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STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

Introduction:
Adapting Lovecraft in Weird Times

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In 1974 Angela Carter declared "we live in gothic times" (133). It is perhaps more apposite these days to suggest that we live in weird times. This is not to say that the Weird (as a literary mode) has superseded the Gothic; rather that it comprises a polymorphous outgrowing emanating from and intertwining with it. What does it mean to say we live in weird times? Perhaps it is a pervasive sense of unreality, or a reality that has been fractured. Certainly, the ecological moment is one of ontological shock as widespread extinction and the effects of climate change prompt pleas across the globe for governments to declare an emergency. Meanwhile, the stranger monsters and specters of the gothic mode, in particular the uncanny appendage of the tentacle, have proliferated across cultural media, especially in the West. In his essay on *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), writer of weird tales, H. P. Lovecraft suggests that "[t]he appeal of the spectrally macabre is generally narrow because it demands from the reader a certain degree of imagination and a capacity for detachment from every-day life" (n.p.). Contrary to Lovecraft, we are surrounded by weird intrusions every day. These are not only to be found in playful and referential cephalopodic literary fiction, including *Kraken* (2010) by China Miéville, but in a wider range of fictions drawing on multiple cultural narratives, such as Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* series (2015-2018). In popular culture, the weird manifests in unlikely places. In the opening credits of the recent James Bond film, *Spectre* (2015), for example, the tentacular becomes emblematic for the unseen machinations of conglomerate control.

The attraction of the Weird seems then to be anything but "narrow," and Lovecraft's creations in particular have proved to be highly adaptable. The monstrous creation, Cthulhu, pervades the high street emblazoned on t-shirts, mugs, mouse-mats, and any other malleable object that can sustain its image. This very reflexivity of the Lovecraftian permeates a host of media, as the articles in this issue demonstrate, from film and television to video and roleplaying games, comics, and graphic novels. The weird emerges at the fringes but also in the mainstream; it is mobilized by top-down media power for profit as well as grassroots, indie productions. In the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-current), the dulcet tones of Cecil Baldwin reassures listeners that the great cosmic void awaits us all. It is this very popularity of the Weird, which attracts a self-conscious referentiality, to which this special issue is dedicated. The knowing deployment of a Lovecraftian aesthetic is a form of adaptation, which Julie Sanders defines as the "reinterpretation of established (canonical or perhaps just well-known) texts in new generic contexts or perhaps with relocations of an 'original' or source text's cultural and/or temporal setting, which may or may not involve a generic shift" (*Adaptation and Appropriation* 27). This issue interrogates a variety of Lovecraftian and Weird adaptations. What do these remediations offer beyond pastiche or homage? Why has the Lovecraftian become such a "popular" contemporary medium and what does it portend for not only cultural and literary studies but wider ontological framings?

In *Postmillenial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic* (2017), Catherine Spooner suggests that the Gothic comes to permeate a person's life and influences not only their media consumption, but their aesthetic outlook, the clothes they wear, and the values they hold. Certainly, the Weird, and particularly the Lovecraftian, seems to have followed a similar trend in its spread beyond the cult roots of the initial magazine run of *Weird Tales* (1922-1940) into mainstream appeal. As Xavier Aldana Reyes points out, Lovecraft owes much to his Gothic predecessors, and his *oeuvre* represents a sustained engagement with the Gothic as he adapted elements from Edgar Allan Poe, Ann Radcliffe, and Matthew Lewis to name a few (ix). Lovecraft did not deny the connection, despite his dismissal of "bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule" (n.p.). If the Weird develops from the Gothic perhaps it does so much like the nameless color central to "The Colour out of Space" (1927), which gestates and ruptures in an inexplicable and indescribable conjuring of a "real" that cannot quite be encapsulated. For the Weird and Lovecraftian is interested in all that is strange, eerie, and unusual, pushing anthropocentrism to its limits and scrutinizing perceived definitions of "reality." As Benjamin Robertson suggests in *None of this is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* (2018)—which is reviewed later in this issue—the Weird confronts the very notion of any conceivable "norm" until it is rather the subject's perception that is brought into question. Such a framework seems uniquely positioned to engage with the ontological terror of our current ecological moment then, where the cracks are beginning to show in the corrosive "reality" that humanity took for granted. As Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman suggest, in a borrowing from Thomas Friedman's "global weirding," our climate has perceptively gotten "weird" (7). They argue that such terminology offers a "cognitive frame . . . to refocus our attention on the localities within the totality of the global," to critically deploy the Weird as a frame to engage with contemporary eco-anxieties or the non-real in which "readers discover they're entering zones of radical uncertainty: can this be real?" (8, 10, original emphasis). The Weird offers no solution to such uncertainty, but it does offer a means of engagement with it.

No doubt one of the current attractions of the Weird is its attempt to subvert anthropocentrism whose dangers are now so pressing.

