2019

Weird Decentering: The Unnatural in H.P. Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness"

Braden Timss

*Western Washington University, Braden.Timss@wwu.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cedar.wwu.edu/orwwu](https://cedar.wwu.edu/orwwu)

Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](https://cedar.wwu.edu/orwwu)

**Recommended Citation**

Timss, Braden (2019) "Weird Decentering: The Unnatural in H.P. Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness"," *Occam's Razor*: Vol. 9 , Article 3.

Available at: [https://cedar.wwu.edu/orwwu/vol9/iss1/3](https://cedar.wwu.edu/orwwu/vol9/iss1/3)

This Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Student Publications at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occam's Razor by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.
THE UNNATURAL IN H.P. LOVECRAFT'S AT THE MOUNTAINS OF MADNESS

By Braden Timss

The 'weird fiction' of H.P. Lovecraft has frustrated any attempt to place the author safely in the canons of genre fiction. Writing in the brief period of 1917 – 1937 with a keen mind towards the era's scientific discoveries, Lovecraft's stories about cosmic horror, insanity, and inhumanity cultivated the author no fame during his lifetime. The weirdness of his 'weird fiction' derives from a unique combination of science, supernatural, metaphysics, and speculation all in service of the decentering and reduction of mankind on a cosmic scale. The mythology maintained across Lovecraft's numerous short stories depicts a world that is determined to undermine the ideals and arrogant assumptions of twentieth-century rationality, a nightmarish undoing of everything that could have been called human or humanity. "The most merciful thing in the world...," Lovecraft wrote, "is the inability of man to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far" (The Call of Cthulhu 381).

In the century since his death, however, he has become one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century, impacting not just writers of genre fiction, but contemporary philosophers and theoreticians as well. Indeed, the twentieth century has brought with it a significant reconsideration of the writer's oeuvre, with large considerations towards his concepts of nature, human history, and time. Upon closer examination of the unique logic and phenome-
na at work in Lovecraft's weird fiction, new audiences are discovering, what philosopher Fabian Ludueña describes as, "[a rare writer] who gives supreme expression to the universe in which any philosophical aspiration must be situated" (Luduena 12). In this tradition of reconsidering Lovecraft—and the challenge that his hostile universe poses—I believe there is a practical good in reading his works through an ecocritical lens. Rearticulating Lovecraft from the position of ecocriticism reveals various applications, demonstrations, and formulations of contemporary ecocritical theory that gives expression to the environment and humanity’s relationship with it. Lovecraft’s fiction contains a type of nature which divests humanity of the advantages bestowed by anthropocentric, humanity-above-and-before-all philosophy and mythologizing; this weird nature de-aestheticizes what ecocritic and philosopher Timothy Morton marks as capital-n Nature, a “damaged and damaging [concept], almost useless for developing ecological culture” (Morton 1). An ecocritical reading of Lovecraft can aid in the construction of de-naturalized conceptions of nature, a useful idea for life during a progressive decentering of humanity by global ecological change in the twenty-first century.

For my ecocritical exploration of H.P. Lovecraft's writings I selected his classic twentieth-century Antarctic expedition novella, At the Mountains of Madness. This is a significant work by the author that depicts the first proper attempt at exploring the last unconquered continent on Earth, a story of rationality’s attempt to demystify the world. The Antarctic setting is noteworthy for its significance in the imagination of Western civilization, heightening Lovecraft’s cosmic drama and connecting the land mass to human identity as a prominent cultural relationship with nature that is worth ecocritical consideration. As the author of At the End of the Earth: How Polar Ice and Imagination Shape the World, G.L. Brackett, asserts, “the poles ... have been touchstones for our sense of place in the world. Their mystery was a driving force behind their discovery and exploration and that mystery ... continues to be essential to our relationship with them today” (20). This justifies the Antarctic, as a real place and an imaginary space, for ecological consideration, and it also provides a legendary stage for the decentering of man that is underway in At the Mountains of Madness.

