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The insectile informe: H.P. Lovecraft and the Deliquescence of Form

This article investigates the phonic materiality of sound, specifically of buzzing voices, in H.P. Lovecraft's 1930 short story 'The Whisperer in the Darkness.' The insectile is configured as trope for the 'outside' and as formless entity, the latter rendered as an enfleshed voice. I am concerned with the interplay between form and formlessness, particularly as it pertains to sound, and the production of form, that is, how form and, conversely, formlessness are determined as political categories, not ontological givens. I use this approach, a focus on the valorization of form, in order to argue against recent scholarship, notably Graham Harman's Weird Realism, claiming Lovecraft as a writer offering a deconstruction of man through perspectives other than human, when the latter remains absolutely understood according to what Sylvia Wynter calls the 'coloniality of Being.'

'…at night in the forest, [they whispered] with voices like a bee's that tried to be like the voices of men' (Lovecraft, 'Whisperer' 221).

In H.P. Lovecraft's 'The Whisperer in the Darkness' (1930), the 'deep things' (217)—evidence of progressively colonising alien 'entities'—the narrator Albert N. Wilmarth encounters in Vermont are relayed, especially, as sound phenomena, a phonic materiality that is rendered as insectile. The unthinkable beings, whose formation occurs, in Graham Harman's words, according to a peculiar 'ontography'—a usage of language that is allusive and excessive, unable to crystallise the thing described into a coherent form—are crab-like and fungoid, but the sounds they emit nest a buzzing amidst, within, each and every word uttered. I am, here, interested in sound outwith—the Scottish preposition comes closest to capturing the interplay between outside and within—semantic content, represented as a 'thick droning voice' (237), itself an outpost or archive of deep time. What I'm trying to do is to think through the concept of the insectile as sonic event, and as it pertains to Lovecraft's deployment of that trope in 'Whisperer.' Here, but also elsewhere, in 'The Shunned

House' (1937), for example, the insectile functions as a figuration of the outside—having to do with infinite time, what lies 'away outside,' beyond 'the last curved rim of space' ('Whisperer' 241)—and the formless, shapeless, nameless. Both of these aspects (the outside; the formless) are overwhelmingly heard, as well as felt, or sensed, as vibrations, buzzing voices that, recorded on a phonograph, travel in and out of apprehension. Technology, all in all, including the technology of writing, fails to capture these beings, which, unlike Dracula, are not defeated by its systems.

This article positions itself against recent scholarship (easily) disposing of Lovecraft's racism, which in-forms—it internally forms, 'lives' inside—his 'Shoggothic Materialism' (Woodard 4). China Miéville has argued that

> all that kind of deep time, all that kind of deep novum, all that ecstatic collapse
> of the subject position … is predicated on master-race ideology; race hatred. So,
> in other words, the anti-humanism one finds so bracing in [Lovecraft] is an
> antihumanism predicated on murderous race hatred (Weinstock and Miéville
> 241).

At issue, here, is to insist on that 'deep' conceptual framework that, on the one hand, appears everywhere in Lovecraft's work and, on the other, has a tendency to disappear in criticism, especially if it is seeking to 'weird' philosophy through his fiction. Ben Woodard, for example, turns to Lovecraft to 'return' philosophy to the 'great outdoors' (9), Quentin Meillassoux's term for an anti-anthropocentric system of thought, but for all the speculative realists' provocative operations, their attempts to formulate a philosophy derived from Lovecraft, on 'the material of the external

world' (3) and without considering 'race hatred' as the absolutely coherent aspect of his work, require scrutiny and persistent opposition. No matter what propositions arise in such readings, the apparent anti-, in- or posthumanism these detect and promulgate as a result is toxic, as well as unconvincing: the politics of this particular theoretical project must urgently be confronted.

The reason for its failure—a posthumanism in name only—is, precisely, that 'deep' entanglement with racism or, in other words, with the ideology of form, the particular ordering and valorising of a subject of 'wholesome stock' (Lovecraft, 'Shadow Out of Time' 157). In contrast to arguments that focus on a becoming-other in Lovecraft's stories, the basis for claims that credit him with writing about the 'impossibility of being a human in deep time' (Weinstock and Miéville 236), I contend that the 'human,' more specifically colonial man, is preserved as order word beyond the 'affordances' (Levine 29), the recurring patterns or 'signature' of the tentacle (Luckhurst 1045) or, as I propose below, of the insectile. While Lovecraft's stories have lent themselves to anti/in/posthumanist interpretations, these are, as mentioned above, unwilling to engage with the politics in-forming his writings, while they also dismiss the extent to which the other, should it eventually be approached with anything amounting to a welcome, is used to restore and maintain the form of the same.

