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H.P. Lovecraft's Weird Body

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“The horror of the cosmos is essentially a horror of the body.”
— Dylan Trigg, *The Thing*, 2014

Introduction

[1] The writings of H.P. Lovecraft are experiencing a renaissance in the twenty-first century. Elevated from “pulp author to canonical classic” by the *Library of America* publication of his oeuvre in 2005, Lovecraft has since been revived in literary criticism and, perhaps even more productively, in philosophy (Harman, “On the Horror,” 4). In the last decade or so, Lovecraft’s tales, letters, and essays have reemerged with intensity, markedly in the influential philosopher Graham Harman’s book, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Zero Books, 2012). Lovecraft’s work has repeatedly appeared in philosophical essays and books that follow in Harman’s speculative realist tradition, where the tales often serve as the literary example *par excellence*.

[2] Residing under the banner of this speculative realism are two distinct but related philosophical methods, object-oriented ontology (OOO) and new materialism, which have jointly undertaken a thorough re-examination of the place of the human in relation to the nonhuman world. Through varying approaches, these philosophers seek to overturn the longstanding assumption that human life and perception serve as an ontological foundation for any ethical study of the world. The effect that these philosophical inquiries have had on literary and cultural studies cannot be overstated. In the twenty-first century, the influence of speculative realism is evidenced in the outpouring of literary criticism and cultural theory that directly contends with the tenets of this philosophy. Both OOO and the myriad of new materialist approaches to the study of literature are burgeoning methods that have, after a decade or more on the literary scene, continued to introduce a host of new literary objects worthy of study, as well as breathe new life into older literature otherwise exhausted or abandoned.

[3] The reemergence of Lovecraft’s work within this context is therefore no coincidence. The adoption of Lovecraft by the speculative realists marks his collection of tales as the quintessential example of literature that refuses the centrality of human life within a rapidly expanding cosmos. His fiction serves as a link between the Modernist period and the contemporary one through this de-emphasis of the human and the inherent inability to ever fully comprehend the mysteries of the universe.

[4] His life, from 1890 – 1937 primarily in Providence, Rhode Island, neatly spans what is most commonly identified as the period of literary Modernism. His work, though published almost exclusively in small, pulp magazines like *Weird Tales* (1923-1954), reflects many of the concerns of more widely-read and recognized

Modernist writers of the period. These concerns include a fascination with and skepticism toward scientific dogma and technological advances, a cynicism towards religion, a return to realism, and a challenge to human's capacity for knowledge. Lovecraft's work asks readers to contemplate how one comes to know what one knows, whether knowledge of the world is ever really possible at all, and to imagine instead forms of nonhuman knowledge. The philosophers central to this essay have taken up this question with enthusiasm, going so far as to herald Lovecraft as "philosophy[s] new literary hero" (Harman, "On the Horror," 6).

[5] Lovecraft's place in literary modernism has been historically debated throughout the twentieth century, evidenced by key essays in defense of his work by the preeminent Lovecraft scholar and biographer S.T. Joshi. In a period obsessed with the designation of and distinction between high and low aesthetics, Lovecraft's work was immediately relegated to mere pulp, a categorization that would persist into the twenty-first century. Indeed, his fiction contains quite a bit of the fantastic, the supernatural, and the weird, descriptions that seem hardly on par with the work of recognized literary greats of the first part of the twentieth century: T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, Djuna Barnes, or Gertrude Stein. Lovecraft's supernatural stories draw from his study of astrophysics, Newtonian physics, and complex geometry to ponder the existence of alien beings on far away planets or in the fourth dimension. While his tales are rooted almost entirely in fictional towns of Massachusetts, his narrators experience supremely unbelievable events like encounters with invisible beasts, extraterrestrial consciousness swaps, and chance encounters with haunted cities of alien races from millions of years past. His work has been criticized for more than just its content – critics have long consigned Lovecraft's literary style to the hackneyed and sloppy, too verbose or too prescriptive, despite an immense oeuvre that surges with elegant and masterfully controlled tales.

[6] At his worst, Lovecraft can certainly be a tedious writer, even formulaic. But when writing at his best – and critics will disagree a bit as to when this is – he expertly creates an atmosphere of fear and confusion. He denies his readers any full disclosure of the creatures that populate his tales, and hints instead at "the general outline of the thing" (Lovecraft, *Cthulhu* 5, 141, 201), or its "weird silhouette" (Lovecraft, *The Thing*, 242). As I will demonstrate in the section that follows, speculative realist philosophers have found this quality of Lovecraft's writing, the refusal to name the horror that so terrifies the narrators of his tales, to be his principal achievement as a writer. Graham Harman, a philosopher at the helm of speculative realism, has written of Lovecraft, "No other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess" (*Weird Realism*, 3). Harman finds Lovecraft compelling because of this "gap" that his writing reproduces, the refusal of representing to his readers the horrors of the cosmos. For Harman, Lovecraft's work emphasizes the unbridgeable space between experiences in the world and one's ability to ever fully describe them.

[7] Because the philosophical field of speculative realism has been at the forefront of Lovecraft studies in the last decade, this essay will begin with a discussion of the important contributions that thinkers in this vein have made to the study of Lovecraft. Speculative realism is largely responsible for Lovecraft's revival, and it has reinvigorated Lovecraft studies. Their collective emphasis on Lovecraft's flattened ontology has fixed his work at the center of anthropocene studies, eco-criticism, and object-oriented ontology, and together they form a new set of foundational texts for any serious scholar of Lovecraft and his philosophy. Yet no current works provide a thorough study of the way in which Lovecraft's weird tales have been taken up across these

philosophical and theoretical works. Lovecraft's "weird" has played a significant role in the development of speculative realism, and I therefore will continue this essay by laying out how "the weird" in Lovecraft has been employed in these accounts. I do this first to demonstrate the import of his writing within contemporary philosophy, and second, in order to situate my own subsequent departure from these readings and from their conception of the weird, which have now come to saturate the study and understanding of Lovecraft.

