would have broken loose had they been able to compare notes. (ibid. 194)

Indeed, as the protagonist Francis Thurston finds out as he continuous the investigation of his uncle, all over the world "poets and artists had begun to dream of a strange, dank Cyclopean city" (ibid. 213). Moreover, it was through the young art student Henry Anthony Wilcox who, after having a strange dream, modelled a clay sculpture of Cthulhu that Professor Angell first was confronted with the forbidden knowledge which unfolded the events of the short story. In Lovecraft's fiction, it is art and culture that are particularly vulnerable to subversive forces that threaten the existing order, which also corresponds with Lovecraft's own "fear of cultural miscegenation and its consequence in social degeneration" (Shapiro and Barnard 137).

Lovecraft's stories engage with knowledge in various ways: While the seeking of forbidden knowledge poses significant risks, for the Western scientist, "knowledge of the other [is essential] to ease and to order external and internal chaos" (Morrison 53). Furthermore, it is through art, "through tradition, through intimate communicative forms legends, narratives, and beliefs […] that cosmic truths are revealed to Lovecraft's characters" (Evans 123). Thus, culture also takes on an ambivalent role: Traditional knowledge and cultural practices of non-white and non-Western people are depicted based on Orientalist stereotypes and depicted as corrupting and dangerous. However, one can argue that the depiction of non-Western cultists having extensive knowledge about long existing phenomena that Western scientists have been completely unaware of reinforces the idea "that indigenous and other colonized systems of knowledge are not only valid but are, at times, more scientifically sound than is Western scientific thought" (Langer 9).

4.2   Forbidden Knowledge in Contemporary Lovecraftian Fiction

As in most works in the genre cosmic horror, forbidden knowledge is a significant theme in the contemporary Lovecraftian works that were selected for this thesis. Like in Lovecraft's stories, the pursuit of such knowledge functions as the link between two important groups in these stories, the scientists and the cultists. However, instead of depicting them as two opposing forces, where the scientist is associated with Western pragmatism as well as the preservation of order and the cultist with the subversion of it through an occultism that is linked to various non-Western traditions, contemporary Lovecraftian fiction often merges the two roles. As already stated, in Lovecraft's stories, non-Western systems of knowledge pose a challenge to Western science. This idea is more explicitly depicted in subversive Lovecraftian fiction which not only emphasize how these systems of knowledge "challenge the paradigm of Western science, progress and the scientific method as the only legitimate method of understanding the world" (Langer 132) but also often attribute the affinity for occultism and mysticism to the Western scientist or questions the usefulness of such distinctions altogether. Both Lovecraft and authors of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction who want to challenge the racial politics of his stories portray the role of art and culture ambivalently, not only as "man's only anchorage against utter lostness in limitless space" (Joshi, *Decline* 44) but also as potentially dangerous and corrupting to society.

4.2.1   Depictions of the Scientist and the Cultist: The Act of Naming, Knowledge Hierarchies and Cultural Hybridity

As already established, the scientists as Lovecraft's common "protagonists are fired with a desire for knowledge and understanding" (Joshi, *Decline* 109). In their aims "to make sense of the world, to bring it under control where possible and to explain uncontrollable phenomena" (Langer 127), they are confronted with forbidden knowledge that not only threatens their own sanity but also mankind's continuing "rule of earth" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 205). In their attempts to censor such dangerous knowledge and to thwart the cultists' plans of reestablishing the Old Ones as rulers of earth they function not only as gatekeepers of knowledge but also as protectors of the established order. Indeed, one can argue that the figure of the scientist in cosmic horror fiction is closely connected to Lovecraft's own hierarchical views on race and society.

   Therefore, it makes sense that authors of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction who want to highlight these problematic genre conventions would also emphasize these

characteristics in the scientist characters of their own stories. In Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country*, for instance, the portrayal of science and scientists is clearly based on the strictly hierarchical Baconian system that emphasizes "the mastery of nature through science […] in conformance with God's plan" (LaFreniere 141). This conception of science is represented in the novel through a secret cult called the Adamite Order of the Ancient Dawn. Indeed, as becomes clear when Atticus calls the magicians, the cult objects to this categorization because they strictly view themselves as an organization of scientists. The cult leader Samuel Braithwhite reacts angrily: "'That's a vulgar word,' he said. Looking pointedly at Atticus: 'A simple man's word. We're not magicians. We're scientists. Philosophers of nature'" (Ruff 85). Thus, the novel merges the two usually opposing factions, cultists and scientists, into one group. This becomes especially clear in the depiction of the cult's rituals which Atticus witnesses at several points in the novel. Instead of the typical occult ritual as depicted in Lovecraft's work, they are depicted as scientific experiments in *Lovecraft Country*. As Atticus observes about the set-up of one such ritual at the beginning of the novel, "the series of circles [on the floor] reminded him of a circuit diagram […] to admit some force or energy from Elsewhere" (ibid. 99). Moreover, the cultists themselves look "more mundane than wizardly, like a Harvard professor who'd misplaced his mortarboard" (ibid. 100)

As the leader Samuel Braithwhite explains, the members of his own lodge, "The Sons of Adam", see themselves as descendants of Adam, the first man. When Samuel tells Atticus the history of the cult, he especially emphasizes Adam's act of naming in the Book of Genesis as the group's founding mythos:

> "And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof." […] [T]his act of naming is much more than a simple matter of picking labels. Adam is sharing in the creation, assigning each creature its final form and its station in the hierarchy of nature." (ibid. 84)

In his concept of "Adam's state", Walter Benjamin describes this Adamic act of naming as "a mournful and violent distancing from the existence of the named objects [which] objectifies the world [and] exercises dominion over nature, forcing upon it an interpretation that speaks only about the subject" (Sestigiani 3). Therefore, in accordance with the Baconian system, to The Sons of Adam, nature is not only a strictly hierarchical system but mankind is separate from it, the subject that observes and interprets the object. The scientists, and Adam as the first scientist, are "guided and empowered by divine inspiration from God himself" (Schoch 2) to observe nature, to name each part of his creation and to bring order and establish a hierarchy.

Furthermore, one can argue that Adam not only represents the figure of the Western scientist, the "universal human [… who] embodies the age of reason, culture and science over and above emotion, nature and myth" (Puwar 56). But as such, he also represents the first white man. As Mariusz Woźniak points out, by assigning names and places in a hierarchy, "[Adam] becomes the silent standard by which the world should be organized – he can decide on how the world is perceived, who occupies what place in it, and how creatures should behave" (101). As already established, not everyone who is human is considered a man, which Sylvia Winter defines as "a 'normalized' human with the privileged position to shape knowledges and determine powers" (Rahn 85). And according to this white supremacist cult that views itself as the successor of the first man, Black people like Atticus and his family do not possess this privilege. In fact, for Samuel Braithwhite and The Sons of Adam, the very existence of Black people in the same space as themselves is a sign that the original hierarchy is no longer intact:

> "[…] At the dawn of time, just for a moment, everything is where and as it should be, from God to man to woman down to the lowliest wriggling creature." He looked at Atticus. "And then entropy sets to work, as it will. Paradise is lost; Babel and the Flood bring confusion and disorder; what was an elegant hierarchy becomes a mess of tribes and nations. […]" (Ruff 84)

One can argue that by making Braithwhite refer to "Babel", Matt Ruff uses an intertextual reference to Lovecraft's short story "The Horror at Red Hook" and the narrator's description of New York's immigrant population as "a babel of sound and filth" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 154). Thus, he suggests that, like Lovecraft himself, the character Samuel Braithwhite views social change and foreign cultural influences as the reasons for the decline of Western civilization. This is further emphasized when Braithwhite points to "the age of kings […] giving way to the age of the common man" as one of the reasons why the cult was founded and states that he "can only imagine [the founder's] horror today, after a hundred and eighty years of the common man" (Ruff 86). For Braithwhite, the rise of democracy directly led to "Babel and the Flood" (Ruff 84), or in Lovecraft's words, the "rashly and idealistically admitted *flood* of alien, degenerate, and inassimilable immigrants [as] the supreme calamity of the western world" (Lovecraft qtd. in Joshi, *Decline* 237; emphasis added). As Atticus realizes, when The Sons of Adam want "to challenge entropy" (Ruff 85) and reestablish the old order, he and his family would belong "to the lowliest wriggling creature[s]" (ibid. 84).

Furthermore, the act of naming that is the foundation of the cult is also closely connected to colonial control: In colonial encounters, language is "often employed as a political, military, and economic resource" (Meissner 164) and "the dynamic of naming becomes a primary colonizing process because it appropriates, defines and captures the

place in language" (Ashcroft et al., *Key* 165). This idea of language as a tool for power and control is depicted in the novel through the "language of Adam", a language that provides seemingly magical abilities to the speaker. Henry Winthrop, the son of one of the leaders of the cult, explains to Atticus, "when you invoke the language of Adam, you're addressing nature" (Ruff 295). The idea of literacy and language as cultural capital, which in Lovecraftian novels is connected to magical power, will be more closely examined in the next subchapter. However, nature like the cosmos itself, is indifferent to humanity, "nature doesn't care, it just does what it's told" (ibid.).

This becomes especially clear when Henry Winthrop tells Atticus how his mother was put in a wheelchair and died: As he explains, she used the language of Adam and "asked nature for the power to walk between worlds, and nature gave her legs of stone" (ibid.). And when "[s]he asked nature to give her her legs back; nature gave her legs [but] more than her heart or her nervous system could handle" (ibid. 296). This incident not only puts into question the beliefs of The Sons of Adam that nature can be controlled by the scientist, but also makes clear who the group regards as scientists and who it does not. Because as Henry points out, unlike his father Hiram Winthrop and Samuel Braithwhite who view themselves as scientists and natural philosophers, his mother "was a witch" (ibid. 295). As Nirmal Puwar points out, like Black bodies, "women's bodies have been expelled from the public realm, as being contrary to the place of reason" (Puwar 26). Therefore, although the knowledge of Henry's mother concerns the same subject matter and involves the same methods as the men of the lodge who are regarded as "students of nature" (Ruff 257), from the cult's viewpoint she "believed in gods, and miracles, and magic" (ibid. 295).

Indeed, it seems that to members of the group the worst insult is to be called a wizard. This becomes clear when Caleb, the son of Samuel Braithwhite, publicly criticizes his then dead father during a gathering of the cult: "He had a scientist's mind, a modern mind, but his heart was old. It was an alchemist's heart. A wizard's heart." (Ruff 254). In this speech, the obvious contradiction of a secret cult that values rationality above all but bases its origins on a biblical story is also directly addressed by Caleb: "Does that sound like a scientific organization to you? Because I'll tell you what it sounds like to me: a joke" (ibid. 255). Moreover, one can argue that the fact that Henry's mother, a witch, was more knowledgeable than the self-described scientists not only challenges the distinction between science and other forms of knowledge production but also this hierarchy in which the former is seen as the pursuit of truth while "speak[ing] of the supernatural [is] a sign of simplemindedness" (ibid. 294).

As already suggested, the white supremacist Adamite Order of the Ancient Dawn and its most prominent lodge, The Sons of Adam, exclude both women and non-white people from the membership in their group. Accordingly, throughout the novel, it is emphasized that the headquarter of the lodge in a small town called Ardham, an intertextual reference to the city of Arkham in Lovecraft's work, is an exclusively white place. When Atticus, George and Letitia visit the manor of the lodge, which looks like "a rustic hotel unlikely to ever be listed in The Safe Negro Travel Guide" (ibid. 61), they notice that all the walls in the house "were hung with dramatic nature scenes in which white people hunted, rode horses, or simply stood around looking awed by the landscape" (ibid.). The mansion is a depiction of what Sara Ahmed describes as "[s]paces [that] acquire the 'skin' of the bodies that inhabit them" (157). Indeed, when Atticus takes a "census of the lodge membership from his window", it becomes clear that the group of scientists themselves consists exclusively of "[c]aucasian men, ranging in age from fifty to at least seventy" (Ruff 75).

However, unlike in Lovecraft's fiction where secret societies are depicted as strictly countercultural, the novel makes clear that The Sons of Adam represent the broader American society in this regard. This becomes especially clear during a later chapter that focusses on Atticus's aunt Hippolyta whose "interests [extend] primarily to science and natural history" (ibid.12). As a Black woman, she is prohibited from accessing academic knowledge, both as a professional path and as her personal interest. Similar to Wilbur Whateley in Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror" who, after being prohibited from attending university, tries to gain access to the forbidden academic knowledge as an amateur scholar, Hippolyta plans to become an astronomer without a college degree. However, even this path is closed to her "when she confided her ambition to a guide at the Hayden Planetarium [and] he dismissed it with four simple words: 'You are a Negress'" (Ruff 183).

This commonality between the white supremacist cult and the American scientific community is further emphasized when Hippolyta recalls a childhood experience where she learned about the discovery of a new planet and wrote a letter to the observatory, advocating for the planet to be called Pluto:

> When she saw what the name was, she let out a whoop that got her shushed by two librarians. But her elation was short-lived. The newspaper article gave credit for the name not to Hippolyta Green of Harlem, but to Venetia Burney of Oxford, England. […] Venetia Burney wasn't just any girl. Her great-uncle Henry Madan was the Eton College professor who'd named the moons of Mars, and her grandfather Falconer Madan was the former head of Oxford's Bodleian Library" (ibid. 180)

In accordance with the beliefs of The Sons of Adam, Hippolyta as a Black woman is excluded from the privileged position to act as a scientist, to give names and "to shape knowledges and determine powers" (Rahn 85). The novel challenges this notion in various ways. On the one hand, through the figure of Atticus who, as a descendant of Titus Braithwhite, is able to speak the language of Adam and thereby disproves the significance of whiteness. On the other hand, the novel repeatedly puts into question the self-described role of the natural philosophers of the cult as seekers of truth. As Caleb Braithwhite, who previously used Atticus to stage a coup against his father, observes about The Sons of Adam, they are mostly driven by the desire for power:

> Alchemists, all toiling away in your little claques. Jealous of each other. Keeping secrets from each other. When you're not busy plotting, you waste most of your time reinventing the wheel, rediscovering esoteric wisdom that ought to be common knowledge by now. And if you do learn something new? You hoard it. Lock it away, up here. (Ruff 255)

This idea is perhaps most clearly conveyed when Hippolyta finds the coordinates and portal to the planet of another solar system in the house that formerly belonged to Hiram Winthrop, one of the most prominent cultists. When she uses the portal and travels to this planet, she meets a Black woman called Ida, a former maid of the Winthrops, who was lock up there with other members of his staff by Hiram. Since Ida is understandably resentful of Hiram, she challenges him on his own domain and tries to discover and name the planets of the solar system before he has the chance to do it: "Winthrop was on the trail of the fifth one," Ida said. "I used his notes to find it. Named it Ida, to spite him. The sixth one though—Pearl—she was all mine" (ibid. 203). However, while Ida takes over and continuous his colonizing ambitions, unbeknownst to her, Hiram died years ago, killed by his scientist compatriot and fellow cult member Samuel Braithwhite in a ploy to become the leader of the lodge. While the white scientists fight for power and recognition, the accomplishments of Black people remain locked away and unnoticed.

