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“Affect and Deep Time in Lovecraft's *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, and the Turn Towards
Thinking Through the Epoch of the Anthropocene”

Mark McGurl begins his article “The Posthuman Comedy” with an analysis of a work by Wai Chee Dimock entitled *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* as a way to think through the concept of deep time and its appearance in fiction. McGurl states that “the perspective of deep time holds the promise, for Dimock, of reinvigorating ‘our very sense of the connectedness among human beings’” which becomes important in, for instance, “dissuading us from the wisdom of war” (McGurl 533). I will return later to the possible benefits of thinking of the ‘connectedness among human beings,’ or as Dipesh Chakrabarty states in his article “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” “the knowledge of humans as a species,” but first I would like to explore the ways in which a work of fiction might gesture towards those benefits on its own terms (Chakrabarty 219). In 1936 H.P. Lovecraft published his novella *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, a horror story told by a nameless narrator about his encounters with an alien species in an American town shunned by the rest of the country. The narrator of this tale, through the abjection and horror caused by his loss of agency in relation to the aliens and their status as other, reveals how a sense of deep time changes a human’s reactions to his situation. This insight is important when we consider the relation of deep time to our own age, one in which reactions

to climate change are varied and not always useful. Lovecraft provides us with what McGurl calls “a literary work in which scientific knowledge of the spatiotemporal vastness and numerousness of the nonhuman world becomes visible as a formal, representational, and finally existential problem,” able to light up current matters in a productive way (McGurl 537).

To begin, I would like briefly to define deep time according to “its original geological meaning,” as a time that encompasses “the 13.7 thousand million years since the Big Bang, or the 3.5 thousand million years in which life on earth has been evolving, or the 4.5 thousand million years from now until the earth is incinerated in the heat-death of the sun” (McGurl 538). Additional definitions of deep time will unfold as we enter Lovecraft’s story, although in general the time span is never less than the 200,000 years since humans in their current form have existed on Earth.

One of those humans, the nameless narrator of *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, begins his story in a (for us) ordinary frame of mind, mentioning the “officials” and “public” involved in an inquiry into the state of Innsmouth (Lovecraft 587). Here we see the separations between humans familiar to us mirrored in Lovecraft’s tale, as the narrator also informs us of a certain “race prejudice” that exists in all of the neighboring towns against Innsmouth because of “a strange kind of streak in the Innsmouth folk” (591). The narrator soon begins to feel the same prejudice in himself, as he encounters his first Innsmouth folk. The bus driver who will take him to Innsmouth causes “a wave of spontaneous aversion which could be neither checked nor explained” in our narrator, and he “trie[s] to determine the source of [his] evil impression” (597). His response to negative affective swellings is continuously applying logic to his situation, because the alternative is a wild swing into pure horror and abjection in the face of an other. Note that for the purposes of this paper, I am using the original idea of *affect* as a “nonsignifying,

autonomic process that take[s] place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning” and comes out sometimes in the body, so that affect is logic’s other (Leys 437). The narrator catalogues every minute detail of the bus driver’s appearance to try to find the source of his ‘aversion,’ and comes to the conclusion of “biological degeneration rather than alienage” (Lovecraft 598). Whatever the source, the narrator’s negative reaction to the supposed human from Innsmouth shows a disconnect between individuals that causes him to wish for a mental as well as physical distance between himself and the driver; he takes “a seat far behind him” on the bus despite his rational thinking process. We find out later that this strange streak present in the bus driver as well as the rest of the Innsmouth folk is the result of interspecies breeding between the people of Innsmouth and the ‘Deep Ones,’ aliens that live in the ocean. Thus the distance between our storyteller and his subject is at first an understandable one, as they are apparently not purely the same species.

In the previous town the narrator has his first encounter with the Deep Ones indirectly through their jewelry pieces, and again we see the negative affects stemming from a foreign element, which the narrator tries to suppress through reasoning. The mere description of the pieces in books makes them “so odd and provocative that [he] could not put them out of [his] mind,” revealing the odd push and pull of what Julia Kristeva calls abjection (Lovecraft 594). In her work *Powers of Horror* Kristeva labels abjection as a feeling that “beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire” while making it impossible to succumb to the fascination, since one is at the same time “sickened” (Kristeva 1). This feeling takes a stronger form when the narrator actually views a tiara of the Deep Ones:

The longer I looked, the more the thing fascinated me; and in this fascination there was a curiously disturbing element hardly to be classified or accounted for. At first I decided that it was the queer other-worldly quality of the art which made me uneasy [...] However, I soon saw that my uneasiness had a second and perhaps

equally potent source residing in the pictorial and mathematical suggestions of the strange designs. The patterns all hinted of remote secrets and unimaginable abysses in time and space, and the monotonously aquatic nature of the reliefs became almost sinister (Lovecraft 595-96)