[8] My readings of Lovecraft's tales are influenced by feminist theory, specifically feminist new materialism, a field heavily influenced by the study of the sciences, which, as Rebekah Sheldon has recently argued, lies in thorny relation to other speculative realist philosophies and especially to object-oriented ontology.^[1] Whereas OOO readings of Lovecraft seek to undermine the human and thus are not interested specifically in corporeality in his work, I am instead drawn to the work that makes up the concurrent "material turn"^[2] in feminism – one that aims to restore the complex makeup of the body as nonhuman, as an "agentic force," and imagines how human corporeality can "account for how the discursive and the material interact in the constitution of bodies" (Alaimo and Hekman, 7). This essay is informed by feminist and queer theorists who have argued that embodiment must take into account the biological, environmental, atmospheric, chemical, geologic, and various other agential forces and their interactions with the body in order to understand the body's porous and willful nature.

[9] In a series of related keynote talks she delivered in 2014,^[3] Donna Haraway argues against human exceptionalism and individualism, citing that the so-called human has always been comprised of the nonhuman as well. Referencing Scott Gilbert's work,^[4] Haraway claims: "We are all lichens now. We have never been individuals. From the anatomical, physiological, evolutionary, developmental, philosophic, economic. I don't care what perspective. We are all lichens now" (AURA talk, delivered 5/9/14, approx. 22 min 45 sec). Through the use of examples of all kinds of creatures both real and imaginary, Haraway builds an argument against the now dominant term "anthropocene" and calls instead for the naming of the current epoch as the "Cthulucene." It is perhaps no coincidence that Haraway borrows from Lovecraft's most famous monster from "Call of Cthulhu,"^[5] the indescribable, timeless entity Cthulhu that has given Lovecraft much cultish adoration. She says it is not the anthropocene but

the Cthulucene, the phonic ones, the not yet finished, ongoing, abyssal, and dreadful ones that are generative and destructive, and make Gaia look like a junior kindergarten daughter... The Cthulucene might be a way to collect up the questions for naming the epoch, for naming what is happening in the airs, waters, and places, in the rocks and oceans, and atmospheres... [It is a way] to imagine a world more liveable. (AURA talk, at approx. 1 min)

[10] Haraway's adoption of Cthulhu to name a kind of possible "reworlding" wherein we might "have a chance of ongoing" (Haraway, AURA talk, approx. 25 min), is a rare optimistic twist on the squid-like beast, whose literary life has come to be otherwise synonymous with human insignificance on an apocalyptic scale. But her naming of the Cthulucene also signals the way in which Lovecraft's literary efforts might be read from a feminist materialist perspective, one which takes stock of the material, often nonhuman forms and forces that are intricately connected to "human life" and more specifically to human embodiment.

[11] I therefore continue this essay with speculative realist accounts of Lovecraft because of a curious neglect of corporeality. For while it is true that Lovecraft's work exposes the insignificance of the human

race in deep time, the characters in his tales cannot escape their bounded-ness to the body in their respective presents. They experience the body as strange and alien, freakish and out-of-control, or even as imprisonment. In addition, those speculative realists, like Harman, who are more interested in Lovecraft's formal techniques at the cost of content, neglect the political stakes that are inextricable from the body. For example, Lovecraft's still controversial racist and xenophobic attitudes towards people of color and immigrants is well documented in his writings. Although this essay does not explicitly engage with those moments of Lovecraft's inexcusable racial politics,^[6] my resistance to exclusively speculative realist readings of Lovecraft is also a resistance to a reading methodology that risks allowing for this racism to escape unnoticed. Although here I will examine stories that are not exclusively about race, I argue that turning attention towards embodiment in Lovecraft's stories is at least one of the ways we might engage critically with the body politics present in Lovecraft's work more broadly. The repeated encounters that Lovecraft's characters have *with their own bodies* as strange stages corporeality as entangled with Lovecraft's horror in profound and largely unexplored ways.

[12] This essay will contend with what has become the trend in the study of Lovecraft, that erasure of subjectivity for the sake of de-anthropocentrism. As the fields of speculative realist philosophy and cultural theory have slowly turned away from the privileging of the human, the sacrifice in Lovecraft studies has been the neglected consideration of embodiment as a primary theme across his work. In what follows, I will interrogate Lovecraft's characterization of bodily experience: the ways in which the body resists our control, estranges us, and incites horror in us. Ultimately I hope to restore a theory of embodiment central to Lovecraft's work, to horror writing of the period, and perhaps to the philosophy of speculative realism more broadly.

Lovecraft's Place in Speculative Realism

[13] Speculative realism was introduced in 2007 to describe the work of four philosophers: Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant (Shaviri, *Universe*, 5). In his recent book, *The Universe of Things*, Steven Shaviri describes the philosophy:

Speculative realists question the anthropocentrism that has so long been a key assumption of modern Western rationality. Such a questioning is urgently needed at a time when we face the prospect of ecological catastrophe and when we are forced to recognize that the fate of humanity is deeply intertwined with the fates of all sorts of other entities... we cannot isolate our own interests, and our own economies, from processes taking place on a cosmic scale in a universe whose boundaries we are unable to grasp. (1)

[14] This description is Lovecraftian in its sense of scope and scale. Shaviri cites the current ecological moment as urgently requiring a new kind of philosophical thought, wherein imagining a human-centered universe is no longer useful or ethical. Speculative realism aims to think of humans' fates as entangled with those of all sorts of other nonhuman things: air, water, carbon dioxide, whales, and dirt, rather than superior to or independent of them. He also invokes a "cosmic scale," emphasizing the vastness of the universe of which humans are a part. As our understanding of the nature of the cosmos matures, the less we actually understand about its limits, and the more trivial humanity seems to be.

[15] Speculative realists are united primarily against elements of Kantian philosophy that have, they claim, dominated Western philosophy since the eighteenth century. Most controversial among these elements is the notion that Meillassoux has called Kant's "correlationism": the claim that objects and phenomena are dependent on human thought to exist. For Kant, we can't *know* anything about things-in-themselves beyond our apprehension or perception of them; they may *exist* independently of us, but we have no access to them.^[7] But speculative realism has staunchly opposed this philosophy. Is philosophy limited to the human mind and what it thinks and perceives? Speculative realists collectively argue not. Timothy Morton has described the central problem of correlationism in the form of a riddle: "is the light on in the fridge when you close the door?" (Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 9).