Like in *Lovecraft Country*, in P. Djèli Clark's novella *Ring Shout*, the role of the common Lovecraftian cultists is assigned to a white supremacist organization, in this case the Ku Klux Klan. With its organization as a secret society with distinctive costumes and titles as well as violent rituals and practices it neatly fits Lovecraft's own portrayal of secret cults while simultaneously challenging the connection of these groups with the cultures of non-white or non-Western people. Their role will be examined more extensively in the course of this chapter. However, the novella's inclusion of the common Lovecraftian scientist character, who as the protagonist is usually in direct opposition to the cultist, here is constructed more ambivalently than the

blend of scientist and cultist into one villain that we see in *Lovecraft Country*. Indeed, one can argue that while *Lovecraft Country* questions the role of Western scientists as rational seekers of truth and challenges the dismissal of traditional methods of knowledge-production, the novella *Ring Shout* aims to resolve these oppositions "through [a] hybridity that is productive and allows for synthesis" (Langer 127).

This hybridity is perhaps most clearly embodied in the character of Molly Hogan who is described as "something of a scientist" (Clark 34). She, like the novella's protagonist Maryse, is part of a group of black resistance fighters in the town of Macon who try to end the secret demonic practices of the Klan. Like Hippolyta in *Lovecraft Country*, Molly is self-educated because there "wasn't no school for freed people in Choctaw country in Oklahoma" (ibid. 47). And although she does not possess the ability called "The Sight" that allows Maryse and other resistance fighters to distinguish the human members of the Ku Klux Klan from the demonic Ku Kluxes, she plays a central role in the group's aim to gain a better understanding of the demons. Indeed, Maryse and her friends regularly bring back the bodies of dead Ku Kluxes so that Molly can perform an autopsy while using a contraption that recreates the effect of The Sight and "allows her to see like [them]–or something close" (ibid. 46).

Furthermore, even though Molly herself is a scientist and, according to Maryse, "a godless atheist" (ibid. 47), it is emphasized that she does not dismiss religion and spirituality. In fact, when she tries to understand the origin of the Ku Kluxes, she bases her scientific assumptions on the knowledge of her parents: "[M]y mother learned the old religion from those that refused the missionaries. Said they belief in three worlds– where we live, an Above world, and a Below world, full of other beings" (Clark 47). Indeed, it seems that the whole organization of the resistance fighters is structured around a cultural hybridity that combines a Western scientific perspective with traditional knowledge and spirituality in which Molly embodies the former. The other part is occupied by the group's unofficial leader, the Gullah woman Nana Jean, who acts not only as a spiritual mentor of the resistance group but also aids their fight by brewing a type of potion that is called "Mama's Water".

This combination of different but equal forms of culture and knowledge can be viewed as what Homi K. Bhabha describes as "a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (4). Moreover, this relationship is also represented by the way that the camp of the group is structured. As Maryse describes the camp, "[t]hey brew up Mama's water in the other barn, and use this one for experimenting" (Clark 47). One can argue that Molly, Nana Jean and the whole

group in Macon represent a "form of hybridity that is in itself productive and […] allows for the emergence of new, symbiotic formations that bear the potential for change" (Rahn 93). Furthermore, it disrupts the colonialist legacy which viewed Western science "as the only valid knowledge [whereas] indigenous epistemologies were relegated to the status of primitive superstitions or [were] destroyed (Mendoza 114). This becomes especially clear at the end of the novella when the group fights against the Ku Kluxes as well as the alien invaders who control them. In the final fight against the novella's villains, the resistance group uses "[a] special concoction Molly helped brew: part explosives and pure Mama's Water" (Clark 157).

Furthermore, it is also significant who exactly the resistance group is fighting against, namely the extraterrestrial invaders called "The Collective" who not only view humans as "just meat" (ibid. 84) but whose civilization is organized in an explicitly hierarchical manner. When Maryse asks the group's leader, Butcher Clyde if they and the demonic Ku Kluxes belong to the same group, he responds that it would be "[l]ike comparing you to a dog" (ibid. 84) and clarifies: "'Master might be a bit much. Think of us more like' […] 'management'" (ibid.). Moreover, when talking about Maryse, he refers to her as "[t]he lesser of God's creatures" (ibid. 81). However, it is not clear whether this rhetoric is merely part of the role that he plays in order to appeal to his white supremacist audience or representative of the actual worldview of The Collective. Nonetheless, the group's aim is not only to take over earth but also "to merge [humanity] to [their] great collective" (ibid. 81) with the implication that humanity's various cultures and traditions will be dissolved. Their idea of a great collective represents what Jessica Langer describes as a traumatic and destructive hybridity, "a rigid form imposed on colonized people by their colonizers, and […] a source of limitation rather than freedom" (Langer 107). Instead of the equal "harmonious union" (Clark 83) that the collective promises and that is represented by the resistance fighters, Butcher Clyde makes it clear that "[p]utting an end to [humanity's] strife and bickering" (ibid.) would presuppose the same condition that Lovecraft demanded from immigrants to the United States: "a complete intellectual and aesthetic amnesia" (Joshi, *Decline* 80).

4.2.2   The Sight: Traditional Knowledge, Literacy and Liminal Perspectives

With Molly Hogan as the most significant scientist character, P. Djèli Clark's *Ring Shout* depicts Western science as a useful instrument that allows for a better understanding of the universe and could also assist in the struggle of Black people for systemic change. However, as already established, the novella emphasizes that Western

science offers only one of many possible perspectives. Furthermore, the novella does not ignore the fact that "Western scientific knowledge has been co-constituted with colonialism" (Seth 374) and acknowledged how "[m]edical officials and psychologists played an integral role in [its] oppressive and interrogative practices" (ibid. 373).

In the novella, this aspect of Western science is embodied in the figure of the so-called "Night Doctors". Based on the African American folklore about mysterious doctors that would abduct and dissect the dead bodies of slaves in the night, the Night Doctors in *Ring Shout* are portrayed as another group of Lovecraftian extraterrestrials. And as it is common in Lovecraftian stories, it turns out that these aliens have been secretly visiting earth for thousands of years and "were the first practitioners of hepatoscopy, who taught it to the Babylonians and the priestesses of Saturn" (Clark 130). They, like Adam in *Lovecraft Country*, can be viewed as the first scientists. Furthermore, like Lovecraft's Old Ones who colonized earth and secretly influenced humanity's progress, the Night Doctors embody the "idea that science and technology were among the gifts that Western imperial powers brought to their colonies" (Seth 373). But unlike the Old Ones in Lovecraft's stories who are mostly uninterested in humanity, the Night Doctors and The Collective are very much intrigued by human behavior. Whereas The Collective feeds on human hate, thus targeting the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan, the Night Doctors "stole away slaves [… b]ecause misery fascinated them" (Clark 129). Moreover, like Lovecraft's scientist characters, they are driven by a desire to uncover secret knowledge, in this case the supressed trauma of black people like Maryse. The depiction of historical oppression and trauma in the novella *Ring Shout* will be more extensively discussed in the following chapter that is focussed on the depiction of the Lovecraftian themes trauma and history.

However, it is significant that, like in Lovecraft's work, Western science has been completely ignorant of the existence of beings like the Nigh Doctors, whereas this knowledge was discerned and orally passed on as folklore by African American slaves. Even before Maryse seeks out and finds the Night Doctors, Nana Jean already confirms their existence: "The Gullah woman twists up her lips. 'Night Doctors, dem ain a story. Disya tale true.'" (Clark 119). Like in Lovecraft's work, the long coexistence of humanity with extraterrestrials on earth has "only been recognized by […] counter-cultural and non-scientific" groups (ibid. 179), proving that "science basically operates imperfectly" (Matolcsy 179–80). *Ring Shout* further emphasize this point by making it clear that the African American slaves' understanding of the cosmos is more accurate than that of Western scientists. In *Ring Shout*, the main characters' enslaved ancestors

"believe[d] in three worlds—where we live, an Above world, and a Below world, full of other beings" (Clark 47). And as it turns out during the novella, this conception is true: "there's [other universes] stacked beside us like sheets of paper" (ibid.) through which beings like The Collective and the Night Doctors crossed over.

Moreover, the white population of the United States have also been ignorant of the true nature of the Ku Klux Klan who in the novella "sold their souls to the evil powers" (ibid. 31). And while the white population thought that this idea was "just Negro superstition […,] some of them ex-slaves could see [t]hat Forrest and those hateful rebels had become […] Monsters, like these Ku Kluxes" (ibid.). At the same time, the white population remains ignorant of this danger because "[e]urocentrism, hegemony and colonialism (re-)produce 'legitimate' knowledge and knowers in the Western world" (Almeida 79), and since Black people are seen as illegitimate knowers, their knowledge is simply dismissed as "Negro superstition" (Clark 31). Likewise, since deviations from Standard English are seen as an illegitimate language, it "renders the voices of the dispossessed and marginalized group members mute" (Ladson-Billings 265). One can argue that *Ring Shout* further subverts this by writing most of the dialogue of the novella in African American Vernacular English, which Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin terms "english" as opposed to the "English" that is viewed as legitimate. Moreover, by adopting the strategy of appropriation, Nana Jean, the authority of such traditional knowledge, speaks in untranslated Gullah. Therefore, the white readers of the novella, just like Thomas Malone in *The Ballad of Black Tom* who wants to gain the secret knowledge of New York's immigrant population but never bothered to learn "how to speak with these people" (LaValle 107), are not catered to and instead encouraged to expand their worldview.

Furthermore, one can argue that in *Ring Shout*, white Americans are assigned the role of the broader population in Lovecraft's work who remain in their "placid island of ignorance" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 188) because the forbidden knowledge would challenge their identity. However, unlike the common Lovecraftian scientists or the scientist-cultists in *Lovecraft Country*, the Black resistance fighters of Macon do not try to try to keep that knowledge secret, but quite the opposite, want to make the white population aware of this threat. This becomes especially clear when in the end of the novella a white woman who witnessed the final battle is afterwards able to see the true nature of the Ku Kluxes: "'They was monsters! I seen them! I seen them!' Chef and I look at each other, then answer back, ''Bout damn time!'" (Clark 175). This idea of a unique Black American perspective, which the historian David Levering Lewis based

on Du Bois's concept of double consciousness describes as a "'second sight in this American world,' an intuitive faculty enabling him/her to see and say things about American society that possessed heightened moral validity." (Lewis 281), is depicted in the novella as an ability that is fittingly termed "The Sight". Although not every Black character in *Ring Shout* possesses this ability and Molly suggests that its origin "is a question for science" (Clark 50), it becomes clear that The Sight also represents the ability to perceive racial injustice. Sadie points out that white people "can't see what's right under they noses", or according to Nana Jean, "[d]ey jes ain wahn fuh see" (ibid). Indeed, one can argue that these perspectives that The Sight offers "do not present something new" (Almeida 91), since the brutal actions of the Ku Klux Klan are visible to everybody. Instead, they "present something familiar from a different angle" (ibid.), revealing the monstrous nature of these actions.

Moreover, as already stated in the analysis of the figure of the racialized outsider in *The Ballad of Black Tom*, white people are more easily driven mad by forbidden knowledge that destroys their comforting illusions. One can argue that in *Ring Shout*, The Sight destroys the protectionist illusions which the white population holds about their own identity as white Americans. As Maryse's friend Chef describes it, "knowing we on the bottom and they set above us" (Clark 43) is fundamental to their identity. Seeing the members of the Ku Klux Klan as demons, as Ku Kluxes, would reveal that such narratives about white supremacy are baseless and only attempts by outside forces to increase their hatred in order to manipulate them. On the other hand, the Black characters in the novella represent what Homi Bhabha refers to as the "third space" of diasporic individuals where "new selfhoods are formed and articulated as alternatives to unitary conceptualizations of national identity" (Hout 333). They practice religious African traditions like the titular Ring Shout, embrace both traditional knowledge and Western science, combine different diasporic cultures and show a wide variety of connections, attachments, and identifications to places. The existence of these new selfhoods becomes especially clear when the community in Macon discusses their different relationships to their African heritage and the United States:

> "And that's why Mr. Garvey says the Negro has to go back to Africa, to claim what's ours." […] Sadie seems like she only half listening, but then declares, "I say we go to Europe. See how they like getting carved up—beat up as they is after the war." […] "I got a home right here," Chef says, lighting a Chesterfield. "Bled and fought for it. Still fighting. I ain't going nowhere." (Clark 59)

Furthermore, when they later discuss humanity's African origin, Sadie ridicules the idea that white individuals are superior to people of other racial or ethnic backgrounds in the

United States by jokingly questioning their claim to distinction: "This whole time, they putting on and acting high and mighty! But they just niggers who stayed in the cold too long! Bet that's why they so mean" (ibid. 61). With their diasporic hybrid identities, they can see the United States "as a culture made up of multiple cultural identities, [because] this multiplicity exists within the individual" (Ramone 114). They are aware that their cultural identities as well as their knowledge are not fixed but instead a "process of continual adaptation and recombination from many available resources" (Reid 308). This leads to a more flexible but ultimately more stable identity which, like Lovecraft's conception about art and tradition, can work as an "anchorage against utter lostness in limitless space" (Joshi, *Decline* 44) and makes them less vulnerable to the influence of The Collective.

A similar idea is expressed in Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country*: Atticus is specifically targeted by Samuel Braithwhite and his son Caleb because of his liminal position as a Black man and descendant of the lodge's founder Titus Braithwhite. However, whereas Samuel thinks that Atticus's hybridity makes his power "[d]iluted […] and also tainted somewhat" (Ruff 86), Caleb views his unique perspective as something useful that can be exploited. When Caleb wants to find the son of Hiram Winthrop in order to get one of his spell books, he tells Atticus that "those 'special Negro powers' […] might actually exist in this case" (ibid. 277). Since Hiram ran away with a Black woman and he and his new family have consequently been the target of racist harassment, Caleb hopes that Atticus's own experience with this would help him locate the family and gain their confidence. As becomes clear throughout the story, this was also the reason that Caleb gave Ruby the elixir that turns her into a white woman: to have "[s]omeone who can be white or colored […] as the need arises" (Ruff 261).

However, the story makes it also clear that Atticus's liminal position is not just something to be exploited but, as in the other Lovecraftian novels, can produce a more stable identity that is also more resistant against the harmful effects of forbidden knowledge. This becomes especially clear when Atticus is forced by Samuel Braithwhite to participate in one of the cult's rituals. During the ritual when he is exposed to "the unfiltered light of creation" (ibid. 102), he is confronted with humanity's insignificance on a cosmic scale and in the process is threatened to be "[s]tripped of identity, of everything that made him Atticus: not just unmanned, but un-named" (ibid.). However, since "[Atticus] liked who and what he was […] and] [i]t was god's other creatures he occasionally had problems with" (ibid.), he is able to resist this force and his identity remains intact, "[a] veil of protective darkness dropped over

Atticus's eyes, shielding him from the light that otherwise would have burned him where he stood" (ibid. 103). The Sons of Adam, on the other hand, are left as "ashen figures, caught in poses of terror [… and] [s]urrendering to entropy, the Antenauts crumbled into piles of white dust" (ibid.). One can argue that, in contrast to Lovecraft's views, the novel emphasizes that hybridity, like interracial relationships and foreign cultural influences, are not the reasons for the decline of civilization and the spread of entropy but, on the contrary, can make a society and one's own identity more cohesive.