Indeed, as "post-truth" enters popular usage and climate change deniers refuse to acknowledge scientific facts, there is a certain attraction to the Weird which not only undercuts anthropocentric outlooks but undoubtedly suggests that there is so much more than the human subject understands. While this may feel like a conceptual retreat or defeat (a term that Jonathan Garrad explores later in connection to Lovecraftian game adaptations), it encourages an awareness of the ramifications of an anthropocentric world-view, one reflected in the critical and commercial popularity of VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014) and its Netflix adaptation (2018). And this is something that the Weird seemingly capitalizes upon, an estrangement, a detachment, or a revelation so paradigm-rupturing that the paradigm itself is brought into question. Thus, the Weird manages to also worm its way into contemporary philosophical trends, including Speculative Realism, object-oriented ontology, and aspects of Eco-materialism, whose presence is felt and challenged within this special issue. The evocation of the Weird in these discourses, however, poses an issue. On the one hand, the Weird suggests the cosmic insignificance of humanity. On the other, its popularity and adaptation promotes a particular valorization of the Weird and the problematic elevation of H. P. Lovecraft himself.

Indeed, it has become a critical commonplace to declare the Weird, or sometimes just Lovecraft, as defining the postmillennial cultural moment. Recent examples include *The Age of Lovecraft* (eds. Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 2016), which opens with the declaration of Lovecraft as a "twenty-first-century star," and a special issue of *Textual Practice* (2017) that demonstrates how the status of the Weird has "profoundly changed" in the twenty-first century (Sederholm and Weinstock 1, Luckhurst 1041). While there is no doubt that the appeal of the Weird more generally, and so-called "Lovecraftian" fictions in particular, has increased in recent decades, what is interesting is the way this has occurred across cultural modes, generic boundaries, academic disciplines, media forms, and cultural hierarchies. Although early academic interventions in the Weird argued for its value very much within the terms of high culture and traditional conceptions of literary worth (see, e.g. S. T. Joshi's *The Weird Tale* published in 1990), the Weird functions equally effectively as literary fiction or as "trash" culture commodity. More than this, it undermines such distinctions of taste and value, its presence in pop culture, geek culture, and the academy resisting both traditional discourses of cultural value and the "veiled elitism" of subcultural discourses (Thornton 5). Roger Luckhurst's introduction to the recent issue of *Textual Practice* offers a useful insight into the recalcitrance of the Weird: it is a category that disorients, defies categorization and "by definition escapes . . . containment" (1042). Enmeshed in processes of adaptation since its inception, the Weird is paradigmatic of the horizontal, collaborative, and intertextual dynamics of cultural and literary production.

The easy proliferation of the Weird across boundaries points to a further tension in recent academic discussions, which praise processes of appropriation and hybridization while also heaping reverence on one or two writers. It is also important to resist such hyperbole and its implied positioning of Lovecraft as the voice of a culture, a figure outside of his time uniquely able to address "questions, anxieties and desires that have become increasingly insistent" (Weinstock and Sederholm 3). What many of the discussed adaptations reveal is a complex register of irreverence mingled with reverence, parody with homage, and naivety with cynicism. Such texts complicate attitudes of reverence that sometimes surface in contemporary critical commentaries and complicate readings that (if only implicitly) maintain the authority of an original author. Weinstock and Sederholm, for example, suggest one of the reasons for the transcendence of Lovecraft is the "genealogical inheritance" one can trace in Horror writers such as Stephen King and Clive Barker, which in turn begets a large "family tree" of writers and directors. In contrast to this arboreal and hierarchical model, we identify a process whereby the authority of an "original" author is undercut and challenged by (re)appropriations, cannibalizations, and hybridizations in the manner of textual poaching described by Henry Jenkins (*Textual Poachers*). Chloé Germaine Buckley has elsewhere noted how the Weird in children's fiction illustrate a model of reading suggested by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980): the reader makes a text their own through an act of re-appropriation (De Certeau, 166; Germaine Buckley 181). More recently, Clare Parody's discussion of "adaptive dynamics" in media franchises reveals new processes for the proliferation of adaptations that are neither the result of top-down hierarchies nor entirely in the control of readers and fans, but are enmeshed in what Jenkins identifies as "convergence culture." Moreover, transmedia adaptations of the Weird across literature, fiction, and games, do not simply function to keep the Weird "alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise," an analysis hailing from Linda Hutcheon's work that is put to work by Sederholm and Weinstock (22). They are complex examples of inter- and meta-textual networks, of repetition with critical distance, an opportunity to (re)examine the cultural politics, philosophy, and affective potentials of the Weird in new situations. Although Benjamin Noys suggests that current levels of popularity represents a "Lovecraft event," it is crucial to challenge what innovation such adaptations offer; in particular how they can both avoid and deconstruct the overt racist and xenophobic values that lies at the heart of Lovecraft's work.