The examples given on this subject frequently emerge from 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' (1936) or also 'At the Mountains of Madness' (1936), where the slippage of the 'I' appears most compellingly. In 'The Shadow over Innsmouth,' the narrator, a fascinated subject—he finds himself arrested by the 'strange, unearthly splendour' of

an alien tiara (109)—, gradually discovers his lineage with fish-creatures, which arrive in dreams to draw him beneath the waters. The process unfolding here is sensuous, mesmerizing, exaltation replacing terror, fluidly, as sea change, a flow of desire. What is taking place is a decentring of the normative subject, and yet, this instance and possibility of becoming-other—the changing entity of the self effectively constitutes, as Miéville observes, an erotics (Weinstock and Miéville 235)—is, on the one hand, obviously integrated into the Lovecraftian mythos and, on the other, displaces the terror the narrator should 'properly' experience. This experience of the proper against the other, more specifically the Shoggoth—'intolerable' (121), 'all aout o'shape' (132), according to the drunkard Zadok Allen—is 'propered' back to me, 'constant reader' perhaps (to refer to Stephen King's interpellations of his audience in every preface), or, at any rate, alert to the dangers fascination poses to the phallic 'I'.

The Shoggoth is persistent 'figure' in Lovecraft's fiction; protoplasmic mass, it offends in its form or, rather, formlessness mocking the proper subject, even if this subject seems, at first glance, and as it does in 'At the Mountains of Madness,' other. As such, it operates in a tradition of 'viscous' (89) representation or order of ruin that is intimated at the end of 'Innsmouth' through the single word 'shoggoth' with its underwater resonance, but also through the effect the creatures and their artefacts have on the entranced narrator. To lose one's head, a literal occurrence in 'Mountains,' is significant with respect to 'Innsmouth,' too, because of the phenomenon of a 'hypnotic order' (Freud, Group Psychology 10) established in dream-states that, over time, abrade the narrator's conscious personality to make him more amenable to life beneath the water. Freud, by way of Gustave Le Bon, discusses

this 'sacrifice' in Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1921), but the more famous instance of fascination and subsequent decapitation, read castration, occurs in 'Medusa's Head' (1940). The 'sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror,' writes Freud (273), a reaction that is nowhere in evidence in 'Innsmouth' with its suggestion of the smooth, of the submerged 'I' being smoothed out, eroded. Even daddy can't help the narrator 'secure' his place—notably through a job in an insurance office—but the contract drawn up is made with the reading subject, stiffening up to ward off evil. The erotics of the 'sea-deeps' (155) provokes that displaced defensive reaction which the narrator lacks, but which is recovered in another 'I' that, upright and vigilant, recoils, stiffly: it will not be castrated by, abraded into, the other.

'At the Mountains of Madness' provides 'salient' (57) details pertaining to the Shoggoth: subject-as-Shoggoth is slave subject and hence no subject at all but whose mimicry or mockery nonetheless defies, as it does in 'Innsmouth' and everywhere else, the old order. In this instance, William Dyer, the first person narrator, discovers that the 'Old Ones,' architects of fantastic cities in the Antarctic built by slave labour, i.e. the formless Shoggoths, are, in fact, kindred, their authority long usurped, their reign disastrously at an end:

> Poor devils! After all, they were not evil things of their kind. They were the
> men of another age and another order of being. … They had not been savages—
> for what indeed had they done? … [P]oor Old Ones! Scientists to the last—what
> had they done that we would not have done in their place? God, what

intelligence and persistence! … Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star

spawn—whatever they had been, they were men! (90)

In the passage above, Dyer territorialises the other, the 'Old Ones,' as 'men of another

age,' despite their physical appearance, 'scientists to the last,' and extends

membership of an exclusive club, that is, the discourse of the human, to an other who

behaves as he does or 'would have done'. In other words, Dyer affirms the rights of

those that are alike and who, consequently, are not subjects of difference, but of his

kind. He thereby further bestows legitimacy onto their order and integrates them into

his political community: 'whatever they had been, they were men!' This

neutralisation of difference complicates arguments, to say the least, about Lovecraft's

anti/in/posthumanism; the logic at work, rather, upholds 'man' as standard-bearer by

which to assess the other, granted recognition in relation to a political norm. This

article contests, then, the basis on which these arguments are made, and its contention

is the following: the form of the 'proper' subject remains that of 'man,' an

organisation of form and of the proper that articulates and must 'secure' itself against

a formless other.