[16] As both a father of speculative realism and the philosopher most enamored with Lovecraft, Graham Harman's work is exemplary of the way in which Lovecraft has been incorporated into philosophy more broadly. As one of the only literary examples Harman repeatedly returns to across his work, Lovecraft's tales are employed as examples of an author already object-oriented in the early half of the twentieth century. Through Lovecraft, Harman's work attempts to overthrow the long-standing philosophical maxim of correlationism. In what has become a touchstone text for Lovecraft scholars, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, Harman performs quick close readings of dozens of short passages from Lovecraft's most well known tales. He examines Lovecraft's literary style of evasion, claiming that the author "unlocks a world dominated by [the] gap... between the world and our descriptions of it" (27). This kind of writing, which operates against the logic of representational realism, is instead what Harman terms "weird realism." The book is a rapid succession of unfastened philosophical scraps that are eventually united as examples of a weird philosophy. Instead of relying on traditional definitions of the weird, which underscore futurity and fate, Harman finds that Lovecraft's most valuable contribution, what makes him "one of the greatest [writers] of the twentieth century" (3), is his ability to merely allude to the horrors of the universe while "cancel[ing] the literal terms of the description" (17). Through this narrative technique, (Harman focuses almost exclusively on Lovecraft's style in this book), Lovecraft's work exposes the impossibility of ever fully knowing the object-oriented world, of which humans are just one part.

[17] Harman's most powerful reading in this vein is of Lovecraft's most famous tale, "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926). Perhaps against the spirit of Harman, who claims in the introduction to this section that "'The Call of Cthulhu' is best savored not by summarizing its plot, but by examining... the work directly" (54), I will describe the story, albeit briefly: Cthulhu is a giant winged octopoid creature, silent in sleep for eons deep under the ocean, below the earth's crust. As figurines of this ancient being begin to appear across the globe, many who attempt to follow the path to the secrets of the beast die horrible deaths. Eventually, through recovered manuscripts, a description of the thing is finally revealed – except not exactly.

[18] Harman's fascination with the "reveal" in "Cthulhu" is for him a moment that similarly occurs throughout Lovecraft's work. Lovecraft writes of Cthulhu: "If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing... but it was the general outline of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful" (*Cthulhu* 160). In a brief section of *Weird Realism*, "The General Outline of the Whole," Harman revels in Lovecraft's refusal to reduce the horror to a grouping of specific qualities: "cheerful bundles of octopus, dragon, and human" (58), he writes. Instead, what is frightening, is the irreducibility of the object to its qualities, the

“general outline of the whole” allows for no direct contact with the horror, but only a vagueness that allows an indirect experience of Cthulhu (238). Lovecraft offers a few concrete descriptions that we can “sink our teeth into” (Harman 238): octopus, dragon, human – but then retreats to the failures of language to describe his experience or make it known to his readers. Harman’s appreciation of Lovecraft identifies his work as the foundational literature of Harman’s weird philosophy, which, above all, is weird because of its “obstruct[ion] [of] the power of literal language” (Harman, *Weird Realism* 234).

[19] Other speculative realists have similarly defined “the weird” in Lovecraft, although with slight distinctions. Eugene Thacker, author of *After Life* (2010) and the recent three book series, *Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1-3* (2011, 2015, 2015), also calls on Lovecraft to define what he calls an “entelechy of the weird,” which undoubtedly echoes Harman. In *After Life*, he writes that Lovecraft’s creatures “can barely be named, let alone adequately described *or thought*.” He goes on to say that indescribability is the “crux of supernatural horror, the reason why life is ‘weird.’ The threat is not the monster, or that which threatens existing categories of knowledge. Rather, it is the ‘nameless thing,’ or that which presents itself as a horizon for thought” (23). Thacker names Lovecraft’s weird as that which resists representation, rather than the weird as the monster itself. Though he does not cite Harman directly, Thacker seems to be furthering Harman’s sense of the weird by showing how Lovecraft’s work is terrifying because it presents us with the “horizon for thought,” or the “possibility of a logic of life... absolutely inaccessible to the human” (23). Notably for Thacker, the “weird” in Lovecraft is about weird *life*, a “life according to the logic of an inaccessible real” (23).

[20] In his subsequent series, *Horror of Philosophy* (2011, 2015, 2015), Thacker calls on Lovecraft at greater length, citing his work as the primary example of the way in which horror forces us to consider the world after humans are gone, what he calls a “world-without-us.” Harman’s celebration of Lovecraft’s anti-representationalist rhetoric is extended in Thacker’s work, where he proposes that “horror be understood not as dealing with human fear in a human world (the world-for-us), but... about the limits of the human as it confronts a world that is not just a World, and not just the Earth, but also a Planet (the world-without-us). This also means that horror is not simply about fear, but instead about the enigmatic thought of the unknown” (*In the Dust of this Planet*, 8). In Thacker’s expansion of the cosmos – from human-centered “World,” to “Earth,” to “Planet,” the challenge of horror is not to theorize human existence in the World, but to imagine the “Planet” as “that which remains ‘after’ the human” (7). For Thacker, the horror in Lovecraft is that confrontation with an unknown future landscape, the world post-humanity. In the introduction to the book series, Thacker acknowledges the inherent contradiction in reading Lovecraft in this way: “we cannot help but to think of the world as a human world, by virtue of the fact that it is we human beings that think it” (Thacker, 2). Yet despite this acknowledgement, Thacker does not discuss the ways in which Lovecraft’s characters might find the human world as another kind of predicament, the reality within which humans find themselves as bound to the fleshiness of material, embodied life.