A brief preamble about the plot, and my formatting: At the Mountains of Madness is a first-person narration warning the world against future explorations of the Antarctic after confronting disturbing ancient histories in the icy landscape. The story’s narrator, William Dyer, relates the discovery of a vegetable-like alien race and their doomed civilization, and a terrible encounter with what doomed it. The aliens, called the Elder Things, were an advanced pre-human species that are responsible for much of Earth’s life, including, it is suggested, humans. It is a horror and science fiction story about mankind discovering its cosmic insignificance at the peak of realizing the century’s long project of global exploration.

My analysis proceeds via three independent theses and conclusions. Revealing a multitude of themes and issues at work within this 101-page novella was an effort of bringing the multidisciplinary field of second-wave ecocriticism to bare upon a singular text. This is my model for a hopeful future where ecocritics of all disciplines can take to this preeminent twentieth-century writer’s weird body of writing. Drawing from the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Timothy Morton, and Kate Soper, I examine history, biology, and economism within Lovecraft's story.

1. TERROR FROM THE ANTHROPOCENE: HUMAN, NATURAL, OR HISTORY OF ANOTHER KIND?

Mere dinosaurs were new and almost brainless objects—but the builders of the city were wise and old, and had left certain traces in rocks even then laid down well-nigh a thousand million years ...
rocks laid down before the true life of earth had advanced beyond plastic groups of cells... They were the makers and enslavers of that life ... beings whose substance an alien evolution had shaped, and whose powers were such as this planet had never bred.

(Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 56-57)

The twentieth-century explorers in *At the Mountains of Madness* are confronted with many terrors, but none perhaps as utterly horrific as the true narrative of Earth’s history, revealed in the ancient friezes of an advanced pre-human civilization. Lovecraft’s assault on human and geologic history in this story problematizes the real project of human civilization in several ways that comprise horrors of the imagination in the twentieth century, but are real ecological concerns in the twenty-first. Linking *At the Mountains of Madness* to ecological issues of historicity is achieved with consideration of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s essay *The Climate of History: Four Theses*, where the terror felt by the fictional explorers can be related to real twentieth-century conceptions of natural and human history by questioning the certitude of their exclusivity. The exploration of Antarctica in the real twentieth century was the object of national pride in the case of the Norwegians and the British, but for mankind it can be recognized as a project of globalization. Arguing that “globalization and global warming are born of overlapping processes” (200), Chakrabarty legitimizes the grounds to perform an ecological reading of Lovecraft’s horror exploration story. I will proceed by revealing how the Elder Things disinherit humanity of the claim to history and the achievements of civilization, and conclude by arguing that the terror in *At the Mountains of Madness* is ecological responsibility in the twenty-first century.

By suggesting that there are pre-human histories, Lovecraft demolishes what Chakrabarty refers to as the Viconian-Hobbesian idea that natural history is distinct from human history (203). I argue this because Chakrabarty is contending with the twentieth-century concept of history wherein nature cannot make history, or can only make natural history, because it is not an agent like man. It seems safe, then, to reason that the history of the ancient Elder Thing race encountered by William Dyer in Lovecraft’s story is indeed a history within the conception of a human history. In other words, the Elder Things are humanized as they are endowed with a history authored by beings with a human-like agency. This is a stunning realization for Lovecraft’s characters, but it also puts forward a thought experiment for critical consideration by Lovecraft’s readers. If history can be inhuman while simultaneously unnatural, it spurs reconsideration not only of the content of history, but the conceptual forms of history as well.