It is to this aperture that we wish to dedicate this special issue of *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, a collation of articles and reviews that reflects the paradoxical recalcitrance and mutability of the Weird. It is not our intent to join the legions of charged critical discourse aimed at defining the Weird, New Weird, or the Lovecraftian, but rather to examine the wider narratives that emerge as a consequence of the popularization of such adaptations. In so doing, we query what comes next, what is the contemporary relevance of Lovecraftian studies, and what wider dialogues — with fields such as the Gothic —are catalyzed?

Kerry Dodd in "Narrative Archaeology: Excavating Object Encounter in Lovecraftian Video Games" explores the presence of objects within Lovecraftian video games, primarily reading his main example, *Bloodborne*, alongside and against the notion of object-oriented ontology. Focusing on the framing

of archaeological artefacts, Dodd highlights the textual narratives that are associated with objects—particularly through an anthropocentric lens that aims to "explain" the history of such an item to its observer—and how this formation crosses over into the video game format. Exploring what he terms "narrative archaeology," Dodd highlights how *Bloodborne* encourages its player to read between object descriptions and pay reverence to their excavation of each item to understand its connection to wider structures. In so doing, he challenges the very attribution of anthropocentric narratives upon objects and suggests that Lovecraftian mediations counter the abstractionism of object-oriented ontology to focus on the importance of the encounter.

Jonathan Garrad, Chloé Germaine Buckley, and Laura Mitchell also discuss the importance of game media as a form of encounter in their articles, "Gamifying Fictions of Defeat: Adaptions of Lovecraft to Games Media" and "Weird Experience: Transformations of Space/Place in Lovecraftian LARP," shifting focus from the digital to the analogue. In the former article, Garrad assesses adaptations of Lovecraft's short stories into roleplaying games that develop ludic mechanics to manage success and defeat. His article identifies a difficult dichotomy between narrative hopelessness and ludic progress that affects both the commercial and critical success of Lovecraft adaptations. Germaine Buckley and Mitchell turn to the non-commercial world of live action roleplaying games (LARP), a form that exemplifies a bottom-up or "grassroots" approach to adaptation. They consider how the unique mode of LARP synthesizes with Lovecraftian and Gothic themes to create *en*-Weirded experiential encounters that undermine everyday experiences of space. Both articles emphasize the interactive element of adaptation and thus counter a sense of Lovecraft himself as a figure of authority. In ludic adaptations, unnerving, and innovative functions of the Weird emerge in interactive encounters.

Both Benjamin Noad and Valentino Paccossi explore the hybridization of Lovecraft stories with other franchises and transmedia narratives. In "'His Madness held no affinity': Reimagining Arkham Asylum," Noad explores the presence of the madhouse and asylum in Lovecraft's fiction alongside adaptations within the Batman franchise. By highlighting how Lovecraftian depictions of this space are usually devoid of prolonged definition, he demonstrates how twenty-first-century representations are meanwhile associated with notions of "criminality, monstrosity, and themes of imprisonment." Noad demonstrates the potential for adaptation to challenge, deconstruct, and engage with problematic absences and presences in source material, arguing that a willful dismembering occurs within contemporary appropriations of Lovecraft's setting. Meanwhile, Paccosi, in "Animating the Unnameable: The Depiction of Cthulhu in Animated Shows," engages with the popularization of Cthulhu and how his repeated adaptation arguably represents a form of "naturalization" that undermines his very horrifying nature. Paccosi, building on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's theory that the monster "always escapes," highlights how Cthulhu still retains a sense of "otherness" that eludes normalization. Interrogating three animated television case-studies—*The Real Ghostbusters* (1986-1991), *Scooby-*

Doo! Mystery Incorporated (2010-2013), and *South Park* (1997-present)—Paccosi argues that Cthulhu is adopted by fan communities in a playful manner that permits satire, parody, or other comedic realizations that engage with and extend Cthulhu's sense of "monstrousness."

To conclude, our reviews section offers a varied and compelling exploration of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction and non-fiction. Claire Quigley reviews Xavier Aldana Reyes's *The Gothic Tales of H. P. Lovecraft* (2018), which offers a pertinent reflection on the Gothic tradition from which the Lovecraftian and Weird format emerged. Next, Kyle Brett's review of *The Cthulhu Casebooks: Sherlock Holmes and the Miskatonic Monstrosities* (2017) by James Lovegrove alongside Richard Mooney's discussion of *Winter Tide* (2017) and *Deep Roots* (2018) by Ruthanna Emrys, engage with the adaptation of the Lovecraftian form and query whether there are any innovations within such fiction, or if this is purely memetic repetition. Both demonstrate the importance of Lovecraftian adaptations to challenge and adapt the form, to push it in new directions rather than stagnating through imitation. Meanwhile, Jake Brewer delves into Benjamin Robertson's *None of this is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* (2018) to explore the notion of "fantastic materiality" in relation to the Weird. To close, Michael Wheatley explores the enduring potential of the short form for the Weird, offering a creative/critical reflection on the work of several vibrant authors in *Normal Deviation: A Weird Fiction Anthology* (2018), edited by Lyle Skains and DeAnn Bell.

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