[21] If Harman and Thacker are struck by Lovecraft’s refusal of linguistic representation, their focus remains primarily on the way in which Lovecraft denies his readers access to the horror of the monsters in the tales. Dylan Trigg’s 2014 *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror* is the first of the speculative realist philosophers whose work comprehensively considers that the horror might arguably be that thing which is both most known to us and most foreign: our own human bodies. Trigg’s book picks up from where thinkers like

Harman and Thacker leave off, attempting to reconcile the philosophical trend of post-humanism with a phenomenology that is “attuned to both human and nonhuman entities” (5). Trigg critiques speculative realist projects that replace subjects with objects, claiming that this philosophy has “long since folded back upon itself, becoming a distinctly human – alas, all too human – vision fixed at all times on the perennial question: *How will the Earth remember us?*” (4, emphasis in original) Trigg’s work holds that a study of human experience, and specifically of the materiality of the body as alien, is a necessary departure from other speculative realist work, which has thus far worked to entirely negate the subject.

[22] Trigg’s work is important in the field and to a more comprehensive understanding of “the weird.” Borrowing again from Harman, Trigg distinguishes his employment of “weird realism” as “that which outlives its own corporeal extinction [and] is transformed into an entity that is both itself and concurrently other-than-itself, both human and unhuman at once” (53). Through a reading of Lovecraft’s *The Shadow Out of Time*, a tale I will turn to in the next section, Trigg argues that Lovecraft’s weird names a kind of bodily experience, a human subjectivity made up of the “weird facets of bodily existence.” These weird facets together name what he calls an “alien subjectivity,” one that is explored in Lovecraft’s tale and is underscored in Trigg’s horror of the body. His engagement with Lovecraft and his investment in the horror of the body enable an intersection with other theories of embodiment, particularly feminist and queer materialisms that have been largely silent on the subject of Lovecraft’s fiction.

Lovecraft’s “Weird”

[23] Lovecraft himself wrote a number of essays in which he describes what he imagined as the truly “weird tale.” While the philosophers discussed thus far share a sense of how Lovecraft theorized “the weird,” a closer look at Lovecraft’s own writing on the subject reveal some additional complexity to the term. Contemporary philosophers have agreed that Lovecraft’s weird is most certainly about the horror of indescribability. In his lengthy 1927 essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” Lovecraft writes that the “true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to a rule.” Instead, he writes:

The one test of the really weird is simply this – whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers, a subtle sense of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim. (*Collected Essays*, 84)

[24] Here, in this beautifully dark and poetic description, Lovecraft illustrates the weird through a series of images and sounds which are meant to evoke “a profound sense of dread,” a fear of “unknown spheres and powers.” He calls on images impossible to conjure up entirely – a set of disembodied black wings, and the scratching of “shapes and entities” not on the outside of a parlor door but on the “utmost rim” of the known universe. The passage illustrates quite vividly Lovecraft’s sense of the weird not as a set of concrete objects or actors, but rather as atmospheric. He writes in the later essay, *Notes on Writing Weird Fiction*, that “[a]tmosphere, not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction. Indeed, all that a wonder story can ever be is a *vivid picture of a certain type of human mood*” (*Collected Essays*, italics in original, 177).

[25] Speculative realism primarily theorizes this sense of indescribable dread as the defining characteristic of the weird. But an extended look at Lovecraft’s own description of the weird demonstrates the concept to be

complicated by the additional question of temporality. What Lovecraft names as “dread,” or, “extreme fear; apprehension or anxiety as to future events” (*OED*), marks his vision of the weird as oriented towards the future and signaled by a mood of fear and anxiety. Although he often writes narratives with complex temporalities framed by reflection, recollection, and temporal disorientation, Lovecraft describes weirdness here not in terms of remembrance or regret over past events, but as apprehension over future ones. In a passage worth quoting at length, he writes:

I choose weird stories because they suit my inclination best, to achieve... the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time... These stories frequently emphasize the element of hours because fear is our deepest and strongest emotion, and the one which best lends itself to the creation of nature-defying illusions... The reason why *time* plays a great part in so many of my tales is that [it] looms up in my mind as the most profoundly dramatic and grimly terrible thing in the universe. Conflict with time seems to me the most potent and fruitful theme in all human expression. (*Collected Essays*, 176)

[26] Here, Lovecraft expresses the desire to halt time, to suspend it even for a moment in his fiction. Weird fiction is the kind of writing that can possibly attain this suspension through a capitalizing of fear and anxiety. As Joshi has stressed of this passage, “Lovecraft is not renouncing his materialism by seeking an imaginative escape from it; indeed, it is precisely because he believes that [these laws] are uniform... that he seeks an imaginative escape from them” (Lovecraft, *Cthulhu*, xv). The link between the subject of “hours” with fear doesn’t exactly make clear their connection, but it is as if only out of the experience of fear can the author create the illusion of defying the unrelenting the laws of time. This passage makes clear Lovecraft’s anxieties over time as the most “terrible thing in the universe,” the subject which informs his writing and which he feels is most fruitful when conflicted with.

[27] Where some philosophers have usefully expanded on Lovecraft’s description of weird writing as atmospheric, indescribably horrific rather than concretized in an object or thing, Lovecraft’s fixation on time is as equally important to any discussion of the weird in literature or in philosophy. In response to the staunch and unwavering constraints and regularity of time, Lovecraft creates weird tales that act as explicit confrontations with these limitations. As I will show in the section that follows, these conflicts with time frequently occur at the site of the body.

Lovecraft’s Weird Body

[28] Despite the way in which Lovecraft scholarship has tended to disregard embodied experience in favor of the cosmological, it is not especially difficult to locate passages across Lovecraft’s fiction that underscore the centrality of the body to his vision of horror. As we have seen in the philosophical readings of his tales and essays, Lovecraft’s horror lies, in part, in the inexplicable and indescribable, and emerges not necessarily from “secret murder or bloody bones,” but from the literary style of purposeful imprecision, a refusal or inability to name that which is un-nameable. But Lovecraft is not merely a horror writer – he is a “weird” writer, and as is evidenced by Lovecraft’s own definition of the weird, his tales also lay out a uniquely embodied and horrific temporality. The tales I will examine in this section are therefore chosen for their joint thematic concerns with the body and with time. Together, the readings of this fiction demonstrate how the weird in Lovecraft is hinged to the body and to the experience of embodiment as a temporal phenomenon.