Further, civilization itself, mankind’s pride, monument to twentieth-century rationality, is disinherted. Upon discovering the dead city beyond the mountains, Dyer narrates:

...this place could be no ordinary city. It must have formed the primary nucleus and centre of some archaic and unbelievable chapter of earth’s history… long before any human race we knew had shambled out of apedom. (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 45)

This discovery implies that civilization is ancient, pre-human, and, it follows, a borrowed achievement that mankind has unwittingly adopted as the basis of its claim to significance over other Earth life. The disinherting of civilization from humanity by the non-human, Elder Thing race is a strike at anthropocentric phi-

*IF HISTORY CAN BE INHUMAN WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY UNNATURAL, IT SPURS RECONSIDERATION NOT ONLY OF THE CONTENT OF HISTORY, BUT THE CONCEPTUAL FORMS OF HISTORY AS WELL.*
losophy, a common Lovecraftian gesture, yet never delivered with more precision than in *At the Mountains of Madness*. As Luduena summarizes, “from the point of view of the Lovecraftian [mythology], a society is the most profoundly inhuman form that humans have found to organize their life together” (Ludena 33). What follows from these disinheritances is a spooky line of questioning: has humanity become less human, or was humanity always more alien than was previously realized?

I contend that reframing both history and civilization as concepts which belong to an advanced race of ancient, pre-human aliens opens the possibility, in the twentieth-century imaginary, of a species capable of bridging natural and human histories and becoming an agent on a geologic scale. As Chakrabarty asserts, “to call human beings geological agents is to scale up our imagination of the human ... [to reach] numbers and [invent] technologies that are on a scale large enough to have an impact on the planet itself” (207). Becoming geological is to transition from the pre-globalization scale of human effects on the planet to the twenty-first-century scale, where our histories are scribed in the change we inflict upon the landscape. Just as ancient Earth was propagated by Elder Things “allowing [life] to develop into other forms of animal and vegetable life for sundry purposes” (Lovecraft 60), human civilization amid globalization is, inversely, capable of reducing the population volume of many species by sixty percent in just forty years (WWF).

The terror in *At the Mountains of Madness* is in the suggestion that biological agents, like twentieth-century humanity, could possibly become geological forces, as we have become in the twenty-first century (Chakrabarty 207). The explorers of the story are confronted with a question provoked by their arrogant claims to history, civilization, and the dream of a globalized world: will you be able to accept the responsibility of the Anthropocene—the epoch of human history wrought on a geologic scale—once you arrive? Considering that the story is framed as a warning against further Antarctic expeditions, this is a question posed to all of humanity.

2. YOU JUST DIDN'T KNOW WHAT A RABBIT COULD BE: DISSECTING THE ELDER THING

10:15 P.M. Important discovery. Orrendorf and Watkins, working underground at 9:45 with light, found monstrous barrel-shaped fossil of wholly unknown nature; probably vegetable unless overgrown specimen of unknown marine radiata ... Like a barrel ... Objects ... baffles all conjecture as to origin. (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 19-21)

When the remains of the ancient Elder Things are discovered remarkably preserved in the ice, the expedition’s primary impetus shifts from geology to biology. Initial impressions of the strange alien life invigorate the imagination of the explorers, but upon closer inspection, through dissection, their anatomy replaces curiosity with abject disgust. “Existing biology would have to be wholly revised,” Dyer relays, “specimens have such uncanny resemblance to certain creatures of primal myth” (21-23); the closer these men of science look, the more the taxonomy of the Elder Things seems to confer them to the non-scientific realm of monsters and mythology. This inability to reconcile Elder Thing biology betrays the constraints of a naturalized capitalist Nature, per Timothy Morton, a limited conceptual ordering of
Morton advocates for a process by which Nature is de-aestheticized from being an environmental ecology of bounded things nestled within their bounded niches (Morton 8). Understanding biology as comprised of and porous to the environment we exist in, Morton maintains, would "drastically [expand] what environmentalism—qua protecting 'habits'—must think and do, because there is no niche opposed to organism; there is only the genome and the biosphere" (Morton 8). In the case of Lovecraft's story, for the scientists to accommodate these monsters—these things—would be to abandon Nature in favor of nature, recognizing a common biological origin derived from a textual conception of ecology.