This is not to say that Lovecraft's work is homogenous, although my intention is not

to demonstrate its possibilities of rupture or transgression; according to Derrida, these

always exist in a text, even in the most phallogocentric ones, which might produce

'paradoxical effects' (Acts 50). Lovecraft, regardless, has his advocates, and, more

than anything, the impression persists that recent scholarship insists too much on, or

hallucinates, disturbances in the order of the 'human,' whose precarity exists to the

extent that it has to be protected. A community of the 'we' is either silently assumed

or, as in 'The Case of Charles Dexter Ward' (1943), is explicitly and 'dutifully'

taking action; this concept of duty motivates 'guiding group[s] of eminent men' (132)

standing guard and raiding the scene of the other. A 'we' similarly recurs in Harman's

Weird Realism (2012)—the epicentre, if you wish, of the present critique—, which

Ezra Claverie, in his book review of Harman's study, identifies as the perspective of

the coloniser, the white supremacist harmoniously aligned with Lovecraft's mythos

(264). There are aspects of Weird Realism that are astute, not least of which is

Harman's description of Lovecraft's style in terms of 'literary cubism' (234),

delivering objects from multiple viewpoints at once. This practice of writing—rather

than cubist, it is perhaps compound, like an insect's eye—yields new, formless,

arrangements, split and unreconciled in their dimensions, partly withdrawn and/or

overwhelmingly, disastrously, there. Words thus function like black holes deforming

everything around them (like the usual qualities associated with a certain term) (239).

Indeed, Lovecraft's writing is morphological, that is, interested in forms and un-

forming, but the incentive driving this process is the privileging of form and, more

precisely, the modality of the colonial man/white settler, the measure of all things, or

of all life. A writing style that disjoints, creates rifts, breaks things apart does not

necessarily come from, nor engender, a similarly 'deconstructive' movement,

meaning an operation that calls into question structure and form. On the contrary,

Lovecraft's ontography, rather than an anti-structuralist gesture, as it were, is

resolutely occupied with preserving systems of formalisation, including the logic of

racialization.

To understand Lovecraft in a tradition, or direction, exposed to the inhuman, insistent

on the 'value' of horror fiction as philosophical exercise/element—because why

waste your time looking at something unworthy of attention, hence Harman's effort to give it proper form—doesn't preclude being unresponsive to the other. Questions of value are at the heart of this essay, as they are to Harman's book (a rescue mission; a defence of Lovecraft's literary merits), and to inquiries about the informe, that which, according to Georges Bataille, 'does not, in any sense whatever, possess rights, and everywhere gets crushed' (51–52). The insectile informe, as the title announces, sets the course of this piece; linked to an insect's metamorphosis, the informe is figuration, 'living map' (Braidotti 2), of a dynamic, constantly changing subject different from itself, whose identity is not repose, but transformation. This dynamism is often imagined as deliquescence, a term borrowed from mycology and which suggests itself through the 'fungous life' in 'Whisperer' (261) but also throughout the rest of Lovecraft's oeuvre: the fungus' putridity corresponds to his creatures' 'damnable approach to form' ('Shunned House' 243). Deliquescence, however, stands not only in relation to a single, 'degrading' body, but further calls up the (im)materiality of swarming multiplicities, which, according to Maurice Maeterlink, observing ants, '[present] the appearance of a liquid in ebullition' (34).