Although Black characters like Atticus in *Lovecraft Country* and the resistance fighters in *Ring Shout* possess and use magical abilities, these stories also make it clear that non-Western cultures are not, as Lovecraft's fiction suggests, closely linked to the pursuit of occult knowledge and forbidden powers. Instead, as already established, magic is portrayed as an extension of white privilege, and the pursuit of forbidden occult knowledge is depicted as a strategy to secure and enhance this privileged position. As Ruby notices about the cultists when she witnesses a meeting of The Sons of Adam, "even the talk of magic wasn't that peculiar, for most of them spoke of it as they would of money, or politics, or any other means of bending the world to their will" (ibid. 248).

This idea is also portrayed in Victor LaValle's novella *The Ballad of Black Tom* where the pursuit of forbidden knowledge is depicted as merely the eccentric pastime of the white leisure class. As Guy Witzel points out about the wealthy white occultist Suydam, "[his] fascination with the occult is bolstered by abundant security" (567), a security that Black characters like Tommy Tester do not possess. Instead, his engagement with forbidden knowledge, like the assignments to find occult books for his rich white customers, is exclusively driven by his need to provide for himself and his father. When Ma Att, one of these customers, asks him whether he was tempted to look inside the occult book called "The Supreme Alphabet", he just responds: "I charge more for that" (LaValle 14). As the three works of Lovecraftian fiction make clear, "to allow oneself to be drawn in by some forbidden glimpse of the unknown, is little more than a white bourgeois power fantasy" (Witzel 567). However, it is not only wealthy individuals who are drawn to the occult but also regular white people like the police officer Thomas Malone. The novella emphasizes that although Malone "had a certain sensitivity" (LaValle 83) for hidden truths and forbidden knowledge, he chooses to ignore another hidden force that secretly controls people's lives, the systemic oppression of Black people. When the overtly racist private investigator Ervin Howard kills Tommy's father unprovoked and then claims self-defence, Malone looks in the other direction and afterwards even "vouched for Mr. Howard's character" (ibid. 81).

In *Lovecraft Country* and *The Ballad of Black Tom*, the possession of magical powers is also closely related to the possession of literacy, especially literacy as a form of cultural capital. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu proposes that social inequalities are not only perpetuated by the distribution of economic but also cultural capital. He separates cultural capital into three subcategories: "the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods […] and in the institutionalized state" (82), with literacy belonging to the first one but also relating to the other two. In both novels, privileged white characters seek out forbidden books that can be viewed as cultural capital in the objectified state.

Moreover, both the "Book of Names" in *Lovecraft Country* and "The Supreme Alphabet" in *The Ballad of Black Tom* include clear references to language and literacy. And as the novels emphasize, these books that contain "the words of power" (Ruff 101) would be useless for anybody who is not able to read them. In *The Ballad of Black Tom*, Tommy goes out of his way to only let his father handle the books because "[h]is illiteracy served as a safeguard" (LaValle 20) against their potentially harmful powers. Similarly, in *Lovecraft Country*, Atticus is initially not able to read in the language of Adam. During one of the cult's rituals he realizes that he "could not make sense of the invocation" (Ruff 101). Thus, it is not heritage per se but "[e]ducation and literacy [that] give the characters access to magic, just as education and literacy provide access to capital in our society" (Peters 10). Furthermore, it was only after the cultists made various preparations during the ritual that "[u]nderstanding came over Atticus in a flood [… and] he could read the words on the parchment and hear them in his head" (Ruff 101). Therefore, one can argue that in the novel, just as in reality, knowledge is institutionalized and only distributed by these institutions, in this case a cult from which Black people are excluded. Thus, the novel draws a parallel between the access to magic, which is controlled by The Sons of Adam, and the access to education and a scientific career which is denied to Hippolyta and other Black people.

The idea that "knowledge of and by people of color has been repressed, distorted, and denied by a Euro-American cultural logic" (Ladson-Billings 268) is also represented in these novels through the depiction of attempts to silence and take away the sight of Black characters. For instance, when Atticus begins to understand the language of Adam during the ritual and therefore gains access to the words of power, he quickly realizes that "when he tried to utter them aloud his tongue was stopped; a weight like an invisible finger pressed against his lips" (Ruff 101). Thus, it becomes clear that the cult remains the authority that controls his speech. Furthermore, the

"ability to see" of Black characters is also repeatedly attacked by the white supremacist villains. In *Ring Shout*, the Night Doctors take away the eyes of their servant Dr. Antoine Bisset "[a] colored physician, looking for the Night Doctors in old slave stories" (Clark 127) because they want to gain access to his unique perspective: "My lords wished to see the misery I had witnessed through my own flesh" (ibid. 134). Moreover, when Maryse is reunited with her boyfriend George after he was captured by The Collective, it is revealed that he has been blinded and "just stares out with white eyes, no pupils or nothing" (ibid. 146). Since the black characters in these novels possess The Sight, a "'wide-angle' vision" (Lewis 262) that allows them to recognize the injustices that are ignored in public discourse, white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan or The Sons of Adam need to remove their eyes and thereby completely deny them the status "as knowing subjects" (Seth 377).

Furthermore, the Black protagonists in the two novels repeatedly try to disrupt the attempts of white characters to increase their power through forbidden books. Before Tommy brings Ma Att the magical book called "The Supreme Alphabet", he rips out the last page to "[render] the tome useless, harmless" (LaValle 19). Likewise, in *Lovecraft Country*, Atticus's uncle George and his friends plan to replace the Book of Names with a decoy before bringing it to Caleb Braithwhite because they do not want to make "an evil man more powerful" (Ruff 156). Moreover, since the possession of agency and the ability to use magic are closely linked in the two novels, it is only after the protagonists gain independence from the superordinated white cultist characters, Robert Suydam and Caleb Braithwhite, that they are able to freely use their new magical abilities. This becomes especially clear in *The Ballad of Black Tom* when Tommy, after visiting The Sleeping King, becomes Black Tom, more than just "Suydam's mouthpiece" (La Valle 101). It is emphasized that, as Black Tom, he no longer needs "Robert Suydam's library in order to move through time and dimension" and is now "a star traveler in no need of a ship" (ibid. 142).

4.2.3 Between Hate and Resistance: The Significance of Forbidden Books, African Folklore and Music

Arguably the most prominent form in which forbidden knowledge is depicted in Lovecraft's work is in the form of books, with the so-called "Necronomicon", featured in several of his stories, as the most famous example. The Necronomicon, both grimoire and religious text, connects humanity with the Old Ones. As a cultural object, it transports and translates their knowledge to humanity and thereby perpetuates the

dangerous influence of such forbidden knowledge, symbolizing Lovecraft's fear that foreign cultural influences would lead to the decline of Western civilization.

Thus, it makes sense that authors of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction who want to challenge such xenophobic themes of the genre would specifically address the role of books and other forms of media in cosmic horror. In P. Djèli Clark's novella *Ring Shout*, it is not the Necronomicon but another powerful spell book that spreads its harmful influence on society: Thomas Dixon Jr.'s novel *The Clansman*. As Maryse explains at the beginning of the novella, the first Ku Kux Klan that started after the civil war was founded by dark sorcerers who "sold their souls to the evil powers [and] [s]tarted calling themselves Night Riders" (Clark 31). And Thomas Dixon Jr., whose father was a Klansman, "wrote his books as a conjuring: meant to deliver up the souls of readers to the evil powers, to bring the Klans back" (ibid. 31–32). With this portrayal, the novella challenges Lovecraft's juxtaposition of the rational white Anglo-Saxon man and the non-white cultist. Moreover, Clark not only emphasizes that it is the white-supremacist ideology, Lovecraft's own perspective, that is connected to such daemonic practices but is by itself inhumane and dangerous, leading to the demise of humanity.

However, it was the adaptation of Dixon Jr.'s novel into a major motion picture, *The Birth of a Nation*, that led to the founding of the second Ku Klux Klan and, in the novella, also the summoning of the demonic Ku Kluxes:

> You see, the second Klan was birthed November 25 back in 1915. What we call D-Day, or Devil's Night – when William Joseph Simmons, a regular old witch, and fifteen others met up at Stone Mountain east of Atlanta. Stories say they read from a conjuring book inked in blood on human skin. Can't vouch for that. But it was them that called up the monsters we call Ku Kluxes. And it all started with this damned movie. (Clark 30–31)

The fact that the cultists, or witches, of the Klan read from a book that was "inked in blood on human skin" (ibid. 30) is a clear intertextual reference to the Necronomicon, which in Lovecraft's work was never described in detail but featured in the same manner in various Lovecraftian works. However, what is particularly notable about this report is the fact that Maryse does not emphasizes this ancient grimoire but instead focusses on the movie *The Birth of a Nation* as the reason for the daemonic invasion. Indeed, even though the white Americans in the story are being manipulated by outside forces, the novella does not excuse their behavior and shift the responsibility to a group of extraterrestrials. As is repeatedly emphasized, The Collective only "point[s] them in a direction [they] need, but that hate they got in them is their own doing" (ibid. 84). They target white racists because "[t]hey was just the most willing [and s]o easy to devour from the inside, body and soul" (ibid.).

Furthermore, one can argue that by incorporating the idea that a film adaptation of a racist book can "induce hate on a mass scale" (Clark 49), P. Djèli Clark draws a parallel to Lovecraft's influence on popular culture and offers meta-commentary about the author himself. Because as David Kumler points out, although Lovecraft was never widely read during his lifetime, "[his] undead corpse now seems to lurk behind every corner of popular culture" (46). With mainstream television shows, movies, tabletop role-playing games and videogames that are inspired by his work he reaches an audience that he never could with his short stories and novellas. Just like in the novella, "white folk who ain't even heard of the Klan surrendered to the spell of them moving pictures" (Clark 32). This is especially problematic because, as writers of Lovecraftian fiction like China Miéville recognize, even when any overt racism is omitted, "we might have to confront the fact that Lovecraft's writing is effective not despite his racism, but because of it" (Kneale 95). Indeed, as this thesis aims to illustrate, Lovecraft's racism is deeply embedded in the most important themes of the genre and requires deliberate effort of contemporary Lovecraftian authors to effectively challenge.

The fact that P. Djèli Clark draws a parallel between Lovecraft as an author and writers like Thomas Dixon Jr. becomes especially clear at the end of the novella when one of Maryse's cosmic mentors, Auntie Ondine, reveals that "[a] new threat rises […] within the Province of Rhodes" (Clark 180), referencing Lovecraft's hometown Providence, Rhode Island. As Auntie Ondine explains, "[t]he enemy has their eyes fixed there—on a man they believe can help them further infiltrate your world, open doors to worse than their Grand Cyclops" (Clark 180). By directly referencing Lovecraft, Clark not only compares Lovecraft's work to media like the movie *The Birth of a Nation* but implies that his influence can be even more harmful. Moreover, when Lovecraft is referred to as "a willing vessel" for The Collective, the novella not only reverses Lovecraft's own portrayal of the lone white Anglo-Saxon man as the sole challenger of the Old Ones and non-white people as the "the worshippers and handmaidens of […] alien beings" (Tyree 144) but also the author's self-perception. Because one of the most famous recurring characters in Lovecraft's stories is his own alter-ego Randolph Carter who is also the only characters who is able to repeatedly challenge the Old Ones while keeping his sanity intact (cf. Tyson 43). Thus, one can argue that by portraying him as a "useful idiot" for alien invaders, the novella not only mocks his white supremacist beliefs but also Lovecraft's own self-proclaimed distinction.

Similarly, Victor LaValle also directly engages with Lovecraft as an author in his novella *The Ballad of Black Tom*. He not only dedicates his book to "H. P. Lovecraft,

with all my conflicted feelings" (LaValle 5) as a form of paratextuality but also features him as a character who is briefly mentioned towards the end of the novella. After the main events of the story, Thomas Malone notes:

> A man originally from Rhode Island but now living in Brooklyn with his wife proved so persistent a pair of officers was sent to the man's place to make clear he wasn't welcome in New York. Perhaps his constitution was better suited to Providence. The man left the city soon afterward, never to return. (ibid. 136)

This episode references the brief period when Lovecraft lived with his wife in Red Hook, a neighborhood in Western Brooklyn – an experience that not only is said to have inspired his most explicitly racist short story "The Horror at Red Hook" (cf. Tyree 140–141) but, according to Michel Houellebecq, is also when "his racist opinions turned to full-fledged racist neurosis" (105). Thus, the novella implies that it was the events of the story which Lovecraft only briefly witnessed that resulted in his irrational fear of non-white people, turning him into just another one of his minor characters who became mad from a glimpse of forbidden knowledge. Furthermore, this portrayal further strengthens the impression that Lovecraft's version of the events in "The Horror at Red Hook" are less trustworthy, since they come from Lovecraft, an unimportant witness who was not directly involved, as opposed to the account by Tommy as one of the central figures. Moreover, by pointing out that Lovecraft's "constitution was better suited to Providence" (LaValle 136) the novella implies that Lovecraft's depiction of New York as "a babel of sound and filth" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 154) might just be a sign of his own provinciality. Lovecraft, unlike Tommy, was unable to recognize "that New York was just reaching one of its cultural high-water marks" (Tyree 145).

Matt Ruff's novel *Lovecraft Country*, as the title already suggests, engages with Lovecraft and his stories in a more overt way. Indeed, it is highlighted right from the beginning that the novel's protagonist Atticus and his uncle George are themselves passionate readers of Lovecraftian horror fiction and, just like Victor LaValle, holds deeply conflicted feelings towards Lovecraft and his work. As George explains his perspective: stories are like people, "[l]oving them doesn't make them perfect" (Ruff 13). But, as George emphasizes and Matt Ruff's engagement with the racist tropes of Lovecraftian horror exemplifies, only focussing of the virtues does not work because "[t]he flaws are still there" (ibid.). In this context, Atticus and George can be viewed as stand-ins for every Black reader of Lovecraft's work who has to reconcile the stories' racist themes with the elements that they appreciate. In the novel, it is Atticus's father Montrose who points out some of these racist aspects to Atticus and indirectly to the reader (cf. Ruff 14). However, Ruff also emphasizes that, in contrast to the author in

question, Montrose does not belief in the idea of forbidden books, not even when it concerns a racist like Lovecraft: He "didn't believe in book-banning [… and] always insisted he just wanted Atticus to think about what he read, rather than imbibing it mindlessly" (ibid. 13). Thus, one can argue that by highlighting this approach towards harmful knowledge, Montrose is positively contrasted both with the white police officers who want to confiscate The Safe Negro Travel Guide and the common Lovecraftian protagonist who tries "to suppress information […] for the supposed betterment or salvation of the human race" (Joshi, *Decline* 129).