The initial disorientation over the assignment of the Elder Things as either vegetable or animal relates to a general disrespect for things, like objects or life that does not look human. Transgressing against 'rational' human conceptions of biology is one aspect of Lovecraft's attack on human exceptionalism. Morton speaks about vegetables with consideration of his extended phenotype concept: "That is the disturbing thing about 'animals'—they are vegetables... Our prejudice about vegetables is that they're beings that only do one thing—grow" (Morton 4). Since the enlightenment, man has always rationalized itself as being superior to, among other things, vegetables and animals. However, discovering this thing that looks like a vegetable, but in all actuality is much more advanced than mankind, is a great blow to man's ego, and to neat-and-tidy conceptions of biology.
The other side of adopting a perspective capable of apprehending life in its least human form is the necessary bravery to confront a nature that is distinctly inhuman.

Morton’s reconsideration of what can constitute an environment and ecology, simply, extends respect to things that do not look or behave like ourselves. In a larger sense, this relates to Morton’s ideas about hyperobjects—actual beings of a nature and scale so large, like radiation, that our general inability to perceive them prefigures our inclination to respect them. Arguing that biology only expresses mild differentiations of the ecology within a biosphere suggests “a rabbit is not really a rabbit” (Morton 5), as an Elder Thing is not really an Elder Thing, and, ultimately, that a human is not really a human. Ecological respect entails recognizing the agency of an other, however abstract, be it global weather patterns or the base proteins that comprise any DNA sequence. A new ecological culture with the intellectual faculty to extend respect in this way entails never underestimating natural forces or, subsequently, failing to recognize their potential to be a threat. Philosopher and horror-fiction writer Nick Land offered an apt rearticulation of the importance of Morton’s extended phenotype in an example pulled from the Lovecraft-inspired film The Thing (1982). Commenting on what the thing is in The Thing, Land explains how the graphic horror that unfurls from the body of a dog in the film’s first hour is horrific “not [because] it was a fake dog, but [because] you didn’t know what a dog could be” (Land 00:27:30-00:27:50). The other side of adopting a perspective capable of apprehending life in its least human form is the necessary bravery to confront a nature that is distinctly inhuman. Lovecraft’s fiction depicts the horror inherent to the decentering of humanity and Morton’s proposed ecological culture accelerates this decentering, thus compelling reassessment of humanist models of ecology that do not sufficiently accommodate the horrors of the non-anthropocentric.

Biological horror in Lovecraft’s story reflects a twentieth-century attitude of biological determinism, exclusionism, purity, and miscegenation anxieties. It is the same rhetoric that supports ideologies of purity that often underlie how we articulate the interrelations of humanity and ecology, as well as human and other humans, bridging ecocriticism with social criticism in what is called the discourse of environmental justice. As has brought Lovecraft much deserved criticism (Emrys), the horror of the other or thing in Lovecraftian horror is commonly a source of a transgression against biological normativity and the fear of its corruption by ‘alien’ or ‘in-bred’ sources. Lovecraft’s writing reflects these anxieties because they express the author’s real social prejudices. Any analysis or synthesis of Lovecraft must inevitably contend with his bigotry, or, in failing to do so, resign to the shallow mediocrity that undermines any refined pop-culture appropriation of Lovecraft’s aesthetic. As for my analysis, I seek to provide models with which Lovecraft can be critiqued or used as critique, and the scope necessary to apply these to Lovecraft’s racism, misogyny, and queer-antagonism is an article the proportions of a dissertation¹. The ability to see At the Mountains of Madness as a text in conversation with the ecocritical theories of Morton as well as issues of environmental justice elevates the critical work already done, while legitimizing grounds for further creative expeditions of Lovecraft and his writing.