[29] Lovecraft's 1929 "The Dunwich Horror" has been called the most "pulpish" of his tales, which, not surprisingly, Joshi writes, was "snapped up by *Weird Tales* as soon as he submitted it" (Lovecraft, *The Thing*, introduction by Joshi, xiv). The tale follows the life of Wilbur Whateley, a child born in fictional Dunwich, Massachusetts to the sound of a "hideous screaming which echoed above even the hill noises and the dogs' barking" (Lovecraft, *The Thing*, 210). His birth is witnessed by none except for his "deformed, unattractive albino" mother Lavinia, whose conditions of pregnancy in the first place remain shrouded in mystery: who is the father of this boy? The strange events that follow his birth are noted over time by the townspeople who occasionally ramble up the hill to the Whateley's property. As the child ages and matures at alarming rates (he reaches adulthood in form and mind in less than ten years' time), the townspeople note that the Whateley's livestock has become increasingly depleted and sickly. In the meantime, Wilbur and his grandfather are seen reconstructing their townhouse repeatedly and without explanation. After his grandfather's death, the now *ten-year-old and nine-foot tall* Wilbur ventures to the (mythical) Miskatonic University Library in search of the (also mythical) *Necronomicon*, which holds the truth to unknown alien pasts. Professor Henry Armitage denies Wilbur's request to take the text from its place in the library, and when Wilbur returns on a later night to steal it, guard dogs attack and kill him, tearing off his clothes and revealing a mass of alien appendages.

[30] Back in the town of Dunwich, havoc has broken out in the elusive form of an invisible creature that has been loosed on the town, destroying homes and killing a number of the townspeople. Suspecting a dark relation to Wilbur's inhuman condition, Professor Armitage ventures himself to Dunwich, only to discover that the invisible creature is the twin brother of Wilbur, nurtured and kept secret in the Whateley home for a decade with the intent of eventually overtaking the human race. After following the invisible beast through its path of destruction and detected only by the sway of grass or the bent of timber, Armitage finally locates the creature. He heroically sprays a potion in the direction of the invisible thing, thus revealing it. He is seen from a distance reciting a series of spells that eventually and successfully destroy the beast, and with it, the malevolent intentions of Yog-Sothoth.

[31] Joshi writes that despite this tale's popularity with readers, it is "one of Lovecraft's great failures in its clumsy moral didacticism and ludicrous use of white magic versus black magic"; it is "pulpish tripe" (Joshi, *World in Transition*, 176). Joshi's critique of "The Dunwich Horror" is not ungrounded. The tale concludes by pitting good versus evil in an uninteresting way, and it is one of Lovecraft's only wherein humankind successfully wards off the malignant alien assailants. Whereas for some authors this kind of victory might be met with praise and pleasure, serious Lovecraft readers do not look to his work for these sorts of triumphant endings, and rather see this tale as a failure to live up to Lovecraft's own philosophy. I want to suggest that the tale might be redeemed by focusing not on the ending, but on the rapid maturation of Wilbur Whateley. It is Wilbur's dramatic growth, recorded at nearly twice that typical for a child his age, that is shocking and terrifying, especially if read as parallel to the mounting evil in the Whateley home.

[32] Lovecraft writes, "When Wilbur was a year and seven months old - in September of 1914 - his size and accomplishments were almost alarming. He had grown as large as a child of four, and was a fluent and incredibly intelligent talker" (*The Thing*, 213). At the age of four, "Wilbur was growing up uncannily, so that he looked like a boy of ten" (214). At four and a half, he "looked like a lad of fifteen. His lips and cheeks were fuzzy with a coarse, dark down, and his voice had begun to break" (215), and just a few years later, he

was “tremendously mature of aspect, and his height, having reached the normal adult limit, seemed inclined to wax beyond that figure” (217). At age 15, Wilbur has reached a height of eight feet tall, and when he meets his death in the Miskatonic University Library shortly thereafter, he has reached the height of nine feet (223). The speed of Wilbur’s growth is disturbing to the narrator, and he marks each incremental foot of Wilbur’s growth throughout the tale as a way to parallel the mounting horror unfolding in Dunwich. In this way, the mounting sense of fear is embodied in the body of Wilbur. Time and the corporeal are bound up in ways that reveal the body to be the site of manipulation on the part of evil beings. As the evil grows, so does Wilbur, his body the manifestation of other-worldly forces outside of his own control.

[33] Literary critics have named the beastly twin brother as the flimsy basis of the terror in “The Dunwich Horror,” the strange invisible beast whose nonhuman maturation parallels Wilbur’s swift human development into abnormally tall adulthood. But I would argue instead that the real horror is the slow buildup of the bizarre circumstance, the material manifestation of the horror from beyond via the earthly body of Wilbur Whateley. The horror is Wilbur’s humanoid figure, a creature that eventually reaches nine feet tall, a “thing” which to behold “crowded out all other images,” and which “no human pen could describe.” As with many of Lovecraft’s tales, in the moment of the horror’s reveal, language and writing fail the narrator, and description becomes impossible. The narrator elaborates: “it could not be vividly visualized by anyone whose ideas of aspect and contour are too closely bound-up with common life forms of this planet and the three known dimensions. It was partly human, beyond a doubt... But the torso and lower parts of the body were teratologically fabulous...” (Lovecraft, *The Thing* 223). Wilbur is a unique character in Lovecraft’s body of work, operating as a covert agent of Yog-Sothoth, a mythic god-like entity first introduced in his novella *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, written in 1927. As Graham Harham writes, “Fresh ground is broken in the tales with the character of young Wilbur Whateley. In the story of Cthulhu, all the ostensible humans are actually human and we never have reason for physiological suspicion... With Wilbur Whateley, by contrast, we have the soon-to-be classic Lovecraftian theme of a being who pretends to be human while concealing a much darker identity” (Harman, *Weird Realism*, 102).