However, in the three selected contemporary Lovecraftian novels, the role of books is not reduced to an item that spreads hate and harmful ideas to society. As already established in the previous chapter about the figure of the racialized outsider, The Safe Negro Travel Guide in *Lovecraft Country* functions as a source of knowledge that provides something essential to Black people: "reliable and current data […] in a white-centered society where Black lives are considered disposable" (Hassler-Forest 179). It offers Atticus and his family not only a way to avoid but also to escape dangerous situations. In P. Djèli Clark's novella *Ring Shout*, a book of African folktales that belongs to Maryse as a keepsake from her dead brother, fulfills a very similar function. On the one hand, it offers a form of escapism to Maryse: Under the precarious circumstances of being under constant threat from the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan and the daemonic Ku Kluxes, she can "flip [the book] open and let the words drown out the world" (Clark 44). On the other hand, it provides her with a way to make sense of the extraordinary and totally unfamiliar cosmic knowledge that she is confronted with. When she first meets the so-called "three Aunties", cosmic beings that in Maryse's struggle with The Collective act as her mentors, she immediately compares their appearance to the animals in her book of folktales:

> They was still womanlike, but slender and unsightly tall in long bloodred gowns. Their faces was masks stitched from what look like real brown skin. What was beneath … well … reminded me of foxes. With rusty fur, pointed ears, and burnt-orange eyes. I know what it sounds like, Bruh Fox and all that. But I saw what I saw (ibid. 72–73)

With their real form resembling foxes, these three cosmic beings take on the form of three middle-aged Black women to appear in front of Maryse as something that she is familiar with and that she trusts. As Maryse recognizes, it is "[l]ike they plucked memories of her [mother] from [her] head, and made them into three people" (ibid. 73). One can assume that they employ the same strategy when they deliberately choose an African folktale to illustrate to Maryse the true nature of the The Collective as their enemy:

There were two brothers, Truth and Lie. One day they get to playing, throwing cutlasses up into the air. Them cutlasses come down and fast as can be—swish!—chop each of their faces clean off! Truth bend down, searching for his face. But with no eyes, he can't see. Lie, he sneaky. He snatch up Truth's face and run off! Zip! Now Lie go around wearing Truth's face, fooling everybody he meet." She stops stitching to fix me with stern eyes. "The enemy, they are the Lie. Plain and simple. The Lie running around pretending to be Truth." (ibid. 77)

However, although the three aunties, who Mama Jean views as just "haints", clearly try to manipulate Maryse for their own purposes, the African folktales appear to be more than mere instrument of their trickery. Instead, they also seem to function as a tool to make cosmic truths comprehensible to selected human beings like Maryse.

As already established, often in Lovecraft's stories, "the artist, not the scientist, is depicted as the key to truth" (Anderson 74) with forbidden books like the Necromonicon and other types of literature assigned a preeminent role. Since "the literature of peoples of color is more likely to fall into the folklore category" (Ladson-Billings 257–258), one can argue that this role as mediator of cosmic truths was deliberately assigned to African folktales in *Ring Shout*. This becomes especially clear when the three aunties introduce Maryse to the cosmic beings called the "Night Doctors". Instead of explaining to her who the Night Doctors are and where to find them, they implement this knowledge by adding a story to her book of African folktales: "[Auntie Ondine] lifts a hand, wriggling her fingers like she writing in the air. 'There. You will find what you need in your book'" (Clark 117). With this portrayal, P. Djèli Clark not only emphasizes the importance of a Black cultural perspective by depicting characters like Maryse as more resistant against the harmful effects of forbidden cosmic knowledge but also challenges the idea that African "folklore is […] less rigorous, less scholarly, and, perhaps, less culturally valuable than literature" (Ladson-Billings 258).

Furthermore, music also takes on an important role in *Ring Shout* and *The Ballad of Black Tom*. Just as the book of African folktales functions as a way for Black characters to escape their precarious circumstances, music and dance take on a similar role. In *The Ballad of Black Tom*, for instance, when Tommy and his father have to travel through dangerous white neighborhoods, the distant noises of Harlem are described as "a song that accompanied them—carried them—all the way home" (LaValle 36). In *Ring Shout*, as Mary Arnold Twining points out, the tradition of the "Ring Shout" after which the novella is named, "is an escape song in either a prayerful or a real sense" that helps the "uniting of the group's solidarity and the release of tensions" (12). This traditional dance is portrayed in the novella as a powerful ritual that is an essential element in the creation of Nana Jean's water, "parts corn, barley liquor, and Gullah root magic" (Clark 38), which is used in the fight against the Ku Kluxes.

One can argue that in the novella, "[t]he musics of the black Atlantic world [… as] the primary expressions of cultural distinctiveness" (Gilroy 115), especially the "Ring Shout" as a unifying tradition, can be seen as a contrast to the dividing and hateful rituals of the Ku Klux Klan as well as the unity through cultural erasure that The Collective wants to implement. This contrast is emphasized in the novella through the juxtaposition of the music of The Collective with that of the Black community in Macon. As Maryse points out, whereas the singing of Butcher Clyde, the leader of The Collective, is "without harmony or pattern" (Clark 106), representing the senseless hate of the Ku Klux Klan, the music of Black people are "[s]ongs full of hurt [that represent a] righteous anger and cry for justice" (ibid. 155). Just like the anger and fear of white supremacists is senseless, which according to Butcher Clyde "[m]akes their hate [taste] like … watered-down whiskey" (ibid. 148), their music too is inauthentic.

This distinction between authentic and inauthentic music is also an important theme in *The Ballad of Black Tom*. Unlike the works of Clark and LaValle themselves, Tommy as a musician explicitly caters to a white audience because he cannot compete with the serious jazz musicians in Harlem. However, since the people in New York's predominantly white neighborhoods "didn't know a damn thing about serious jazz" (LaValle 18), Tommy is able to "deploy his race in such a way as to appear "authentic" (Kumler 52). It is also the reason why Tommy is invited by Robert Suydam to play at his occult gathering and eventually become his second-in-command. As Tommy observes when Suydam initially approaches him on the street and tells Tommy that he has a "fine git-fiddle" (LaValle 20), Suydam "wanted Tommy to know he could speak the language" (ibid. 20–21). Since white characters in the novella, just like Lovecraft himself, are convinced that there is inherent connection between Black or at least non-white and non-Western cultures and occult knowledge, Suydam wants to borrow Tommy's authenticity to gain the trust of New York's immigrant population. This becomes especially clear when Tommy is ordered to Suydam's house before the gathering because Suydam "needed to practice [his] words [on Tommy to …] see how they affect a man of the proper type" (ibid. 48). However, Suydam is convinced that his speech, in which he promises the end of racial discrimination, only works when Tommy's "music and Suydam's words worked together, [as] an even stronger spell" (ibid. 76). As Suydam seems to believe, only when authentic jazz music underscores both his knowledge of Black culture and therefore of the occult is he able to gain the confidence of his audience of non-white immigrants.

However, as becomes clear in the course of the novella, this connection between Black culture and occult knowledge exists only in the imagination of white characters like Suydam or Malone. Indeed, the police officer Thomas Malone often visits Harlem and Red Hook because he thinks the "superstitions and lowly faiths [of the immigrants are] the lead a higher mind might transmute into the pure gold of cosmogonic wisdom" (ibid. 91). And it is only when "[a] curtain of silence fell between him and the residents" (ibid. 99) that he focusses his investigation on the actual seeker of forbidden knowledge, the rich white occultist Robert Suydam. LaValle makes it clear that to people who have to face racial oppression in their daily lives, the temptations of forbidden knowledge and "fear of cosmic indifference […] seemed comical, or downright naïve" (ibid. 66). Fittingly, when Tommy plays well for "the first time in his life" (ibid. 70), it is not when he adopts the persona of the "dazzling, down-and-out musician" (ibid. 11) or plays during Suydam's speech. Instead, his music only becomes authentic when "he didn't play for the money, didn't play so he could hustle" and he plays the song that his mother "Irene taught [his father] Otis and Otis passed on to him" (ibid. 70). The titular ballad of Black Tom is the Blues song "Don't You Mind People Grinnin' In Your Face", a song that, like the "Ring Shout" in Clark's novella, is about resilience and resistance in the face of adversity and represents not just the struggle of an individual "but centuries of anger" (Clark 154).

5 With Strange Eons: The Significance of the Past in Lovecraft's Works and Contemporary Lovecraftian Fiction

Even though Lovecraft as a writer was most influential to the genre of horror fiction, one cannot deny the many science fiction elements in his story, from alien invasions to the focus on new scientific discoveries. However, what is particularly noteworthy about his many "quasi science fiction stories" (Matolcsy 165) is that, uncharacteristically for the genre, his perspective is consistently focused on the past instead of the future. This becomes already clear when one considers that the extraterrestrials in his stories are referred to as the "Old Ones" or the "Elder Things", cosmic beings who have secretly existed on earth for millions of years and are more significantly connected with humanity's past than with its present or future. As David Punter notes, Lovecraft's fiction incorporates "the structure of the original Gothic: in that it hinges on an unassimilable fear of the past" (39). Indeed, in many of his stories, "the past encroaches

menacingly on the present" (Dziemianowicz 171), often through the revelation of some forbidden knowledge or when a character "is undone by the unwise actions of his ancestors" (Simmons 20).

It may seem contradictory that an antimodernist like Lovecraft who "combined an antiquarian interest in folklore and historic material culture with the passions of a preservationist and worries about cultural loss" (Evans 100) would depict, of all things, the past as threatening. However, one can argue that precisely because Lovecraft attributed so much importance to history as something that shapes personal, cultural, and national identity, the revelation "that mankind is cosmically trivial" would seem particularly threatening to him. Furthermore, as someone who fears that "the accelerated rate of change in the early twentieth century is leaving him behind" (Joshi, *Decline* 138), it makes sense that he would be "intrigued by the possibility that the present could collapse back into the past" (Dziemianowicz 171). As it is written in the most prominent forbidden book of Lovecraft's stories, the Necronomicon, "[t]hat is not dead which can eternal lie, [a]nd with strange eons even death may die" (Lovecraft, "Nameless" 9), suggesting that even the most profound phenomena of the present become trivial from a perspective that includes the distant past.

It is precisely this ambivalent perspective on knowledge about the past as both potentially traumatic and as something that "can also lead to a stronger sense of identity and a renewed social cohesion" (Visser 263) that authors of subversive Lovecraftian fiction can take on when they want to subvert this common theme in cosmic horror. After all, who knows better than Black people in the United States that the past can "[encroach] menacingly on the present" (Dziemianowicz 171) and is full of unacknowledged histories. As Montrose in *Lovecraft Country* explains to Atticus, "you think you can forgive, forget, the past. You can't. You cannot. The past is alive, a living, thing. You own [and] owe it" (Ruff 17).

5.1   The Significance of the Past in Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness"

In Lovecraft's arguably most famous novella "At the Mountains of Madness", it is the earth's past itself that is depicted as a forbidden knowledge. This knowledge is gradually uncovered by the novella's scientist protagonist William Dyer, a professor at the fictional Miskatonic University that appears in many of Lovecraft's stories. In an expedition to Antarctica, the geologist Dyer together with a team of other scientists sets out to learn more about the "primal life-history of this bleak realm of ice and death [which] is of the highest importance to our knowledge of the earth's past" (Lovecraft,

"Mountains" 10–11). However, as the expedition progresses, it becomes increasingly clear how limited Western science's knowledge of the earth's past is. Since the novella is set at the end of the age of Antarctic exploration, the explorers in the story discover humanity's "cosmic insignificance at the peak of realizing the century's long project of global exploration" (Timss 15). When they unearth fossils "from organisms hitherto considered as peculiar to far older periods" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 26) or of unknown species as well as the remnants of an ancient non-human civilization that existed "millions of years ago, when man's ancestors were primitive archaic mammals" (ibid. 72), they have to gradually acknowledge "that something—chronology, scientific theory, or [their] own consciousness—was woefully awry," (ibid. 58–59).

One can argue that the expedition team in the novella perfectly encapsulate the role of the common Lovecraftian scientist who at first seeks out knowledge enthusiastically and with the "wild hopes of revolutionising […] entire sciences" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 18–19) but is confronted with forbidden knowledge that traumatizes him, leads to an identity crisis and eventually to the desire to completely suppress any information about the content of his discovery. Whereas at the beginning of the story "there burned a dominant curiosity to fathom more of this age-old secret" (ibid. 59), the end of the expedition for Dyer "marked [the] loss […] of all that peace and balance which the normal mind possesses through its accustomed conception of external Nature and Nature's laws" (ibid. 38). This transformation of the scientists William Dyer, which is depicted as a deeply traumatic experience, is the main focus of the novella. And as becomes clear early in the story, it is triggered not only by forbidden knowledge of the past but also literally by a "past [that] encroaches menacingly on the present" (Dziemianowicz 171).

Like many other scientists in Lovecraft's work, the expedition team is confronted both with the inadequacy of Western science and with the knowledge about the insignificance of all humanity. Early on during the expedition, Dyer is forced to acknowledge that this "unbelievable chapter of earth's history [… is] recalled only dimly in the most obscure and distorted myths" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 59), again suggesting that the folklore of non-Western people, which Lovecraft directly links to forbidden cosmic knowledge, is more accurate than Western science. Furthermore, if one considers the fact that Lovecraft very much feared the decline of Western civilization, one can argue that in his stories, humanity's insignificance in the cosmos also represents his own anxieties about the state of Western civilization. Therefore, when Dyer learns about the existence of a highly advanced non-human civilization on

earth, "when man himself could scarcely have been differentiated from the great apes" (ibid. 56), this perceived challenge to humanity's position also extends to Lovecraft's ideas of Western exceptionalism. When Dyer describes the existence of this ancient city in Antarctica as a "fiendish violation of known natural law," (ibid.) one can suspect that Lovecraft's reaction would have been similar if he would have, like Frantz Fanon, researched Black antiquity and found "a race that had already been working silver and gold 2,000 years ago" (Fanon 109).

As J. M. Tyree points out, "[f]or both Poe and Lovecraft, the ancient remnants of these Ur cities are […] active sources of doom that may erupt in the future and release the fury of Hell itself, like dormant supernatural volcanoes" (144). Indeed, the encounter with this ancient city in the story marks a significant intrusion of the past on the present, and from the perspective of Dyer "established an unprecedented and almost blasphemous link with forgotten aeons normally closed to our species" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 62). An earlier and arguably even more profound crossing of this boundary is marked by a direct encounter between the scientists and one of the Old Ones which are here referred to as the "Elder Things". Although the expedition team of Professor Lake, which is separated from Dyer's party, only find the bodies of seemingly dead specimen of the Elder Things, the hybridity of the alien bodies is immediately regarded as their most notable characteristic: When Professor Lake dissects one of the Elder Things, it is stated that "one could hardly hesitate to call the thing animal; but internal inspection brought up so many vegetable evidences that Lake was left hopelessly at sea" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 34). In accordance with the fact that Lovecraft saw the hybrid alien as the most threatening (cf. Joshi, *Decline* 126), the scientists immediately regard the Elder Things as the monstrous other.