3. The Shoggoth and the Discourse of Nature

The star-headed Elder Things interred within the Antarctic ice, discovered, at first, in pieces and then later in a perplexing, yet intuitive whole are still only the penultimate unnatural life that At the Mountains of Madness contains. The rock murals of the dead city reveal the existence of a grotesque beast of burden which the Elder Things, at their civilization’s peak, synthesized from inorganic material and utilized to construct their civilizations. Over millions of years, however, these beasts were naturalized as their inorganic origins
were forgotten by a society succumbing to the ecological pressures of a warming and cooling ancient Earth. Mistaking these monsters as something natural like themselves, the distinctly Natural social creations overwhelmed and eradicated the race of the Elder Things that could not see them as ideology given corporeal form. These monsters, the 'shoggoth,' defy human visual or linguistic representation because of their abstract formlessness, as Lovecraft writes:

They were normally shapeless entities composed of a viscous jelly which looked like an agglutination of bubbles ... a constantly shifting shape and volume ... rubbery fifteen-foot spheroids infinitely plastic and ductile ... the utter, objective embodiment of the fantastic novelist's 'thing that should not be.' (Lovecraft 64 & 91)

The shoggoth of *At the Mountains of Madness* manifest as the story's most intimidating force precisely because it is a social invention out of control. By this interpretation, I suggest a reading that could lend itself, as a metaphor, to social constructionist, feminist, and environmental justice critiques. Examining what I perceive to be a mimetic shift in the relationship of the monster to its creators, I will link Lovecraft's "thing that should not be" to a process by which nature is Naturalized as ideology by societies. However, before accepting the shoggoth as a Natural concept, I must demonstrate that Lovecraft's text supports this interpretation by showing a division between man and Nature as it is drawn by Dyer, with the shoggoth itself as the background to man's activity.

After much foreshadowing, the terrible shoggoth appears to the human explorers and its unnaturalness is immediately evident. As Dyer relates to the reader, "its nearest comprehensible analogue is a vast, onrushing subway train as one sees it from a station platform" (Lovecraft 92). Indeed, the thing is so at odds with anything possibly human that it forces Dyer to sympathize with the Elder Things as "radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star-spawn—whatever they had been, they were men!" (92). This moment and the use of 'men' is of note because Dyer, up to this point, has considered the Elder Things only as ambiguous beings, creatures, or monsters. Only against the sliding background of a subway-train-like shoggoth can Dyer see something approximating personhood in the Elder Things. The distance Dyer holds the Elder Things apart from humanity is such the case that even upon discovering the ancient and dead city of this pre-human race of 'man,' Dyer distinguishes their architecture as "[unknown] to man or to human" (29). Prior to the encounter with the shoggoth, the Elder Things are neither man nor human. Relating the Elder Things to man is rare respect extended to an othered thing, yet it does not convey the respect inherent to humanity. I contend this is the socialized abstracting of the Elder Things by way of a confrontation with the ecological concept of nature in contrast to civilization, or "what is very obviously and
recognizably a product of human cultivation and transformation in the realist sense” (Soper 325). The Elder Things become ‘men’ and the shoggoths are visible aspects of their terrible Natural surroundings, just as deforested landscapes and oil-coated seas illustrate the boundary between human civilization and the Nature beyond it. On its way to becoming ideology, the Natural is used to conceptualize the social man.

“Nature had played a hellish jest on them” (Lovecraft 93), Dyer is able to conclude from his human perspective. However, the history of the shoggoths in Elder Thing society reveals they—the unnatural social creations—had been perceived differently by their creators, and this had led to social collapse. A significant characteristic of the shoggoth is its inherent formlessness and adaptability; the many needs of a civilization required abstract tools “capable of moulding their tissues into all sorts of temporary organs under hypnotic influence [by the Elder Things] and thereby forming ideal slaves to perform the heavy work of the community” (60). The shoggoth is more akin to the social itself in the Elder Thing imagination, I argue, than it is like the Nature which Dyer requires to recognize Elder Things as social men. The implication of this being that the Elder Things, initially, would have held their essential ‘humanity’ in distinction of their existence as social beings. This perceived dichotomy was weakened, however, as “newly bred shoggoths grew to enormous size and singular intelligence ... [became able] to converse with the [Elder Things] by mimicking their voices” (72). This is the political danger of ecomimesis—the struggle to capture nature in representations—as ecocritic Dana Phillips warns, whereby the social is granted motivation, where “[trees in literature become] something more vital than textual functions” (Phillips 10), and the real of nature is confused with the ideology of Nature. What was essentially Elder Thing was reflected by the social, and as the knowledge of how to create shoggoths was forgot so too was the distinction which defined their humanity, and they were destroyed by the violence of a Naturalized ideology.