Form and the deliquescence of form, these events, or, rather, formations, deformations, formatting, and transformations, to refer to Sebastian Vehlken, give shape to this essay, which proceeds by way of a close encounter, of a kind, with buzzing voices in 'Whisperer.' In Miéville's analysis of the weird, the insectile is grafted onto the tentacular, privileged by Miéville but also Roger Luckhurst as sign of displacement of the so-called human, but which misses the dimension of sound. The insectile is aural, not necessarily a visual phenomena: it is cacophony, noise, murmur, buzz, 'indistinguishable,' so Eugene Thacker, 'from the very elemental properties of

… storms and whirlwinds.' Miéville defines the creatures of the weird as 'indefinable and formless,' before exemplifying this impossibility of description and approach in a notation: 'and/or,' or also 'and/or and and/or or'. The notation itself demands a response: the forward slashes defer, are two- or multi-faced, each facet uneasily co-existing, the symbol at once separating force and a barrier to be overcome, inviting, in fact, its negotiation. '[D]isproportionately insectile/cephalopodic,' the creatures of the weird, Miéville writes, are 'without mythic resonance,' that is, unable to sound across a culture to provide it with a structuring form (of belief, explanation, etc.). Wedged between the insectile and the cephalopodic, the mark, however appropriate to Lovecraft's ontography, nonetheless makes it easy to gloss over the 'phenomenally complex' aspect of the swarm, which is 'affectual before [it is] accountable' (Thacker). There is, hence, a point to be made about pausing, for a moment, to consider the insectile, so as to concentrate on the realm that we might otherwise glide over, on the way to somewhere or something else.

Before becoming (and not even necessarily so) source, the insectile is environment. In its immateriality, it is without form, pertaining, as such, to another aspect of the informe, namely what Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss consider to be 'pulsation.' A sort of beat which disrupts or 'punctures' the apparent closedness of forms, a 'unified visual field' (31), pulsation agitates, for example, Man Ray's photographs, though Bois and Krauss also mention Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), the 'rhythm of shock,' the urgency of pulse as repetition (162). It behaves as a largely visual, rather than aural, category in their work, if simply because their analysis focuses on art, but pulse or pulsation, as Thacker has shown, is also swarm, a permeating aurality. The informe, here, then, refers to the pulsation of a resonant,

sonorous materiality, whose theoretical framework is assembled from research into sound studies, the voice, media technologies, the impressions of sound-objects and their 'liquid instability,' the vibrations always in excess of the sources that emit them (Goodman 71). As Isabella van Elferen has already shown, sound is a 'privileged metaphor' for Lovecraft's 'paradoxical materialism,' because of its 'uneasy fit between ontology and phenomenology'—engendered, as it is, by instruments and voices but also obviously generating affective experiences—as well as between materiality and immateriality (93). While van Elferen uses the matter of sound to point to the serious divergences between Lovecraft and speculative realist philosophy, the subsequent pages stay attentive to the flesh of sound, the auditive texture of voices like a bee's, in order to demonstrate Lovecraft's orientation toward form. The diffusive insectile buzzing, in and beyond 'Whisperer,' endeavours to represent that which is unrepresentable, the 'thought from the outside,' in Michel Foucault's terms (16). Rendered in a language whose vibrations, its timbre, performs—or, rather, in which resonates—that pure outside, the insectile exists as evocation, or pulsation, of the formless.

What is to come, below, is an engagement with the valorization of form, i.e. the good form, against that which is deemed formless/deliquescent/insectile. The first part of the essay travels through the methodology on the materiality of the voice, and thereby lends an ear to the flesh of the buzz, while the second is concerned with the assemblage and notation of the good form in Lovecraft's 'Whisperer' by being alert to punctuation as indicative of the voice that is expelled from the order of writing. A project about morphology, it attends to sound, to the correlations between sound and form, and addresses the obfuscation at the heart of recent scholarship on Lovecraft,

whose particular iteration of anti/in/posthumanism can't finally offer any sustained or substantial critique of the systems of thought sustaining the violent political domination of the 'human,' aka colonial man. Instead, such perspectives reconcile posthumanism with racialization, with the construct of 'man' so apt at reconstituting itself at every turn. Rather than a manifestation of 'outside thought,' in the sense of working to decolonise the concept of the 'human,' this mode of thinking actively neglects the production of form (colonial man) and formlessness (the insectile) in Lovecraft's writing, which, deforming, unforming, nonetheless upholds the value-form of the master-subject.