[34] In “The Dunwich Horror,” the humanoid body is the central vehicle through which an alien race carries out its malevolent plot to destroy the future of humanity. The freakish temporality of Wilbur’s individual life is thus in sharp contrast with the immortalized and infinite temporality of Yog-Sothoth. These distinct and conflicting temporalities, Wilbur’s individual human(ish) time and the deep time of Yog-Sothoth, are set in dramatic opposition in the tale. Lovecraft would continue to revisit this conflict between scales of temporality in many of his tales to follow, namely “The Whisperer in Darkness,” “The Shadow Out of Time,” and “From Beyond.” In these tales and in countless others, the human body is manipulated and altered by nonhuman actors from outside of time as we know it, and human corporeality is revealed to be a horrific, uncontrollable, or unwieldy experience.

[35] “The Shadow Out of Time” (1936), tells the story of Nathaniel Peaslee, who is lecturing at the University when his mind is suddenly overtaken by a Yithian being (an ancient race referred to as “The Great Race”) and is transported to the Yithian planet. His consciousness has been kidnapped by the Great Race in an effort to escape their slowly dissolving planet. They have undertaken the project of invading human specimens, overtaking their bodies through the inhabitation of human minds. After five years of alienation from his own body, Peaslee’s mind is suddenly returned to himself, exactly at the moment from which it was

extracted, mid-sentence during his lecture at the university. The five year span is just the blink of an eye for Peaslee, who suddenly awakens mid-sentence in the same lecture from which he was stolen. The five years on the planet of the Great Race have equated to the blink of an eye on Earth. As he re-acclimates to terrestrial life, he has difficulty taking stock of his human form:

There was... a feeling of profound and inexplicable horror concerning *myself*. I developed a queer fear of seeing my own form, as if my eyes would find it something utterly alien and inconceivably abhorrent. When I did glance down and behold the familiar human shape in quiet grey or blue clothing I always felt a curious relief, though in order to gain this relief I had to conquer an infinite dream. I shunned mirrors as much as possible, and was always shaved at the barber's. (Lovecraft, *Necronomicon*, emphasis in original, 723)

[36] Lovecraft's italicized emphasis on "myself" makes clear the strangeness of the experience of Peaslee's own body. At this moment, the tale minimizes the horror of the Great Race and instead calls attention to the horror of one's own form. Peaslee's fear that he might find his body utterly alien is calmed only by an occasional glance, which he avoids as much as possible. For awhile, he doesn't understand his own fear of his body, until the memories of the past five years with the Great Race begin to flood back to him. With his developing knowledge of his time on the Yithian planet comes the awareness that his body has belonged to others. As Peaslee's memories slowly come to the fore, so too does an emergent awareness that his body does not belong to him, but to other forces who invade his consciousness and take over his capacities at their whim. The erasure of his memory, of his past and therefore of his sense of himself in the present, also erases his familiarity with his human form. He becomes temporarily estranged from his body as the result of his travel through time and cosmic space.

[37] Trigg's reading of "The Shadow Out of Time" emphasizes the way in which "ownership" over the body has been central to the conceptualization of the rational subject in Western philosophical thought. Utilizing Lovecraft's tale as a counterexample, Trigg argues that the just cited Lovecraft passage presents a challenge to these reigning notions of the self as that which can ever be "mastered" by its host:

The discovery of the body in its alien materiality hinges upon a self-conscious awareness of the body as no longer mine, and thus marks a point of divergence from personal identity... this break of the body from an experience of selfhood is not absolute, but depends on a recognition of the body as simultaneously self and other... What this means is that the alien within the body is not a departure from the lived body, but a continuation of it... The creature we are faced with in Lovecraft... is thus a synthesis of the human and the nonhuman, the personal and the impersonal, the possessor and the possessed. (78)

[38] Trigg emphasizes in Lovecraft the way in which the alien possessor, a figure which repeatedly surfaces across Lovecraft's tales, is not "a departure from the body" but a "continuation of it." The human is revealed to be what Trigg calls here a "synthesis of the human and the nonhuman"; the body (and mind) an open system rather than a cordoned off, contained one. As Trigg argues, it is Peaslee's revelation of the porousness of the body to outside forces and beings that terrifies him. The human itself is alienated, made strange.

[39] There is another nuance to the Lovecraft passage. Peaslee reflects: "I developed a queer fear of seeing my own form, as if my eyes would find it something utterly alien and inconceivably abhorrent." Here, Peaslee is afraid not simply of an "alien materiality"; it is not only, as Trigg reads it, the horror of lost ownership over the body. It is also that he will not longer be able to recognize the human. It is the possibility

of a loss of recognition of himself, “as if my eyes would find it alien,” that most frightens him. It is the alienation of the human form, the evolution of the human into something no longer recognizable as such, that drives the terror of this tale, and which makes this passage alluring to read alongside contemporary theories of embodiment. Trigg asks, “If I am unable to possess my body, then who - or perhaps more pertinently what - am I?” (65)

[40] A welcome voice in the choir of speculative realism, Trigg’s inquiry here reverberates with corporeal feminisms, which pose similar questions about the body’s place in nature and culture. Trigg’s work might then serve as one of many possible bridges between object-oriented ontology and feminist new materialisms. Where strict OOO philosophers like Harman theorize that all objects maintain strict boundaries and withdraw from one another without relationality, Trigg’s theoretical leanings feel closer to something like Stacy Alaimo’s notion of “trans-corporeality,”^[8] Donna Haraway’s “entanglements,”^[9] Karen Barad’s “intra-actions,”^[10] or Myra Hird’s “microontologies.”^[11] In these theories of relationality between human and nonhuman realms, the human and nonhuman relate and coexist in various ways; there is no inside or outside of the human form, only a complex intermingling of life and nonlife.

[41] Feminist theorists of the natural and biological sciences, and I’ve mentioned just a few, each approach the question of corporeality from distinct backgrounds and with unique projects at stake. This very brief account of a few of the major theories in feminist and queer materialism is meant not to group them together to collapse their many differences in approaches, content, and style. Instead, I cite these theories to demonstrate the kind of work that feminism, at the junction of the humanities and the sciences, has been doing previous to and alongside those working in the speculative realist tradition for some time now. Trigg’s insightful recognition regarding *The Shadow Out of Time* of the human posited as “simultaneously self and other, “a synthesis of the human and the nonhuman,” locates in Lovecraft what feminist new materialists have been, albeit in broad terms here, theorizing about the body.