To read the shoggoth as ideology, and perhaps specifically a type of nature rhetoric, lends itself to ecocritical thought and Lovecraft’s project of decentering man; it reveals the arbitrariness of how we distinguish—make exceptions—of ourselves in the world. Here I have demonstrated two ways that the natural might draw out the human. Dyer’s identification of the shoggoth as an effect of the Elder Thing’s society delineated the boundary between man and nature, conceptualizing social man in contrast to its surrounding environment. Inversely, I examined how the Elder Things considered society as separate from their essential nature, suggesting their extinction is akin to mistaking a social and ideological identity as humanity. Mistaking the social as real is the downfall of the Elder Things, a mistake which Dyer readily repeats by basing his sympathy on a shared social realness. That even the most advanced race humanity has ever encountered was arrogant enough to mistake their society as themselves should inspire terror in the twenty-first century. Do we need to know what nature is in order to know ourselves, and further, does the distinction benefit us at all?

**IN THE END**

The ‘punch’ of a truly weird tale is simply some violation or transcending of fixed cosmic law—an imaginative escape from palling reality—hence *phenomena* rather than *persons* are the logical ‘heroes.’ (Lovecraft, “Some Notes on Nonentity” 207–211)

Future weird studies into H.P. Lovecraft’s ‘weird stories’ may one day include the scholars and theories that comprise the vast and amorphous body of ecocrit-
WE MUST PROBE THE UNCOMFORTABLE POSSIBILITY THAT IF THERE EVEN IS A POSSIBILITY FOR A HERO FIGURE IN NATURE, THE HERO IS LIKELY NOT HUMAN.

icism in the twenty-first century. The text is there just waiting to be discovered and poured over. Central themes of human-kind's decentering and disinheriting of its identity, make Lovecraft's horror especially suitable to second-wave ecocritical thought. By creating a mythology out of a world that frustrates human arrogance, Lovecraft gives agency to nature in ways that oppose enlightenment and modernist assumptions about humankind's place in the universe, the world, and the immediately local. The weird nature alive in *At the Mountains of Madness* is unnatural, and humankind's folly is to have ever thought it could be Naturalized. Lovecraft provokes consideration of what exactly about our conception of the world constitutes a true understanding of its nature, and how much of that understanding is mediated by an anthropocentric perspective. Considered as such, Lovecraft's universe constitutes a fictional space where the ideas and concerns of ecocritics might be given expression or find their undoing. For example, what does Morton's concept of hyperobjects entail for humanity when made real in this fictional world? How might Lovecraft's hostile universe of weird nature legitimize, problematize, enhance, or invalidate ecocritical thought are the questions I mean to provoke. By taking to task humankind's anthropocentric notions of nature, we must probe the uncomfortable possibility that if there even is a possibility for a hero figure in nature, the hero is likely not human.
I would like to point directly to some works that thrum with the vitality of criticism and the volatility of Lovecraft's unique twentieth-century horror. Matt Ruff's horror novel and critique of Lovecraft's racism, Lovecraft Country; She Walks in Shadow, a short-story collection written by women of color that reclaims Lovecraft's mythology; and Alan Moore and Jacen Burrows' comic series, Providence, which confronts Lovecraft and his works with a politics of authorship and sexuality.

REFERENCES


Lovecraft, H. P. At the Mountains of Madness. Modern Library, 2005.