Moreover, even though Professor Lake already informed Dyer that the "nervous system [of the Elder Thing] was so complex and highly developed" compared the humans that they "[p]robably […] had more than five senses" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 34–35), when Dyer finds the seemingly deserted camp of Lake's expedition team, he describes the aliens only as "imperfect monstrosities" (ibid. 44). To them, they are the monstrous other that needs to be studied in order to dispel its danger, "to dominate it, to have authority over it" (Said 32). However, as becomes clear to Dyer, the Elder Things likewise seem to regard human beings in the same manner. When Dyer locates the deserted camp of Lake's advance group, Dyer finds the bodies of the dissected Elder Things "buried upright in nine-foot snow graves" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 44) while the dead bodies of Lake and his team of scientists seem to have been in turn dissected:

"some were incised and subtracted from in the most curious, cold-blooded, and inhuman fashion [… and] had their most solid masses of tissue cut out and removed, as by a careful butcher" (ibid. 48). While the Elder Things grant their own dead a ceremonial burial, the human body is dehumanized, dissected, and studied.

It is after this revelation and through the later study of the ancient city that Dyer starts to view the Elder Things as a different kind of threat, as a usurper of human—and from Lovecraft's perspective Western—accomplishments. As Dyer and his colleague Danforth learn from murals in the ancient city, the Elder Things colonized earth millions of years ago "before the true life of earth had advanced beyond plastic groups of cells [… and] were the makers and enslavers of that life" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 72). Moreover, they learn through the murals that the Elder Things are not only much older than humanity but "[e]vidently their scientific and mechanical knowledge far surpassed man's today" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 75). They not only "passed through a stage of mechanised life" (ibid.) but already left it behind before they even came to earth. Essentially, "the Elder Things disinherit humanity of the claim to history and the achievements of civilization" (Timss 16). And since "aesthetic mastery is perhaps the single distinguishing feature of civilisation [to Lovecraft]" (Joshi, *Decline* 143), it is repeatedly emphasised by Dyer that the murals of the Elder Things "had an artistic force that moved [them] profoundly" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 69), and "[t]he more one studied the marvelous technique the more one admired the things" (ibid. 70).

However, in this "disinheriting of civilization from humanity by the non-human" (Timss 16), the most traumatic revelation to Dyer and Danforth is a mural that hints at the origin of humanity. In one of the later murals, they find "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" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 79). As S. T. Joshi notes, "the degradation of humanity can go no further" (*Decline* 140). Moreover, it is interesting to observe that as humanity is more and more debased, "the Elder Things are humanized as they are endowed with a history authored by beings with a human-like agency" (Timss 16). As Dyer points out, "[i]t is this abnormal historic-mindedness of the primal race […] which made the carvings so awesomely informative to us" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 70) and through which they learn about the ultimate decline of this ancient prehuman civilization.

One can argue that it is precisely the knowledge about their decline that leads to yet another shift in Dyer's perspective on the Elder Things: By the end of the story, he no longer sees them as the monstrous other or as a threatening usurper of Western

hegemony but wholly identifies with them. For Dyer and for Lovecraft, the past as the realm of the Elder Things provides a warning about the future of Western civilization. Although the story gives no concrete reason for the decline of the Elder Things, mentioning both climate catastrophes and war with other alien races, one can argue that in the portrayal of the symptoms of this decline Lovecraft incorporated many of the developments that he and authors like Oswald Spengler saw as signifiers of the decline of the West. As the later murals reveal, "[w]ith the march of time […] the art of creating new life from inorganic matter had been lost" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 80) and "[w]hatever the old secret of interstellar travel had been, it was now definitely lost to the race" (ibid. 82). Thus, it is their inability to continue the conquest and colonization of other regions of the cosmos that signifies their decline and essentially ends their existence as an empire. One can argue that Lovecraft here not only draws a parallel to the Roman empire but also European colonial empires of his own time.

However, it is also the murals themselves that show symptom of this decline. In line with Lovecraft's hatred for hybrid culture, "[c]hronologically the first realm in which [he] perceived decadence was in aesthetics" (Joshi, *Decline* 135). It is therefore not surprising that in "At the Mountains of Madness", Dyer discovers that the sculpture in the newer parts of the city "embodied an art which would be called decadent in comparison with that of specimens [they] found in older buildings" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 73). Again, one can argue that Lovecraft connects a decadent, less valuable and less authentic art with hybrid culture when Dyer observes that these sculptures "reminded of such hybrid things as the ungainly Palmyrene sculptures fashioned in the Roman manner" (ibid. 108). It seems particularly significant that Lovecraft attributes the reason for this artistic decline to the Elder Thing's reliance on the work of slaves, namely the artificially created creatures called "shoggoths". As Dyer learns from the murals, the Elder Things manufactured the shoggoths, which are described as "multicellular protoplasmic masses capable of molding their tissue into all sorts of temporary organs under hypnotic influence and thereby forming ideal slaves to perform the heavy work of the community" (ibid. 75).

But over time, the shoggoths "developed a semi-stable brain whose separate and occasionally stubborn volition echoed the will of the Old Ones without always obeying it" (ibid. 81). And as their "self-modelling powers were sometimes exercised independently" (ibid.), they became more and more sentient, eventually revolted, and completely exterminated the Elder Things. As the expedition team now realizes, the later sculptures and murals are merely the work of the shoggoths imitating the art of

their extinct masters, "degenerate murals aping and mocking the things they had superseded" (ibid. 111). One can argue that with this depiction of the Elder Things' fate, Lovecraft incorporated his own fears about the decline of Western civilization through the increasing autonomy and cultural influence of Black Americans who, in his view, "would be perfectly content with a servile status if good physical treatment and amusement would be assured them" (Lovecraft, qtd. in Joshi, *Decline* 76). From Lovecraft's racist and xenophobic perspective, Black Americans and non-white immigrants, just like the shoggoths, take on the role of "the (Visi- or Ostro-) Goths overrunning the eternal city of Rome, threatening to obliterate the legacy of an empire" (Shapiro and Barnard 127). In accordance with the white supremacist perspective that views Black Americans "as passive and their culture as almost entirely derivative" (Crowe 254), it is emphasized that even after the shoggoths freed themselves of the control of the Elder Things, they had "no voice save the imitated accents of their bygone masters*"* (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 118). Their artworks are correspondingly described as "wholly decorative and conventional [… and seemed] more like a parody than a perpetuation of [the Elder Things'] tradition" (ibid. 108).

Furthermore, it is notable that Lovecraft depicted the shoggoths as "multicellular protoplasmic masses capable of moulding their tissues" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 75), not anthropomorphic creatures like the Elder Things but a massive black slime. As Stephen Shapiro and Philip Barnard point out, "'slime' in Lovecraft is a keyword used to describe any non- Northern European population [… who] are unwilling or unable to maintain their racial integrity and thus rapidly amalgamate into an undifferentiated mass" (128). Fittingly, it is the confrontation with this slime mass that definitively transforms Dyer's perspective on the Elder Things, here again referred to as Old Ones, which he initially also viewed as the monstrous other:

> [P]oor Lake, poor Gedney … and poor Old Ones! Scientists to the last—what had they done that we would not have done in their place? God, what intelligence and persistence! What a facing of the incredible, just as those carven kinsmen and forbears had faced things only a little less incredible! Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star-spawn—whatever they had been, they were men! (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 112)

With his last exclamation, it becomes clear that Dyer now sees the Elder Things as men, "'normalized' human[s] with the privileged position to shape knowledges and determine powers" (Rahn 85). Moreover, by calling them scientists and mentioning them in line with his peers Lake and Gedney, it is emphasized that he fully identifies with them and even views them as their colleagues from another era. In the shoggoths, Dyer finds a more terrifying other, one that presumably reminds him of racialized others

from his own era, and he consequently attributes them with the fears of his present: One can argue that the shoggoths, "slaves of suggestion, builders of cities—more and more sullen, more and more intelligent, more and more amphibious, more and more imitative" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 112) represent not only anxieties about racial mixing and cultural hybridity but also the fear that oppressed people could gain more agency and rise against their oppressors.

The fact that the civilization of the Elder Things was destroyed as a result of a slave uprising could be interpreted as a condemnation of slavery. However, it is important to note that the use of slaves is not portrayed as the reason for their decline but rather it is because of their weakened state as a civilization that they are particularly vulnerable against such a slave uprising. While initially a "veritable war of resubjugation was waged upon [the shoggoths] by the marine Old Ones" (ibid. 81), the later decadent Elder Things were unable to do so. It seems that to Lovecraft, slavery is an essential element of all great civilizations, human or non-human, and problems only arise when the empire has grown too weak or decadent to keep the oppressed class in line. Lovecraft who feared that a similar fate could befall the United States incorporated the "legacy of eighteenth-century New England's profiteering in the Atlantic slave trade" (Shapiro and Barnard 131) as an important element in his fiction. It is, however, seldomly addressed as directly as in "At the Mountains of Madness", and instead "slavery lurks in nearly all Lovecraft's Miskatonic tales" (ibid.) as forbidden knowledge about the region's history.

This silence witch which forbidden knowledge about the past is treated can also be observed in the novella when the expedition team ultimately decides that the suppression of this knowledge "is absolutely necessary, for the peace and safety of mankind" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 122). It is also the strategy that Dyer and Danforth adopt to cope with their traumatic experience in the story. Danforth who has glimpsed even more forbidden knowledge than Dyer and "will never be the same again" (ibid.) refuses to speak about this experience even with his colleague. As Dyer notes about Danforth after the expedition:

> Even young Danforth, with his nervous breakdown, has not flinched or babbled to his doctors— indeed, as I have said, there is one thing he thinks he alone saw which he will not tell even me, though I think it would help his psychological state if he would consent to do so. (ibid. 46)

Although Dyer puts great importance on the group's secrecy about the events in Antarctica, even he realizes that speaking about traumatic experiences could be helpful. However, as is suggested in "At the Mountains of Madness", Danforth's silence should

not only be understood as a refusal to speak about his traumatic experience but also an inability to speak about it, just as the experience of trauma survivors is often "unspeakable" (cf. Stocks 78).

Moreover, although Dyer acknowledges that breaking the silence "would help [Danforth's] psychological state" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 46), he still is convinced that "some experiences and intimations […] scar too deeply to permit of healing, and leave only such an added sensitiveness that memory reinspires all the original horror" (ibid. 109). Memory here is an important factor that for Dyer and Danforth leads to "a continual reliving of some wounding experience" (Erikson 184), or as Dyer puts it, to "oddly vague, hateful, and confusing semi-remembrances" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 60). Indeed, it seems that Dyer and Danforth are unable to find a way of healing from their traumatic experience, a way of "moving from silence into speech" (Hooks, *Talking Back* 9). Instead, Dyer is "forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow [his] advice without knowing why" (Lovecraft, "Mountains" 9). Only to prevent another expedition of Antarctica, Dyer ultimately moves away from his "rule of strict censorship" (ibid. 39) and gives the report that the narrative of the novella represents.

5.2 The Significance of the Past in Contemporary Lovecraftian Fiction

It is precisely this silence about the past, especially about past injustices, and traumatic experiences, that the authors of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction aim to challenge. As bell hooks states, this "moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited […] a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible" (*Talking Back* 9). Moreover, it is possible that "traumatic memories are transmitted from generation to generation [… both as] objects such as photographs and [through] the silences present in family histories" (Zapata 25). In order to reduce what Irene Visser describes as the contagious impact of trauma (cf. 275), it is important to establish a culture where "community's memory of trauma may not be erased, but […] can be transformed in positive ways" (Kurtz 430).

Likewise, a culture that treats memories of the past and past injustices as forbidden knowledge needs to be actively challenged. This is especially important for a diasporic community such as African Americans. Because as Susan Rubin Suleiman states, "how we view ourselves, and how we represent ourselves to others, is indissociable from the stories we tell about our past" (1). And since "Africans and their descendants in the Americas forged a sense of community from and through the shared trauma of bondage and exploitation," (Larson 335) it is an essential part of their

collective identity as a "shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true' self […] which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (Hall 223). Thus, one can argue that the silencing of knowledge about the past does not only prevent healing but is also a threat to the collective identity of the oppressed.

Furthermore, both Lovecraft's works and the three contemporary Lovecraftian works are set in the United States after the abolition of slavery where, however, slavery still very much influences the present. While Lovecraft is less concerned with "the horror of slavery itself, but [rather] the horror of realizing that one's cultural and educational ideals are contaminated by profits derived from slavery" (Shapiro and Barnard 135), the traumatizing forbidden knowledge about the past portrayed in contemporary Lovecraftian fiction is often the realization that the horrors of slavery have not died with its abolition. To appropriate a quote by Arthur Machen which is included in both Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook" and LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*, one can argue that systemic racism is "[a]n awful lore [that] is not yet dead" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 151). After all, "[i]f the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison" (Hartman 133).

5.2.1   *From Silence to Speech: Forbidden Family Histories, Trauma and Identity*

In Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country*, the past or rather awareness about the past is a central element of the story. This is already emphasized through the structure of the novel: As a form of intertextuality that Gérard Genette terms a peritext, each chapter starts with a quote from a historic artefact like eyewitness testimonies, slave narratives or legal texts that serves to provide historical context. Moreover, it is knowledge about the past that sets off the events of the novel. Indeed, it is Atticus's past or rather his secret descent from Titus Braithwhite, the founder of The Sons of Adam, that provides him with his magical abilities, his "legacy […] and] birthright" (Ruff 17). This knowledge about the past gives Atticus power, not only magical power but also a social power that would otherwise not be accessible to a Black man in this environment. Atticus as "a direct descendant of Titus Braithwhite [… is] empowered to call lodge meetings and to give orders to other members" (ibid. 79) which, to the displeasure of the white supremacist cult members, he promptly tries out. However, it quickly becomes clear that it is only Atticus's inherited magical power that the cult is interested in and which they plan to use for themselves. As Samuel Braithwhite explains to Atticus, "[y]ou are a reservoir of that power. Diluted, no doubt, and also tainted somewhat, but still useful for the work we have to do" (ibid. 86).

Thus, although Samuel and Atticus have a shared ancestry, the Braithwhites view Atticus as a tainted hybrid, as "Turner, the Negro" (ibid. 87). Despite Atticus's familial relationship with the Braithwhites, it is clear that their history is not the same. As a Black man, his "'cultural identity' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (Hall 223) is not connected to "Titus Braithwhite, a slave trader from Boston" (Ruff 67) but to Hannah, his "mother's great-great-great-grandmother," (ibid. 67) who was owned and presumably raped by Titus Braithwhite. Therefore, it makes sense that Atticus's identity is not changed by this new knowledge about his ancestry. As already established, Atticus is aware of and comfortable with his identity, "[h]e liked who and what he was" (ibid. 102).

Furthermore, Atticus's family, the Turners, just as the Braithwhites and their cult are depicted as explicitly history-minded. However, certain events like the traumatic experience of how Hannah became pregnant and how she was freed from slavery are never spoken about. As Atticus recalls, his "Mom told [him] that Hannah would never tell anyone exactly what happened, only that it was something terrible she had to run" (ibid. 68). It therefore makes sense that Atticus perceives this new knowledge about his ancestry as an uncovering of a hidden family history, "a shameful and therefore unspeakable experience [that] is barred from consciousness or kept secret" (Whitehead 14). Moreover, both for Atticus's family and the Braithwhites, the event that is referred to as the "calamity" (Ruff 68) where a ritual went wrong and consequently "the lodge blazed with every color in nature and some outside it" (ibid. 85), holds a similar meaning. As Samuel Braithwhite explains, during the calamity "[a] huge body of esoteric knowledge was lost" (ibid. 86) to the cult. Thus, the event not only connects the two families but is also for both connected with a loss of knowledge about their history.