[42] An early weird tale, “From Beyond” (1920, published 1934), elucidates a new materialism at work in Lovecraft, wherein the true unknown multiplicity of the universe is revealed. The narrator describes a visit to his friend Crawford Tillinghast’s home where Tillinghast has just constructed a new kind of machine that makes ultra violet rays (among other things) visible, and invites the narrator over to show it to him. Tillinghast claims, “I have always believed that such strange, inaccessible worlds exist at our very elbows, and now I believe I have found a way to break down the barriers” (Lovecraft, *Necronomicon*, 747). They turn it on, and the narrator’s view of the world suddenly and dramatically changes forever:

I saw the attic laboratory, the electrical machine, and the unsightly form of Tillinghast opposite me; but of all the space unoccupied by familiar objects, not one particle was vacant. Indescribable shapes both alive and otherwise were mixed in disgusting disarray, and close to every known thing were whole worlds of alien, unknown entities. It likewise seemed that all the known things entered into the composition of other unknown things and vice versa. (Lovecraft, *Necronomicon*, 750)

[43] Here, the scientific machine elucidates an otherwise invisible universe all around them. It makes visible the previously imperceptible; it illuminates what was once thought of as “vacant” space as being filled with “unfamiliar” and “indescribable shapes.” The beings are both alive and something other than alive, and are all “mixed” in a way that appalls the speaker. The mixture, described as “disarray,” is disgusting to the

narrator because its things lack borders and specificity. The invisible universe shares very few of the qualities with our perceivable one, where objects, beings, and bodies (seem) clearly self-contained and distinct from one another. The narrator writes, “I felt the huge animate things brushing past me and occasionally *walking or drifting through my supposedly solid body*” (emphasis in original). The body here is revealed to be what Alaimo calls “porous,” susceptible to the comings and goings of unperceivable nonhuman entities. No longer able to imagine the body as a closed system impenetrable to outside things and forces, the narrator in “From Beyond” must come to the terrifying realization that the body is always exposed to an environment not visible, and is thus far more vulnerable than he previously understood.

[44] Thacker calls this kind of discovery, one prominent in the horror genre, a “terrifying reverie,” citing Pascal’s well-known formulation: “Nature is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere” (cited in Thacker, 166). Evoking Shaviro’s “universe whose boundaries we are unable to grasp,” nature is depicted in the Lovecraft passage as a multitude of worlds around us without any knowable boundaries. As Thacker says of the horror in “From Beyond,” it is the “[d]issolving of the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural” (*Dust*, 74), the “[revelation] of the already-existing non-separation between natural and supernatural (77). Thacker reads the device as a kind of mediation between the seen and unseen universe, an instrument that reveals an entanglement that has always existed. Thacker seems right to point out the dissolution of the boundaries between the so-called “natural” and the “super-natural.”

[45] Thacker and Trigg have much in common with material feminists who draw from the natural, geological, biological, and other environmental sciences in their collective refusal of nonhuman matter as inert or passive. As Ann Fausto-Sterling writes, “In thinking about both gender and race, feminists must accept the body as simultaneously composed of genes, hormones, cells, and organs— all of which influence health and behavior” (1495).” The body’s makeup of nonhuman parts biological and otherwise (“I felt the huge animate things brushing past me and occasionally *walking or drifting through my supposedly solid body*”) is a central acknowledgement of feminist science studies and feminist new materialist projects.

[46] The acknowledgment of a human/nonhuman body is met throughout Lovecraft’s tales with mixed feelings: horror, bewilderment, and even allure. In *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (1936), a novella with dramatic bodily transformations, the narrator Robert Olmstead sets out to explore the town of Innsmouth, where he learns that the townspeople are hybrid offspring of humans and Deep Ones, fish-frog like creatures that look like humans until mid-life until they slowly transform into the amphibious beings. After escaping the town, Robert soon discovers to his horror that he too is likely a descendent of Deep Ones and begins dreaming of his transformation. Yet in a surprising turn at the close of the tale, he writes, “I feel queerly drawn toward the unknown sea-deeps instead of fearing them” (Lovecraft, *Call of Cthulhu*, 335). Whereas “From Beyond” is fascinating for the way in which it anticipates contemporary philosophical thought about the complex and human/nonhuman makeup of the body, “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” details the evolutionary comingling of humans and nonhumans and emphasizes the genealogical links between humans and nonhumans. Robert’s queer acceptance of his fate as a fish-frog is surprising in light of the horror and disbelief with which he first receives the news of the townspeople of Innsmouth. And despite the fact that his being “queerly drawn” to the creatures does not, in the early twentieth century context, have the theoretical meaning or weight it carries now, his sudden acceptance of his transformation

might also be understood as “queer” in the contemporary theoretical sense.^[12] His embrace of a human/nonhuman lineage and evolutionary past is a surprising acknowledgement of the way in which human and nonhuman species comingle and co-exist, and emphasizes a queerer fluidity in the place of a human/nonhuman divide. *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* is an embrace, perhaps, of queer kinship with other species, perhaps even a queer, non-progressive evolutionary view that does not privilege the human as the evolutionary *telos*.^[13]

Conclusion

[47] While some of speculative realist philosophy has begun to consider the place of the body in Lovecraft, a more comprehensive sense of corporeality is necessary in order to gain a fuller understanding of “the weird” across his work. In this vein, this essay has hopefully offered a reading of Lovecraft through feminism and new materialisms, which help to restore to Lovecraft’s fiction the centrality of embodiment and the many horrors it presents in his work. The convergence I offer between Object-Oriented Ontologies and Feminist (and Queer) New Materialisms does not negate the philosophical developments of speculative realist work on Lovecraft, but does challenge that body of work to more fully consider the centrality of embodied, material existence to Lovecraft’s fiction, and perhaps, to the still youthful speculative realist philosophical tradition.