The flesh-voice of the z

It is the voice (as well as handwriting, which becomes impossible, because so distorted) that gives away otherness in Lovecraft's fiction, even if, on the face of it, appearances are more or less kept up. In 'The Shadow Out of Time' (1936), Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee, professor in Political Economy at Miskatonic University, descended of 'wholesome old Haverhill stock' (157), returns to occupy his own body after an abduction lasting for over five years and finds that his 'speech seemed awkward and foreign':

> I used my vocal chords clumsily and gropingly, and my diction had a curiously stilted quality, as if I had laboriously learned the English language from books. The pronunciation was barbarously alien, whilst the idiom seemed to include both scraps of curious archaism and expressions of a wholly incomprehensible case. … Something in my aspect and speech seemed to excite vague fears and

aversions in every one I met, as if were a being infinitely removed from all that

is normal and healthful. (158–159)

In 'The Case of Charles Dexter Ward,' Joseph Curwen, the dodgy ancestor, adopts

the speech of a 'learned and cultivated Englishman,' but whose mimicry hints at

'sinister undercurrent[s]' (113). In both these cases, language is something improperly

acquired, as if it wasn't theirs to possess, or their improper bodies were barred from

being claimed by, or associated with, the English language. In 'Whisperer,' too,

'buzzing voices' speak 'in imitation of human speech' (220); these are not 'well-built'

voices, but 'animal noises,' a speech 'decayed,' misshapen, unable to really, or

properly, be formed into words (228). There is an intolerable excess to these speaking

voices, all the more unbearable because illegitimate, 'laboriously' appropriated rather

than 'naturally' pertaining to the subject and wider order in question. This

discrepancy, between 'nature' and labour, as Homi Bhabha shows in The Location of

Culture (2004), threatens the authoritative discourse of colonial man (123), an

'empty' subject or, in Lauren Berlant's words, abstract citizen. Abstract personhood is

not, as the term already implies, bound to a living body; if a body appears—a fat,

black, queer, differently abled body, say, or, as the case may be, a crustacean, or

Shoggothic, body—it is surplus (130), a 'bad form' (Bois & Krauss 108), whose

corporeality also lodges in the voice.

There is, then, a weight, a viscous density, to the shaping labour of the other's

language—even the term 'body' bestows too much form—whose messages can't be

free of its medium, that is, the voice, emerging from organs 'unmistakably alien to

this world' (Lovecraft, 'Whisperer' 230). The materiality of the voice, impossible to

be passed over—it resides, for one, and of which more later, in the 'fiendish' presence of punctuation marks brutalising the writing, the separate spheres of each letter—, signifies a perversion of form even more 'blasphemous' because of the 'impersonal precision and deliberation' informing the mimicry (235). Soulless, mechanical, insectile, this voice destabilises colonial man/history/authority through its fleshiness, that which, with reference to Alexander Weheliye, is extraneous according to the logic of the political domination of the other, sustaining and activating an 'atrocity of the flesh' (2). Colonial man has no flesh, just as his voice isn't marked by a surplus viscosity; racialization is excessive fleshiness, made apparent, on the pages of Lovecraft's story, through the way messages are forced through an intolerable body. The buzzing is the result of this trajectory, the purity of a language sullied by organs unfit to pronounce it and all the more monstrous for its 'cultivation'.

Jean-Luc Nancy's *À L'Écoute* draws the ear toward the enfleshment of the voice, or also timbre, what Roland Barthes, acknowledging Julia Kristeva's work, calls the 'geno-song' (506), that which is remaindered from the speaking voice as source of meaning or semantic order. Rather than valorising the message, Nancy asks us to listen to sonority: he uses the expression *tendre l'oreille* (18), preserved in translation, that is, to stretch the ear, to mobilise it, and attend to its travels. '[T]o be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning' (21), he writes, considering sound as edge, 'open depths' (16), an outside in which the subject is immersed, and which resonates within. What is remarkable is that Nancy eschews a vertically held perspective (the all-seeing 'I') for a position that renders the listening subject as resonant womb or belly, a 'hollow column, over which skin is stretched' (77).