Through the depiction of Atticus's parents Dora and Montrose Turner, two opposing perspectives on forbidden knowledge about the past are embodied in the novel. As already established, a focus on the past is an essential characteristic of Montrose who "could trace his own roots back five generations" (ibid. 16). At the beginning of the novel, he explains to Atticus, "[t]he past is alive, a living, thing. You own [and] owe it" (ibid. 17). Atticus's mother Dora, on the other hand, who is a descendant of Hannah, wants to maintain the silence about her own family's history. As Atticus recalls,

> [he] could remember lying in his childhood bed, listening to the two of them argue. "How can you not want to know?" his father would say. "Who you come from is part of who you are. How do you just let that be stolen from you?" "I know where the past leads," his mother would reply. "It's a sad place. Why would I want to know it better? Does knowing make you happy?" "It ain't about happy. It's about being whole. You have a right to that. You have a duty to that." "But I don't want it. Please, just let it go." (ibid. 16–17)

Whereas Montrose and his side of the family view the past as an essential part of their identity and the remembrance of the past as an important family tradition, Dora has "grow[n] up surrounded by silences and family secrets that attest to past traumatic experiences which are difficult or impossible to be told" (Zapata 38). And there was not only silence about her great-ancestor Hannah but "[h]er father's identity was [also] a mystery and a taboo subject" (Ruff 16).

As Beatriz Pérez Zapata states, "[t]rauma may […] live in the memories and psyches of different generations […] who have not directly experienced the traumatic event" (25). One can argue that both Atticus and his mother belong to what Marianne Hirsch refers to as a generation of postmemory which "remember[s] only by means of stories, images, and behaviors among which they grow up" (16). Dora and Atticus, it seems, have inherited Hannah's perspective on the past and exhibit behaviors such as "silences, grief, rage, despair, or sudden unexplainable shifts in moods handed down to them by those who bring them up" (Schwab 14). This becomes especially clear when Atticus recalls an incident at the day of his mother's funeral where he found his father searching "a photograph of Dora's grandparents" (Ruff 17) for clues about her heritage: "Atticus had snatched the photo from his startled father's hands. 'Let it go!' he'd shouted. 'She said let it go!'" (ibid.). Like his mother, Atticus responds aggressively when Montrose tries to gain forbidden knowledge about the history of Dora's family.

Like in Lovecraft's stories, the protagonists in Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* have only incomplete knowledge about their past. However, although this knowledge is uncomfortable or even traumatic, the act of learning about the past, unlike in "At the Mountains of Madness", is depicted as productive instead of threatening to their identity. Rather, as the novel suggests, Atticus's family, especially his strained relationship with his father, "only begins to be healed when the forgotten connections are once more set in place" (Hall 225). This becomes especially clear at the end of the novel when the family not only works together to defeat the Braithwhite family, but they also plan another research trip for The Safe Negro Travel Guide, this time with a multigenerational crew. Besides George's twelve-year-old son Horace, Atticus insists that his father, who he usually only argues with or avoids, comes along too:

> "I'd be willing to take him, if you'll let me. And you could come too, Pop." "Me?" Montrose said. "Yeah, you," said Atticus. "You can make sure Horace draws the right lessons from what he sees. Like you did for me. And I know I'd enjoy the company." Montrose scowled. But he didn't say no. (Ruff 371–372)

It is a stark contrast to the beginning of the novel when during a big fight with his son, Atticus's "father turned from words to fists" (ibid. 25), and "most of all his father in

Chicago—were things [Atticus] didn't really care to talk about" (ibid. 5). One can argue that as the family's relationship towards their past moved "from silence into speech" (Hooks, *Talking Back* 9), so did Atticus's relationship with his father.

Furthermore, in order to better understand why there is such a stark contrast between Montrose's perspective on the past and that of his wife, one needs to look at the history of his own family, the Turners and the Berrys, especially of his great-grandmother Adah. Like Dora's ancestor Hannah, Adah was a slave, "born into slavery on a Georgia plantation in 1840" (Ruff 145) owned by the Burns family. However, according to the novel, what sets her apart from her contemporaries is that she had a perfect memory: [b]y concentrating on a given date, she could summon a memory of everything she had done, everything done to her, from the moment she woke up to the moment she fell asleep" (ibid. 146). Indeed, her ability not only explains the history-mindedness of her descendants, but as the story suggests, it is also an ability that is seen as threatening by white slave-owners and their descendants. After Adah was freed, she used her perfect memory to work on a book that records "each day's labor [… and all the] insults she'd suffered" (Ruff 146) and sets an exact price for both her work and penalties for the injustices:

> For the penalties, Adah consulted her Bible. She charged twenty-seven dollars and twenty-six cents for each whipping, 27:26 being the verse in Matthew's Gospel where the Savior was flogged. Her price for the most common of the "other" insults, twenty-two dollars and a quarter, was based in Deuteronomy. Ruth entered the figures in neat columns, subtotaled and summed them. The final telly, after the subtraction of living expenses but before interest, came to $8,817.29—a small fortune at the time. (ibid. 146–147)

In a country like the United States that was largely built on slave labor (cf. Harris 54), this ledger is perceived as a dangerous book that contains forbidden knowledge. It is therefore not surprising that Adah's and her daughter Ruth's attempts to collect the money failed, since the "[t]he surviving members of the white Burns clan felt that their responsibility had ended with the destruction of the plantation, and they ignored Ruth's letter—as did eleven governors of Georgia and six U.S. presidents" (ibid. 147). Yet, as the novel suggests, it seems that by writing down all her memories, "she'd performed a kind of exorcism" (ibid.). By performing the act of "active forgetting" which "defuses and neutralizes past experiences that are not beneficial for present and future life" (Aydin 125), the "weight [of her memories] had been transferred to the ledger's pages [… and she was] doubly and truly freed" (Ruff 147).

However, the novel also emphasizes that this active forgetting "has nothing to do with memories fading away" (Aydin 125) or a silencing and suppression of the past. This becomes especially clear when one considers the fact that the Turner family still

maintains a tradition where the eldest child is appointed with "the safekeeping of the Book [of Adah]" (Ruff 147). Indeed, for generations "the family continued to keep the Book, meeting annually to calculate and record the interest in the still unpaid debt" (ibid. 145). Thus, Adah's perspective on her traumatic past from which she managed to move on without forgetting it becomes part of the family's history and tradition. As J. Roger Kurtz states, "[a] community's memory of trauma may not be erased, but it can be transformed in positive ways, and new narratives can make sense of trauma" (430). One can argue that stories about the creation and protection of Adah's book, told and retold through multiple generations, is such a narrative. Thereby, Montrose's family accomplishes what the family of his wife Dora, who is confronted with her origins only "through partial images, incomplete (hi)stories, fragmented memories, and silences" (Zapata 58), could not do themselves, which explains the two character's vastly different perspectives on the past.

In the course of the novel, it is Samuel Braithwhite's son Caleb who finally repays the debt owed to Adah and their ancestors, "the original eighty-eight hundred, plus ninety years' interest" (Ruff 174). And as is implied in the text, this payment manages to further help the family find closure for their traumatic past: Like in the past when Adah found out that the "weight [of her memories] had been transferred to the ledger's pages" (ibid. 147), George, "counting up the stacks [of money], […] felt the ledger in his other hand grow lighter, and then his whole body with it" (ibid. 174). However, as Atticus's father Montrose tells Caleb in a later confrontation, "[y]ou do not get to count paying off a debt ninety years past due as a good deed" (ibid. 275). Moreover, it is only a debt paid to one family and does not address the collective trauma inflicted through slavery, segregation, diaspora and racism. As Pier M. Larson argues, this collective trauma with the [m]emorialization of enslavement has proved a powerful means of identity formation for Africans in the Americas" (359) and will be further explored in the next subchapter with an analysis of these themes in *Ring Shout*.

The idea that a shared trauma can contribute to a sense of community and collective identity is also featured in the family history that is at the centre of *Lovecraft Country*. Because as novel emphasizes, Adah's descendants, the Turner branch and the Berry branch to which George belongs, have very different histories. While the Turners "had been given nothing: not freedom, not even their name" (Ruff 150), the Berrys "had been blessed, their last owner, Lucius Berry, being one of the rare true Christians salted among the ranks of the so-called faithful" (ibid. 149). The Berrys were not only treated more humanely by their owner but "Lucius [also] set out to atone for his family's sins:

He sold off the rest of his inheritance, put his slaves into wagons, and escorted them safely out west, where he gave them not just freedom but money and land to make a new start" (ibid. 150). From the perspective of the Turners, they were essentially just given what Adah and her descendants had to fight for over multiple generations. Indeed, the Turners looked down upon them and "made no secret of [their] disdain for how 'easy' the Berrys had had it" (ibid. 151). Since the identity and sense of community of their peers is forged by the shared memories of trauma and exploitation, they are treated as outsiders by the Turners who question that they experienced the same hardship.

Interestingly, it is only through the shared experience of Montrose Turner and George Berry at the Tulsa race massacre during which George went on his own to "rescue Adah's book from the Safe in [the city]" (ibid.) that the Turners change their opinion about the Berrys: "George never bragged about what he'd done, never tried to hold it over Montrose's head, but he knew he'd proved himself, and he knew Montrose knew it too" (Ruff 151). More importantly, their experience during the Tulsa race massacre made it clear that the exploitation and collective trauma of Black Americans is not merely a thing of the past, and the Berrys are affected by it the same as the others.

5.2.2 *"They Like the Places Where We Hurt": Collective Memory, Transgenerational Trauma and Diasporic Identity*

Modern historical events like the Tulsa race massacre in 1921 or the founding of the second Ku Klux Klan in 1915 are also repeatedly referenced in P. Djéli Clark's *Ring Shout*. The latter event is even portrayed as the catalyst for the main conflict of the story. However, it is important to note that, just like in *Lovecraft Country*, the events are not directly depicted in the novella but only featured as the traumatic memories of its characters. The traumatic nature of these memories becomes clear when one considers that Maryse and her comrades only refer to the day that the second Klan was founded as "D-Day, or Devil's Night" (Clark 30). And when the group encounters a poster of the movie *The Birth of a Nation*, which in the novella is responsible for the Klan's reemergence, it immediately triggers rage in the onlookers: "Sadie leans over me, stretching out the window to hurl curses at the poster. Can't say I blame her" (ibid.).

Moreover, the Tulsa race massacre is portrayed not only as a major defeat in the group's war against the Ku Kluxes but also as a deeply traumatic memory. As Maryse's friend Chef points out, "losing Tulsa last year was a hard blow" (ibid. 51) to the group, which is further illustrated by the fact that she is haunted by her memories of the event and "can still see Ku Kluxes marching, clawing through all the fire and smoke" (ibid.

51). And Maryse too has to relive these events in her "head, [as] memories flash—watching a mob hunt down colored folk in Elaine, Arkansas; Ku Kluxes rampaging down Greenwood in Tulsa" (ibid. 130–31). Thus, although the novella itself is historical fiction, or historical fantasy to be more precise, Clark depicts events of historical racial trauma only as part of the characters' pasts, as their memories, however, with substantial influence on the present. Indeed, one can argue that traumatic memories and transgenerational trauma are at the center of the novella. Just like in Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness", knowledge about a traumatic history is depicted as "a past that has not passed away – a past that intrusively invades the present" (LaCapra 55).

Just like Hannah in *Lovecraft Country* or the research team in "At the Mountains of Madness", the novella's protagonist Maryse has suppressed all memories of a central traumatic event in her past. Seven years before the events of the novella, Maryse found the dead bodies of her parents and her brother, "[t]hree bodies […] hanging from the barn rafters by ropes" (Clark 134–135), killed by the Ku Kluxes while she was hiding in a hatch. It is only when she encounters the creatures called the "Night Doctors" who feed on trauma and "desire the secret [Maryse] keep[s] from them" (ibid. 134) that she is forced to confront this memory which she had successfully suppressed by "stuffing a little girl back into that hatch, and all the horrors she'd seen" (ibid. 135). Since the Night Doctors "like the places where [people] hurt [… and] use it against [them]" (ibid. 134), Maryse is forced to reveal her memories by the Night Doctor's servant Dr. Bisset who travels with her back to the barn where her parents were killed.

According to Beatriz Pérez Zapata, "[t]rauma is […] an exploration in memory" (25), an image that is also used when Maryse physically visits and rediscovers her suppressed memories. Interestingly, in this exploration in memory, Maryse's identity is split in two, between her adult self and her childhood-self which, having been locked up, now wants to be free. Accordingly, while the adult Maryse reacts angrily to this intrusion in her memories, Maryse's childhood-self cooperates with Dr. Bisset and gives him the information willingly:

> Dr. Bisset bends to one knee. "You've been in here a long time." The girls nods. "It's where she keeps me." "I don't keep you nowhere!" I snap, anger bubbling up. She looks at me, and the fear in her round eyes sets me back. "Why do you stay down there?" Dr. Bisset asks. "To hide from the monsters. The ones who came looking." "That was seven years ago!" I shout. Dr. Bisset glances between us, and whatever he got under that blindfold put two and two together quick. "You look young for just seven years past," he tells the girl. "She keeps me this way. Think it's easier to imagine me small." (Clark 132)

Arguably most interesting about this passage is the fact that Maryse pictures herself as a small child in her traumatic memories although she was already eighteen when her

family was murdered. On the one hand, the fact that she appears as a child in her memories emphasizes the helplessness that she felt during this event. On the other hand, the fact that, as the little girl points out, "it's easier to imagine [herself] small" (ibid. 132) suggests that she also feels guilty for not helping her family but hiding "in the hole, shaking with fright" (ibid. 133). It is only after Dr. Bisset "sweep[s] away all illusions" (ibid. 132) that she sees herself as an eighteen-year-old girl. And as the novella suggests, it becomes harder for her to separate her adult self from this version that exists in her suppressed memories: "Not quite the woman of twenty-five, but no denying who she'll become" (ibid.).