[48] While object-oriented ontology has seemingly staked its claim on Lovecraft as the literary figurehead of the philosophical movement, the robust forms of materiality that have emerged from feminist perspectives offer a useful and much needed intervention into the study of Lovecraft. Feminism’s recent attunement to the “materiality of the body itself as an active, recalcitrant force” (Alaimo, *MF* 4), helps to understand Lovecraft and “the weird” in new ways. The horror of Lovecraft’s corpus is not merely the indescribable strangeness of the world or the cosmos *writ large*, it is more specifically the unfamiliarity with and estrangement from the human body. It is a horror of recognition of the body as an agential force: porous and vulnerable, unpredictable, out of control, even fatalistic. Lovecraft’s weird corporeality is one grounded in the materiality of the body in relation to other things and other bodies, and one that claims a theory of weirdness that is always and explicitly an embodied phenomenon. As Haraway has written “theory is not about matters distant from the lived body; quite the opposite. Theory is *anything* but disembodied’ (*Monsters*, 295). The horror implicit in the weird is therefore the body’s complete enmeshment with the environment; the site of the breakdown between what was once thought of as the “Natural” and what can no longer be staved off as the “Supernatural.”

[49] Weird corporeality is perhaps most easily recognizable in Lovecraft, but it is by no means limited to his work. The weird, developed in Lovecraft’s essays and embodied in his fiction, is pervasive into the Modernist period, as anxieties mount over developing scientific and cultural understandings of the body. Though most identifiably “weird” in Lovecraft’s work, the body is no less alien and certainly no less frightening as it appears in more canonical fiction from across the period.

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Notes

1. Sheldon's essay, "Form/Matter/Chora: Object-Oriented Ontology and Feminist New Materialism" from the edited collection *The Nonhuman Turn* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), offers a comprehensive recent history of concepts in feminist new materialism that cut across two fields that are often cited as entirely at odds with one another. Influential to this essay and to my own thinking about the relationship between these two fields is Sheldon's demonstration here of the "unwitting embrace of patrilineation" (116) by OOO, and perhaps by speculative realism more broadly.
2. Named as such by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman in the introduction to their edited collection *Material Feminisms*, Indiana University Press, 2008.
3. For two primary examples where she discusses the Cthulucene, see "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Cthulucene: Staying with the Trouble," delivered at AURA: AARHUS University Research on the Anthropocene, University of California, Santa Cruz, 5/9/14, <https://vimeo.com/97663518>, and "SF: String Figures, Multispecies Muddles, Staying with the Trouble," delivered at University of Alberta 3/24/14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1uTVnhIHS8>.
4. See "A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals," in *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, Vol. 87 No. 4 (December 2012) pp. 325-341, co-authored with Jan Sapp and Alfred I. Tauber.
5. Since the writing of this essay, Haraway has published her book that came out of the talks I reference above. In the book, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, published with Duke University Press (2016), Haraway denies any influence of Lovecraft's Cthulhu and instead links her notion of the "Chthulucene" with a species of spider. Haraway's refusal of Lovecraft's influence, primarily, it seems, because because of his widely-acknowledged racism and misogyny, but appears to me to be a bit of an odd sidestepping of Lovecraft's work and his clear influence on many theorists working at similar intersections. Regardless, I find Haraway's description of the Chthulucene very provocative and useful for my theorization of "the weird," and in further work that exceeds the scope of this essay, hope to interrogate Lovecraft's racist, xenophobic, and misogynistic attitudes as deeply problematic but central tenets of his weird philosophy.
6. For a discussion of racism in Lovecraft's work see Michel Houellebecq's *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (1991), Bennett Lovett-Graff's "Shadow's Over Lovecraft: Reactionary Fantasy and Immigrant Eugenics" *Extrapolation* (Kent State University Press) 38.3 (1997): 175-192, or China Mieville's introduction to the Modern Library Classics edition of *At the Mountains of Madness* (2005). Critics have also begun to complicate our sense of Lovecraft's racist and eugenic beliefs by demonstrating a shift away from these attitudes in his later writings. See, as one example of this,

- Timothy H. Evans' "A Last Defense against the Dark: Folklore, Horror, and the Uses of Tradition in the Works of H.P. Lovecraft," *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Jan. - Apr., 2005), pp. 99-135.
7. Thanks to Matthew Taylor (UNC) for his clarification on this point in an earlier draft of this essay.
 8. "Trans-corporeality" is a way to think about the material self not as a "bracketed biological body" (*Bodily Natures*, 3) separate from the environment. Instead, the material body "in all its... fleshiness, is inseparable from 'nature' or 'environment'... always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (*Material Feminisms*, 238).
 9. See *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
 10. For Barad, objects emerge through intra-actions with other objects and phenomena, and do not exist preceding their relationality. See *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007.
 11. Hird's concept of "microontologies" follows from Haraway's concept of companion species that she outlines in *When Species Meet*, but considers human/nonhuman relations via companion beings that are not species at all and that are mostly invisible to the human eye – bacteria.
 12. There is a lot of important theoretical work at the junction of queer theory and the sciences which is attuned to the makeup of the body as primarily nonhuman material and organisms. This work is outside of the scope of this essay, but offers much to the way in which we might think about weird embodiment at the cellular and bacterial level. See, as exemplary work on the topic, Myra Hird's "Indifferent Globality," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2010, 27 (2-3), 54-72, "Meeting with the Microcosmos," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2010, 28, 36-39, and "Symbiosis, Microbes, Coevolution and Sociology," *Ecological Economics*, 2010, 69(4): 737-742, as well as her co-edited collection with Noreen Giffney, *Queering the Non/Human*, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008.
 13. See Stephen Jay Gould's essay "The Evolution of Life on Earth," *Scientific American*, 2004. Gould disputes long-standing claims that evolutionary processes are unidirectional or naturally progressive. Though Gould does not discuss his revised theory of evolution as "queer," I see his project as queering evolution by challenging teleological narratives of evolution and progress, a project that productively aligns with theorists of queer temporality. See, for example, the work of Elizabeth Freeman, Heather Love, Jack Halberstam, Jose Esteban Muñoz, and Lee Edelman.
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