Here the narrator uses the same language as Kristeva, speaking of fascination as well as being disturbed, and he searches once again for the source of his displeasure. He finds that the most ‘potent source’ of that negative reaction comes from designs which hint at ‘unimaginable abysses in time,’ or deep time. Lovecraft here suggests the fact that for humans, as McGurl points out, “the deep time of the earth sciences is difficult to integrate into even the most capacious visions of civilizational, national, or institutional continuity” so that our narrator’s disturbed feeling may stem from an unease in trying to grasp such a time span (McGurl 538). Lovecraft himself states that his stories contain “an aesthetic crystallisation of that burning & inextinguishable feeling of mixed wonder & oppression which the sensitive imagination experiences upon scaling itself & its restrictions against the vast...abyss of unthinkable galaxies & unplumbed dimensions” (542).

However, at the end of the story (spoiler!) we learn that the narrator himself descends from the same type of alien and human procreation, so that he has as part of his ancestry the same creatures that produced the jewelry before him. He has a “certain haunting and uncomfortable sense of pseudo-memory” whenever he encounters the Deep Ones’ products—unconsciously he must know that he is himself one of their products (Lovecraft 595). Kristeva explains that the abject is the response to “something rejected from which one does not part,” creating an unease because of this inability to shun the source of the disgust, and the narrator is indeed a part of the Deep Ones, however unwillingly (Kristeva 4). His unconscious awareness might be explained by a collective unconscious of the aliens, which also accounts for his realistic dreams of their underwater cities at the end of the story when he begins his transformation.

Because the narrator is not conscious of his link to the Deep Ones he feels the abjection of being attracted by something presumed other and unconnected to oneself. It is only through the addition of thinking with deep time that the narrator may remedy his negative affect by the end of Lovecraft's novella, in thinking of himself as part of a larger body, a species, instead of focusing on the separations of an other. The difficulty of grasping deep time as a concept is lessened only with the aid of actual bodily changes in the narrator, so that his alien side links him physically and mentally to the deep past.

McGurl states that "one of the more important benefits of taking the fact of deep time seriously is how it alters our sense of the plausibility of the unintended appearance of highly complex biological structures in natural history" (McGurl 536). Within the 'natural history' of Lovecraft's constructed world, by looking hundreds of thousands of years into the past the character Zadok Allen reveals that "human folks has got a kind o' relation to sech water-beasts—that everything alive come aout o' the water onct, an' only needs a little change to go back again" (Lovecraft 616). Therefore the humans in the story have the same origins as the Deep Ones if we go far enough back in time, and because the interspecies procreation has been occurring for almost as long in various parts of the world, the mixed species that are neither only human nor only alien also make up part of a 'complex biological structure' of connection. The nameless narrator enters that connection at the end of the novella, when his bodily changes force him to realize that "who—or *what*—then, was [his] great-great-grandmother," was a Deep One, an alien of the sea (651). He begins to accept that the sea "was to be [his] realm, too—[he] could not escape it" and he "would never die, but would live with those who had lived since before man ever walked the earth," moving into the sea as a result of his bodily transformation (652). Here deep time illuminates the connections between the narrator and the horror-inducing Deep

Ones, and once the narrator accepts that fact, his negative feelings begin to change. He tells us that “the tense extremes of horror are lessening, and [he] feel[s] queerly drawn toward the unknown sea-deeps instead of fearing them” (652-3). In the final pages of this narrative, Lovecraft also asks us to look at deep time in the other direction, towards the future, since the Deep Ones are immortal; for instance, the narrator’s ‘great-great-grandmother’ has already been alive for over “eighty thousand years” (652). The narrator’s final sentence, “in that lair of the Deep Ones we shall dwell amidst wonder and glory forever,” shows a link between positive affect (‘wonder and glory’) and the ability to think through deep time (‘forever’). The promise of immortality in one direction, as well as the connectedness with the very species that has previously terrified him in the other, allows our narrator at the end a way out of his horror.