The novella emphasizes that this exploration of Maryse's memory is an intrusive act by an outside force and, as she states, it is only "[her] scar to carry [and not …] theirs to feast on" (Clark 136). However, it also suggests that this process helps Maryse to restore her formerly split identity by "reintegrating the event […] through re-exposure and re-narrativization" (Pheasant-Kelly 15) of her trauma. Thus, when Maryse looks at the girl again, she notices that "[t]he fear on [the girl's] face is gone, because […] it's all inside [Maryse] now" (Clark 134). Only after Maryse is re-exposed to her traumatic memory and all illusions are dispelled is she able to re-embody the event:

> When I step inside [the barn], I'm alone. Whatever she was—a ghost I left behind, some trick in my head—is gone. So it's through my eyes that I relive the cold December morning seven years back, when I entered to the terrible sight before me. (ibid. 134)

Although the extraterrestrial villains, especially the Night Doctors "like the places where [people] hurt […and] use it against [them]" (ibid. 134), the novella also emphasizes that trauma is not only a weakness or inherently destructive but can also, through its role in constructing a shared identity, serve as a source of strength. This idea is explored in the novella through the image of a magical sword. It is revealed that it was during Mayse's most traumatic experience seven years ago that she received the sword that she uses to fight the Ku Kluxes. This sword, which is described as "a thing of vengeance" (ibid. 114), seems to be strengthened by the trauma of the owner, or as Maryse's cosmic mentors describe the weapon, "[t]he wielder must pour their own anger and suffering into it" (ibid.). However, as is illustrated by the visions Maryse sees whenever she uses the weapon, it is also the collective suffering of African diaspora populations and the collective trauma of slavery that gives the sword its power:

> The sword comes at my call, with the visions. A woman in Saint-Domingue shouting a war song at shaken French troops as she set herself on fire; a man in Cuba applying a balm to another's cut-open back, singing to soothe his lover's cries; a mother fleeing through thick Mississippi pines to a contraband camp, humming to quiet her babies. (ibid. 97)

It is the collective and transgenerational trauma of Africans who were sold into slavery and of their descendants, "colored folk everywhere, who carry [their] wounds with [them], sometimes open for all to see, but always so much more buried and hidden deep" (ibid. 155). One can argue that the sword together with the visions and the songs that accompany it not only break the silence surrounding their trauma but also helps to connect the individual experience to the collective trauma which make possible the "purposeful and explicit remembering as a form of empowerment and identity formation" (Larson 335).

The novella makes clear that Maryse's personal trauma is part of the larger collective trauma. As Maryse points out, in her visions when she uses the sword, "there's the girl. Always her. Sitting in a dark place, shaking all over, wide eyes staring up at me with fright" (Clark 24). And since Maryse suppressed her memories, she still refers to this trauma as someone else's and "shrug[s] off [the girl's] fear before it can sink in teeth" (ibid.). Only after she travels through her own memories and re-embodies the event does she "realize that amid the many visions, the girl is truly gone" (ibid. 136). As Maryse states here, "[t]he wound […] is still there, but it don't pulse raw like it used to [… and] is mending too, even if it might never fully heal" (ibid.). However, this does not mean that Maryse's memories are no longer part of the collective trauma that gives the sword its power. This becomes especially clear during the final fight against The Collective:

> The spirits that come now not just a few, not even hundreds. More like thousands, rushing to the sword, pouring out the songs of their lives, the strength of it running through the iron and up into me. Drums and shouts and cries, shrieks and laughter and howls, rhythmic chants and long keening moans. An archive of endless memories, from watery graves in the Atlantic to muddy rice fields and cotton plantations, from the stifling depths of gold mines to the sickly sweet smell of boiling sugar that consumed up people, devoured them in jaws of whips and chains and iron implements to shackle and ruin. I'm swept up by that maelstrom and I'm singing too, spilling out my own pain. (ibid. 156).

As becomes clear at the end of this passage, in the visions, Maryse's personal trauma together with the individual experiences of oppressed "colored folks everywhere" (ibid. 155) form the collective trauma that strengthens the sword, and for the first time she refers to the trauma as her own pain without projecting it onto a little girl.

However, although Maryse is able to re-embody her experience of the traumatic event in her past, she and the other members of the African diaspora population experience a sort of split identity, a "perilous intermediate position that both migrants and their children are deemed to occupy: living 'in-between' different nations" (McLeod 147). This becomes especially clear whenever she or the other resistance

fighters talk about the United States and Africa. When the group discusses not just their immediate plans to defend themselves against white supremacist groups but also regularly ponder the Pan-Africanist ideas of Marcus Garvey to "go back to Africa, to claim what's [theirs]" (Clark 59), it is evident that they are trapped "in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present" (Bhabha 219). And with Lester advocating that they need to go back to Africa to "[r]estore the colored race to [their] greatness, like in times past" (Clark 60) and Chef responding that she "got a home right here" (ibid. 59), the group is clearly conflicted about this topic.

Moreover, Maryse's friend Sadie embodies the idea that her cultural identity as a diasporic individual is not only "constructed through memory, [but also through] fantasy, narrative and myth" (Hall 226). Since the place of origin often becomes a "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" (Brah 192), Sadie only talks about Africa in fantastical terms: Her grandfather told her that "slaves from Africy had wings, but white folk cut them off so they couldn't fly home" (Clark 44), and before her death, she wonders if she will fly "all the way back to Africy" (ibid. 104). Furthermore, it becomes clear that, being alienated from her history, she had to "'create' an 'imagined motherland' that only resembles the original history in the 'remotest way'" (Cohen 26). Thus, when Sadie imagines herself back in Africa, she can only envision an exaggerated stereotypical image of herself "[s]trutting around on elephants or whatever" (Clark 88). Since this place of desire exists only in the imagination, a return to Africa, as proposed by Lester, would not resolve what W. E. B. Du Bois describes as the "two-ness [of being …] an American [and] a Negro" (11). However, as Maryse's visions illustrate, paradoxically "the uprooting of slavery and transportation […] 'unified' these peoples across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to their past" (Hall 227). Thus, one can argue that while the collective trauma of enforced displacement and diaspora produced a "dramatic loss of identity and meaning" (Eyerman 2), it also "formed the root of an emergent collective identity through an equally emergent collective memory" (ibid. 1).

At the end of the novella when the extraterrestrials called "The Collective" try to bring Maryse over to their side, it becomes clear that their offer also cannot heal the trauma of slavery and enforced displacement, just like they cannot bring back Maryse's family (cf. Clark 149). Instead, they offer her "power – enough to never need fear anyone again [… and] to avenge all those wrongs" (ibid. 150). And although it is a tempting offer because, as Maryse puts it, "[w]hen colored folk ever had anyone offer [them] so much [… or] the power not to be scared no more?" (ibid. 153), she ultimately

decides to decline. The reason that The Collective makes this offer, as it turns out, is that "the hate [that white supremacists] give is senseless" (ibid. 148) which to them, as beings that consume hate, makes it taste like "watered-down whiskey" (ibid.). As Butcher Clyde explains, oppressed people like Black American, in contrast, "got a good reason to hate […and] every reason to despise [white Americans]" which makes their hate taste "so pure, so sure and righteous—so strong!" (ibid.).

However, as Maryse realizes, there is a difference between hate and her own people's "righteous anger and cry for justice" (ibid. 155). And although she herself has been temporarily consumed by her own anger after her traumatic experience seven years ago, "wandering, killing Ku Kluxes [and doubting whether she] was even fully human no more" (Clark 135), it becomes clear that these negative emotions can also be used productively. Ultimately, she defeats The Collective by summoning up "not just the anger of what [she has] seen with [her] own eyes but centuries of anger" (ibid. 154), the memories and collective trauma that are part of their identity and allows them to resist the enemy's attempts to make "you forget yourself [until you are …] something like them" (ibid. 155).

Furthermore, although the sword is called "a thing of vengeance" (ibid. 114), its history suggests that it was also created to offer repentance. It was forged by an African chief who was involved in the slave trade and infused the sword with magic to call "on the dead who got sold away […to] seek the spirits of the ones who sent them across the sea, and bind those chiefs and kings, even his own self, up in that iron—make them serve those they done wrong" (ibid. 74). One can argue that it is this repentance and acknowledgement of wrongdoing, rather than vengeance, that Marye and the resistance fighters seek from white Americans: An acknowledgement of historical oppression in a culture that "doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past" (Morrison qtd. in Gilroy 222). Because as Maryse points out, the ones who bought the slaves and oppressed them also "got penance to pay" (Clark 179). But as to Auntie Ondine tells Maryse at the end of the novella, there is "a whole other sword" (ibid.) to repent for this guilt.

5.2.3   "An Awful Lore Is Not Yet Dead": The Continuing Legacy of Systemic Racism

As already illustrated, an essential element of Lovecraft's stories, "the past [that] encroaches menacingly on the present" (Dziemianowicz 171), is also prominently featured in contemporary Lovecraftian fiction, as traumatic memories, secret family histories as well as forbidden knowledge about past injustices that the perpetrators and

their descendants try to silence. Moreover, the three works feature yet another variation of this theme that is an important element in Lovecraft's novella "At the Mountains of Madness": The idea that a horrifying element of the past secretly survived into the present, like Lovecraft's shoggoths surviving for millions of years in ancient ruins in Antarctica. In the case of the three contemporary Lovecraftian works, it is the oppressive structures of slavery that survived in the form of systemic racism, an "invisible, concealed and hidden racism, which operates both consciously and unconsciously" (Kilvington et al. 70). While slavery itself is only featured through memories and family histories in the three works, the protagonists are at many times directly confronted with the consequences of systemic racism. One can argue that the various white supremacist cults and secret orders that are featured here are only the most overtly aggressive representatives of systemic racism as a broader, even more secretive order that structures American society. Like a supernatural influence comparable to the powers of Lovecraft's sleeping Old Ones, systemic racism "can be experienced as an impersonal force latent in place even when racist actors are absent" (Kneale 100).

Moreover, the trauma that Black Americans experience is not only the collective trauma based on the memory of slavery and diaspora but also racial trauma resulting from present-day interpersonal and systemic racism. As Kenneth T. Ponds states, this racial trauma is often experienced as "an ongoing physical or psychological threat that produces feelings of fear, anxiety, depression, helplessness, and post-traumatic stress disorder" (23), emotions that have been identified in the prior analysis of the three works. However, as Laurie Vickroy states, "traumatic experience can inspire not only a loss of self-confidence, but also a loss of confidence in the social and cultural structures that are supposed to create order and safety" (13). And it is this reaction in particular that is emphasized when Black characters in the three works are affected by systemic racism and experience the horrifying realization that this "awful lore is not yet dead" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 151).

As was already established in the prior analysis of the figure of the outsider in contemporary Lovecraftian fiction, Tommy Tester in Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* is racially othered and lives in a near constant state of fear, anxiety, and helplessness whenever he leaves the safety of Harlem and travels through the predominantly white neighborhoods around New York. However, the novella suggests that it is the knowledge about how systemic racism impacted his father, rather than the experience of interpersonal racism, that leads to him losing "confidence in the social

and cultural structures" (Vickroy 13) and becoming "a scammer, a swindler, a con" (LaValle 11). As Tommy recalls, when working in construction, his father Otis "had earned a Negro's wage, not a white man's […] and even that money was withheld if the foreman sometimes wanted a bit more in his pocket" (ibid. 18). Moreover, there is no institution that would protect Otis against such obvious discrimination because "Negroes weren't allowed to join [unions]" (ibid.). Similarly, in *Lovecraft Country*, Atticus's friend Letitia wants to buy a house but is only able to do so through a "Realtist: a Negro real-estate broker [… n]ot to be confused with a Realtor, whose national association Negroes could not join" (Ruff 112). And even in niche organizations like the Freemasons which can be seen as a sort of micro-society (cf. Vanbeveren 2), Black people are not allowed to join and instead had to form their own secret society, "the Prince Hall Freemasons" (Ruff 79). And unlike other secret societies and cults that are featured in the novel, they are primarily a "social club, charity, and mutual-aid organization [… and its members are not] going to become secret masters of the universe" (ibid. 155).

As becomes clear in these instances, systemic racism "involves much more than individual racial prejudices and discrimination" (Feagin and Elias 937). It is "enmeshed in the fabric of the U.S. social order" (Ladson-Billings 264) and as such it "infects policies, practices, socio-economic and political systems to benefit ethnic majority groups at the expense of minoritized ethnic groups" (Kilvington et al. 70). Consequently, the lesson that Tommy learns from his father's experience is that "you better have a way to make your own money because this world wasn't trying to make a Negro rich" (LaValle 19). It seems significant that Tommy reacts to systemic injustices in the same manner that he confronts the occult: "Skirt the rules but don't break them" (ibid. 20). Since Tommy is powerless to either directly confront the white cultists or destroy the system that oppresses him, at least until he becomes Black Tom, he can only use his marginalized status to his advantage. Tommy not only takes advantage of his father's limited access to education, his illiteracy, to let him rip out the last page of a dangerous magical book (cf. ibid. 20) but also uses the prejudices of his rich white customers against them when he plays the role of "the hardest gangsters in Harlem" (ibid. 15), "the dazzling, down-and-out musician" (ibid. 11) or of, depending on the circumstances, either the magical or "[c]lueless Negro" (ibid. 25).

Tommy is only able to move from these small acts of resistance to strategies of actually challenging the system once he gains more agency and power as Black Tom. However, since racism is so deeply ingrained into the social order of the United States,

he is only able to dismantle it by destroying the world. After Tommy brings the Old Ones back to rule over earth, he proclaims: "All this will pass. Humanity will be washed away. The globe will be theirs again, and it's me who did it. Black Tom did it. I gave them the world" (ibid. 148). One can argue that by making Tommy commit this desperate act, LaValle comments on the pervasiveness and persistence of systemic racism, a sentiment that Calvin Warren also acknowledges when he states that "[b]ecause anti-blackness infuses itself into every fabric of social existence, it is impossible to emancipate blacks without literally destroying the world" (Warren 239). As becomes clear in the course of the novella, Tommy arrives at this conclusion only after his loss of confidence in the social and cultural structures transformed into a more radical nihilism. Tommy realizes that even Robert Suydam, who promises "[t]he end of this current order, its civilization of subjugation" (LaValle 76), is no different than "any other man [… and only] want[s] power" (ibid. 129). Tommy comes to the conclusion: "Mankind didn't make messes; mankind was the mess" (ibid. 76).

Although the two other works of Lovecraftian fiction are less nihilistic in their conclusion, they too depict this loss of confidence in society and emphasize that white supremacist cultists are far from the only reason for the precarious situation of Black Americans. In *Ring Shout*, Maryse's friend Sadie is regularly ridiculed by the other freedom fighters because of her conviction that the government is aware of the existence of the Ku Kluxes: "Y'all can roll your eyes all you want! But I'm telling you the government know 'bout all this" (Clark 48). However, even before she is proven right at the end of the novella when the clean-up of the battlefield is "supervised by government men in dark suits, smoking and giving orders" (ibid. 177), they are already aware that Black Americans cannot expect any kind of protection against the Ku Kluxes from the police or assistance from the government. As Maryse points out, "[o]nly time [the police] come here is when some Negro escapes a chain gang" (ibid. 33). Moreover, the area in Macon that is predominantly inhabited by Black people has "no telegraph lines […, its] streets are unpaved and [… when] Pleasant Hill ran plumb out of water [… the] City moved slow as molasses in January to fix it" (ibid.).

In *Lovecraft Country*, since the police is one of the most threatening forces that Black characters are confronted with, police brutality as a manifestation of systemic racism is put at the forefront of the novel. Like the shoggoths in the woods around Ardham, they prey upon Black travellers after dark, enforcing segregation and protecting the "the economic resources and power [of white Americans] that has been generationally passed down" (Kilvington et al. 70). This idea is most explicitly depicted

through the character Sheriff Hunt who patrols the area around Bideford to ensure that Black travelers like Atticus and his family do not disturb its white inhabitants (cf. Ruff 50). The town of Bideford itself is also significant here. As Atticus learns, "[t]he town developed a reputation for being unusually backward-looking" (ibid. 40). It is a place where remnants of the past are kept alive to such a degree that it held "slaves more than a decade after the Massachusetts Supreme declared slavery unconstitutional" (ibid.). Moreover, Bideford "refused to be assimilated, and eventually the legislature threw up its hands and decided to let them be" (Ruff 40). One can argue that this small town, which is described as a "land time forgot—inbred, insular, clinging to the past tooth and nail," (ibid.) embodies the idea that the legacy of slavery secretly survived in the United States. And as is emphasized through the role of Sherrif Hunt, this remnant of the past is ignored or even protected by institutional forces like the government and the police.

In all three novels, the words of Robert Suydam ring true that when confronted with the poverty and criminality resulting from systemic injustices, "[p]olicemen despair of order or reform and seek rather to erect barriers protecting the outside world from the contagion" (LaValle 47). In their protection of white spaces, they often use violent means and show only indifference when it results in Black deaths. Arguably the most traumatic instance of police violence in the three works is included in LaValle's novella. Tommy is told by the police that his father has been killed during a search of their apartment, shot by Mr. Howard when he mistook his guitar for a rifle: "'I felt in danger for my life,' Mr. Howard said. 'I emptied my revolver. Then I reloaded and did it again'" (ibid. 65). This, of course, immediately brings to mind prominent contemporary instances of unarmed Black Americans who were killed by the police, highlighting the fact that legacy of systemic racism persists today.

Furthermore, this traumatic experience also makes Tommy question one of the central themes of cosmic horror: "A fear of cosmic indifference suddenly seemed comical, or downright naive. […] What was indifference compared with malice?" (ibid. 66). To Tommy, the fear of cosmic indifference of privileged white people like Robert Suydam, the "breathless terror with which the old man spoke of the Sleeping King" (ibid.), is a luxury compared with the terror of racist dehumanization that he and other Black Americans experience daily. As Tommy proclaims, "[i]ndifference would be such a relief" (ibid). Moreover, James Kneale suggests that contemporary Lovecraftian fiction often likens racism to the cosmic powers of the Old Ones when they make the point that "racism deforms space and time" (Kneale 102). He argues that one example of this comparison is "The Safe Negro Travel Guide" in *Lovecraft Country* (cf. 102).

The book defines the term "Jim Crow Mile" as "[a] unit of measurement […] comprising both physical distance and random helpings of fear, frustration, and outrage" (Ruff 1). Moreover, when asked about his age, Atticus's uncle George points out that "forty-one, in Jim Crow years, is old. Ancient, even" (Ruff 273). Similarly, when Tommy in *The Ballad of Black Tom* must travel through a predominantly white neighborhood, "[he understood the journey […] as travel to another universe" (LaValle 35). Thus, racism can be regarded as an eery entity, one of the "invisible, powerful hyperobjects […] that are] present in and shaping place" (Kneale 99). Like Lovecraft's cosmic beings, it exists "beyond human perceptions, human limitations of space, and even time "(LaValle 55).

However, since racism is perceived as "normal, not aberrant, in American Society" (Delgado xiv), racial discrimination from systemic racism often remains invisible. One can argue that in the three contemporary Lovecraftian works, white Americans who do not perceive or ignore the continuing legacy of systemic racism in society take on the role of the blissfully ignorant broader population in Lovecraft's stories, unaware about the existence of powerful cosmic beings on earth that secretly influence their lives. This connection becomes especially apparent when one considers that in *The Ballad of Black Tom*, Robert Suydam who prides himself on his knowledge of occult secrets is also the only white character who acknowledges the existence of systemic racism (cf. LaValle 47). Thus, when he talks about forbidden knowledge, about "a great and secret show [that] had been playing […] throughout all our lives, but the mass of us were too ignorant, or too frightened, to raise our eyes and watch" (ibid. 49), he could just as well be addressing his knowledge about systemic oppression.

However, unlike in Lovecraft's works where the protagonists try to censor this forbidden knowledge to spare the broader population from its traumatizing effects, in LaValle's novella, Tommy tries to break this silence. After all, as Gloria Ladson-Billings points out, "the strategy of those who fight for racial social justice is to unmask and expose racism in all of its various permutations" (264). Thus, during the climax of the novella when New Yorks's police force engages in a violent military-like raid on tenement buildings occupied by Red Hook' immigrants population, Tommy incorporates this "maelstrom of gunfire and shouting on the street" (LaValle 128) into his song. By playing the titular "Ballad of Black Tom", he performs a ritual that opens a gate to the Old Ones: "The scream of the locals combined as if it were a single instrument […] demented music, evil orchestration" (ibid. 128–129). And when the gate to The Sleeping King opens, Malone for the first time sees one of the Old Ones, "amid

the ruins of the sunken city, [he] perceived the figure's enormous features" (ibid. 131). Through Tommy's song which incorporates the violence of racial discrimination, Malone is now forced to acknowledge both the existence of the Old Ones and of systemic racism. Finally, when Malone reacts to this forbidden knowledge by "closing his eyes" (ibid.), Tommy decides to cut away his eyelids, so that "[he] can't choose blindness when it suits [him]. Not anymore" (ibid. 133).

6 Conclusion

The aim of this master thesis was to identify the colonialist, racist and xenophobic attitudes in Lovecraft's work that shaped the genre cosmic horror and examine the various strategies how contemporary Lovecraftian fiction challenges these tendencies in order to decolonize the genre. I argue that it is primarily three common themes in cosmic horror that offer authors of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction the possibility for subversion: the figure of the outsider, the role of forbidden knowledge and the fear of a past that is encroaching on the present. All three of these themes are not only portrayed ambivalently in Lovecraft's own work but are also closely related to important issues of postcolonial studies like othering, trauma, identity and knowledge production. Moreover, since these themes are central to the structure and philosophy of cosmic horror, by incorporating these themes into their works and offering a different perspective, authors of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction can challenge Lovecraft's colonial perspective while still producing a Lovecraftian story.

The figure of the outsider in Lovecraft's works is ambivalent and encompasses both the common Lovecraftian protagonist, the traveler who visits and studies a strange and hostile place, and racialized hybrid characters like Wilbur Whateley in "The Dunwich Horror" whose relations with the Old Ones and potential for passing is portrayed as the primary threat. In works of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction like Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* and Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*, these various depictions of outsiders are combined into one character. Black characters like Atticus and Tommy are racially othered and alienated in the United States of the Jim Crow era, particularly when they travel through white spaces. In the novels, these white spaces are portrayed as strange and hostile areas where the racialized outsiders are not only hypervisible, spatially restricted but often in danger of their lives. The protagonists of these stories use various strategies to alleviate the hypervisibility of the Black body and

defend themselves against the "white gaze" that include forbidden books like "The Safe Negro Travel Guide" or role-playing to appear less threatening and adhering to racist expectations. LaValle and Ruff not only present Jim Crow America as a hostile and eerie place where racist violence is normalized and therefore remains hidden, but they also contrast them with the safety of Black or multicultural spaces. Thus, the authors directly respond to Lovecraft's depictions of these spaces which incorporated racist and Orientalist stereotypes and directly linked non-Western cultures to the occult.

Indeed, in contemporary Lovecraftian fiction, it is not the racialized outsider character but instead white occultists who, driven by the desire to increase their power, practice magic and seek out forbidden knowledge. Whereas the Black body is racially othered and hypervisible, the white body is seen as the norm and therefore remains invisible. This invisibility and other magical powers are portrayed in these works as just another form of white privilege. Accordingly, the authors of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction make it clear that this invisibility and invincibility of white individuals, aptly symbolized in the "mark of Cain" in *Lovecraft Country*, needs to be reversed to challenge their privileged position. In the same vein, the normalized racism in American society also needs to be exposed in order to resist it. In P. Djèli Clark's novella *Ring Shout*, it is an ability called "The Sight", which only Black characters possess, that represents both the ability to distinguish between "human" and "monster" as well as the capacity to perceive racial injustices in society. While Clark's novella *Ring Shout* incorporates and essentially preserves the common Lovecraftian opposition between human and non-human outsiders, LaValle in his novella reinforces the idea that monsters are created and not born. By emphasizing human insignificance, LaValle not only questions such binary categorizations as "human" and "non-human" but also makes his protagonist embrace the cosmic disillusionment that usually destabilizes the identity of the common Lovecraftian protagonists.

Indeed, as all three authors highlight in their works, Black people, since their humanity has historically often not been acknowledged, are better equipped to cope with such forbidden knowledge which questions humanity's place in the universe and renders distinctions between "human", "non-human" or "less than human" as meaningless. Moreover, it is suggested that this forbidden knowledge is less traumatizing to the protagonists of these contemporary Lovecraftian works because they do not subscribe to a Eurocentric system of knowledge which upholds the idea that Western science covers the totality of the known. In stories by Lovecraft like "The Call of Cthulhu", the figures of the scientist and the cultist are presented as two opposing

forces where the former group represents this coloniality of knowledge and the latter a subversion of the established order. The three works of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction challenge the roles of these groups in various ways. Matt Ruff in *Lovecraft Country*, for instance, combines them into a group called "The Sons of Adam", white supremacist cultists who view themselves as scientists. This cult as the villains of the story not only embodies the colonial hegemony of Western science and a hierarchical conception of nature but Ruff subverts these attitudes by portraying the cultists as practitioners of dark magic and seekers of forbidden knowledge, a depiction that Lovecraft commonly attributed to characters with a non-white and non-Western background. This portrayal is also consistent with characters like Robert Suydam in *The Ballad of Black Tom* and the Ku Klux Klan in *Ring Shout*. All three works of Lovecraftian fiction link this occultist desire to gain forbidden knowledge to the eccentric pastimes of rich white people or depict it as another way for the privileged to enhance their power.

Through its inclusion of a multicultural community of resistance fighters in the story, P. Djèli Clark's *Ring Shout* also depicts a positive alternative to this Eurocentric conception of knowledge that is embodied in the scientist/cultist characters. Indeed, the perspectives of both Holly, who is a scientist, and Nana Jean, who relies on traditional knowledge, are depicted as equally valid. In fact, as not only the three works but also Lovecraft's own stories suggest, folklore and traditional knowledge can at times be more accurate than Western science when it comes to cosmic knowledge. In Clark's novella, it is a book of African folktales through which Maryse can make sense of this cosmic knowledge and which ultimately helps her defeat the extraterrestrials who are threatening earth. At the same time, *Ring Shout* compares Lovecraft's own works to movies like *The Birth of a Nation* and to his own conception of forbidden books like the "Necronomicon" which spread harmful knowledge and make humanity more vulnerable to outside forces. Thus, the novella not only reverses Lovecraft's fear of foreign cultural influences but also challenges the idea that oral traditions, folklore, and traditional knowledge are less valuable than Western literature and science.

Accordingly, in the works of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction, Black characters like Maryse and the resistance fighters in *Ring Shout*, Atticus and his family in *Lovecraft Country* and Tommy in *The Ballad of Black Tom* are separated from the ignorant general population that is unaware of certain types of knowledge. What the ability called "The Sight" in *Ring Shout* encapsulates is the idea that the liminal perspective of Black Americans, possessing double consciousness, allows them to

perceive aspects of American society that are usually ignored or even actively suppressed. One of these hidden truths about American society is the fact that, like the Old Ones who once ruled earth, the oppressive structures of slavery secretly survived as systemic racism. Fitting to the genre, the three works of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction portray the fact that this knowledge is completely ignored by the general population as one of the most terrifying aspects. Although the three works highlight many instances of interpersonal racism and depict overtly racist white supremacist organizations through the various cults, each of these stories also emphasize that racism exists on a structural level, is normalized, and therefore remains invisible. In this context, they address another prominent theme in Lovecraft's work, namely that characters who belong to public institutions like the government, the police or universities censor and suppress forbidden knowledge for the wellbeing of the general population. In the works of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction, it is knowledge about the existence of both the Old Ones and of these systems of oppression that is ignored or even suppressed by representatives of these public institutions. Accordingly, the protagonist of the three Lovecraftian work against the motivations of the usual Lovecraftian protagonist and try to make the ignorant white population aware of this knowledge. This connection becomes especially apparent in LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* where the protagonist Tommy exposes the white occultists of the story who see themselves as seekers of knowledge not only to traumatic cosmic truths but also the realities of racial oppression in the United States.

Another important theme and subcategory of forbidden knowledge both in Lovecraft's works and in contemporary Lovecraftian fiction is knowledge about the past, about the history of slavery in general as well as individual memories and family histories. While this theme is portrayed in Lovecraft's work as another instance of forbidden knowledge revealing human insignificance and thereby causing trauma, in *Lovecraft Country* and *Ring Shout*, the past is featured more ambiguously. On the one hand, learning the forbidden knowledge about family histories and recovering suppressed memories are depicted as traumatic events. However, on the other hand, just like with hidden systemic racism, the stories make it clear that progress and healing is only possible if one moves "from silence into speech" (bell hooks, *Talking Back* 9). If this knowledge remains hidden, these suppressed traumatic memories may be transmitted as "postmemory" to future generations. Moreover, the stories suggest that the collective historical trauma of forced displacement, diaspora and slavery serves as an important source of cultural identity for African Americans. Therefore, one can argue

that, whereas Lovecraft's work portrays forbidden knowledge about the past as an identity threat, in contemporary Lovecraftian fiction, it is the suppression of this knowledge about history that threatens the collective identity of African Americans and therefore needs to be challenged.

Although the three works of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction that were chosen for the analysis of this master thesis all adopt the important themes in the genre cosmic horror, they vary significantly in their emphasis. While Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* refrains from incorporating any of Lovecraft's cosmic entities and for the most part avoids the cosmic perspective and emphasis on human insignificance that is central to the genre, by focusing on the experience of traveling for Black Americans, the novel manages to make the racist but mundane American society of the Jim Crow era appear as one of Lovecraft's weird and eerie locations. *Ring Shout* by P. Djèli Clark on the other hand sets itself apart from other works of Lovecraftian fiction by connecting cosmic knowledge with African folklore as well as traditional knowledge and thus renegotiating the established power relations of these various forms of knowledge in Lovecraft's work. One can argue that Victor LaValle's novella *The Ballad of Black Tom* especially succeeds in producing the effect "cosmic horror" that gives the genre its name by not only preserving the characteristic nihilism and focus on human insignificance of Lovecraftian fiction but completely exorcising it from Lovecraft's own "protectionist illusions" about racial and cultural superiority (cf. Ligotti 60).

Given the prevalence of racist, xenophobic, and colonialist themes in the genre of cosmic horror, it seems appropriate to be concerned when the "present cultural moment [is described] as 'The Age of Lovecraft' (Kumler 46), an observation that seems to be supported by the increasing interest in Lovecraft's works and wide popularity of Lovecraftian media in various forms. However, I argue that the genre is particularly adaptable and well suited to be challenged and reimagined because its central themes already contain elements of ambiguity and subversion within it. Since cosmic horror is essentially horror fiction and therefore wants to frighten and cause anxiety, Lovecraft already incorporated many of the challenges to his own white supremacist ideology and colonialist conceptions into his stories. And as the three contemporary works have proven, authors who want to challenge his racist legacy may seize these elements and rewrite or "write back" to Lovecraft while still producing an easily recognizable work of Lovecraft fiction.

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