We humans also live in a current horror-inducing situation, that of a “planetary crisis of climate change or global warming,” and like Lovecraft’s narrator, one of the ways in which we might think through this crisis is by way of deep time, to arrive at an understanding of humans as a species (Chakrabarty 197). First I would like to examine the crisis, drawing on work by Chakrabarty as well as Paul Crutzen and Christian Schwägerl to explain climate change as man-made, and part of the age called the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is that geological epoch in which “human domina[tes the] biological, chemical, and geological processes on Earth,” where “we are taking control of Nature’s realm, from climate to DNA,” and are the “dominant force for change” geologically (Crutzen). As Chakrabarty says, “climate scientists posit that the human being has become something much larger than the simple biological agent that he or she always has been. Humans now wield a geological force” instead of a mere biological one (Chakrabarty 206). For the purposes of this paper I will not go into the various scientific proofs and theories of the ways in which humans affect their environment, as I am sure we all have somewhat of an

understanding of the actions involved. Instead, I would like to examine one possible reaction to the effects of the Anthropocene, namely using deep time to arrive at the ‘connectedness among human beings’ mentioned by Dimock, and seen in Chakrabarty’s articles as well as in works by theorist Donna Haraway.

Chakrabarty reminds us that it is only by looking at “the deep history of humanity,” at the “combined genetic and cultural changes that created humanity over hundreds of [thousands of years]” (or deep time), that we are able to “arrive at a secular understanding of why climate change constitutes a crisis for humans” (Chakrabarty 213). He further explains:

The consequences make sense only if we think of humans as a form of life and look on human history as part of the history of life on this planet. For, ultimately, what the warming of the planet threatens is not the geological planet itself but the very conditions, both biological and geological, on which the survival of human life as developed in the Holocene period depends.

Here Chakrabarty introduces the next important piece of thinking through our current situation, namely the ability to think of “the human being as a species,” and our individual selves as part of that species. Species thinking, or “the knowledge of humans as a species, a species dependent on other species for its own existence” makes clear why “changing the climate, increasingly not only the average temperature of the planet but also the acidity and the level of the oceans, and destroying the food chain are actions that cannot be in the interest of our lives” (219). Deep time allows for the possibility of such species thinking, as we have seen in Lovecraft’s novella, but Chakrabarty explains the difficulty of such thinking, as we have in the past experienced ourselves only as individuals. He states that “we humans never experience ourselves as species, [and] can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such” (220). Another hindrance to species-thinking is the abjection following deep time as we simultaneously know and try to expel or forget that we are subject to its forces;

it's both our origin and end, but it has to be unacknowledged for us to go on living¹. However, the “universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe,” or thinking of humans as one species, remains important whether or not we *experience* the concept as a way to realize that changes must be made in human actions on Earth.

Donna Haraway pushes for experiencing that concept in her work *The Companion Species Manifesto*, and makes more explicit deep time in the other direction. She states that living as a companion species is a way in which we might “cobble together non-harmonious agencies and ways of living that are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures” (Haraway 7). Obviously humans individually do not have the same immortality payoff that is present in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, yet the relatively long survival of humans as a species might still be a possibility, if we take seriously the diagnosis and subsequent prescriptions of such thinkers as Chakrabarty and Crutzen and Schwägerl. Unfortunately, unlike for Lovecraft’s narrator, deep time and the accompanying push to view the ‘connectedness among human beings’ leads not away from horror, but rather into an entirely different affective response to the possible outcomes of the Anthropocene.

In his article Mark McGurl takes up the science fiction and horror genres, exploring their merits as well as the ways in which they deviate from other genres. He states how:

In the clutches of the outsize realism of science fiction and horror, the two-stage Kantian sublime—*first* the failure of the senses in the face of the very large, *then* the triumph of reason in the concept of infinity—enters into a third stage, unable now to shake the knowledge that reason, too, is sure to be engulfed in a larger darkness. That time will be the time not only of our death but of the death of death and the concept of infinity, too. (McGurl 539)

¹ Thanks to Matt Taylor for bringing this connection of abjection and deep time to my attention.

In *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* we see how the narrator follows all three stages here described by McGurl. He is overcome with negative affect upon first seeing the jewelry of the Deep Ones, and upon meeting the first of the Innsmouth folk, but using reason and logic the narrator is able to suppress those negative reactions, and convince himself of logical explanations for each circumstance of affect. Finally, as his negative feelings are no longer removable by reason or logic, the narrator finds himself part of a species that has existed and will exist for all of time, and so he experiences the 'death of death and the concept of infinity.' Chakrabarty tells us that likewise "scientists hope that reason will guide us out of the present predicament" but as we can see from the competing political actions both in the U.S.A and the rest of the world, the turn to scientists and reason does not provide all the solutions for the preservation of the human species (Chakrabarty 211). Instead, we are engulfed in the 'larger darkness,' and "those rare works of literature that set themselves the task of scaling our vision dramatically up or down or both, blasting through ordinary perception to the most surprising vistas we can imagine," might be our best hope of moving beyond mere death in the form of extinction and towards a different type of action, one that accounts for the 'other' in an enfolding instead of distancing way (McGurl 541).

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