A philosophy of listening to approach Lovecraft's 'The Whisperer in the Darkness,' the materiality of his buzzzzzing voices: the way the z, like skin, can stretch, or hummmm. In an interlude, Nancy plays with the word mot, the noise of m, to murmur, to mutter, to become mute, to pour out, via the German münden, also incubating the mouth (46–47). A buzzzzzing: the vocal folds are tense and vibrate together, their vibrations sensed as material, the distended z vibrating at the roof of the mouth, the tongue lightly touching its ridge. The airflow is restricted but not stopped; a small opening allows it to pass, hitting the back of the teeth. In the 'cave of the mouth' (48) a nervous entity nests: not yet, no longer, a word, it is a disturbance, a bug hovering, writhing, within. The buzzing of the consonant m articulates no voice, writes Nancy (48), a compelling observation, though not strictly true. The buzz is voice as excessive material object, as 'vocality,' Paul Zumthor's term, which Adriana Caravero uses to discuss the dimensions of the voice as far larger than speech (528, 529). She proposes that logocentrism denies the voice its range, its 'seductive and quasi-animal' reverberations (529). The voice of the othered is frequently dismissed as noise, hysterical babble, etc., but the logocentric command must render its own voice as pure meaning: beautiful, clean, uncluttered information machine.

Mladen Dólar has analysed the 'linguistics of the voice,' referring to Aristophanes' hiccups in Plato's Symposium, irruptions usually understood as 'recalcitrant to meaning' (48), like coughing, or any other 'soulless' (73), automatic, involuntary interruption of speech. Dólar, however, shows that although such interferences— parasites, in Michel Serres' vocabulary—, while not linguistic, do not simply lie outside of linguistic structure either. He considers them, in 'their very absence of articulation'—what Nancy might have gestured toward with his comment concerning

voicelessness—as the embodiment or corporeality of linguistic structure as such (97).

Elsewhere in his study, he describes the voice as 'plus-de-corps,' a double entendre

that, at the same time, hides the body (plus de corps = no body left) and increases its

mass (plus de corps = supplementing the body with yet more flesh) (200). The

incorporation of the voice, though it never really belongs to the body it emanates

from, is evident in the sonorous body Nancy posits, echoing Derrida's alertness, his

stretched ear, to 'the irreducible openness of the inside' ('The Voice' 502), making

any absolute inside, closed off from the other, impossible.

The exact location of the voice always remains in doubt, even if we can describe

exactly where and how sounds are formed. Z is a voiced alveopalatal sibilant

fricative, occurring because a certain number of conditions are fulfilled for its

emergence and lingering vibrations. In his book about sound and avant-garde art,

Douglas Kahn notes that the voice inhabits bodies differently, that

> [m]odern Western culture typically locates the dominant operations of the
>
> embodied voice above the collarbone, attracted toward the head by the pull of
>
> the fusion of thought with speech and by an unconscious that serves as a proxy
>
> for the rest of the body. Other cultures place the operations of the voice
>
> throughout the body, and some place them primarily below the collarbone and
>
> symbolise voice through an array of objects, economies, and forces both inside
>
> the body and well outside of it. (290)

In this particular chapter, Kahn examines what he calls 'meat-voices,' a voice spread

throughout the entire body, in operation, for example, in William Burroughs' work, in

the word schlupp—expressing hunger or desire—in which the sounds of the body can be abundantly heard. It takes moisture to pronounce this word, slushing inside, in the wet region of the mouth. It is, consequently, as if a word, made flesh, released spores, starting an autodigestive process: this affective quality pertains to the basely material, the entropic (Bois and Krauss 26); in other words, to the informe. It does not so much form an image as deform, degrade or transform it; like slime, which Sartre analyses in Being and Nothingness, its softness, its 'inexpressible materiality' (606), is indicative of formlessness, the dissolution of representation. In the 'event' of the Lovecraftian buzzing voice—'metallic, lifeless,' with its 'inflectionless, expressionless scraping and rattling, and its impersonal precision and deliberation' ('Whisperer' 271)—it similarly calls up a horror of that which can't become, and explodes, form.

The flesh-voice of the buzz—flesh so as to retain, in a first instance, the association with Weheliye's work—, rather than integrated, is a distributed, disaggregated voice, in that it can be located across a number of bodies. Its materiality is vibrational; it is a swarming, a noise indicative of a 'semi-being,' as Leibniz calls multiplicities (Serres 2). In Genesis, Serres suggests that multiplicities—a pack, a swarm, a herd—are 'a bit viscous perhaps,' hardly objects (he likens them to a lake in mist, a white plain) (5), though they are frequently produced as un- or anti-aesthetic thing and, in different contexts, as specific form or figure of knowledge, as Sebastian Vehlken shows in Zootechnologien (2012). Form, as Vehlken notes, is not an ontological condition but a historical/political phenomenon; a swarm, as 'epistemic object' (176) does not remain statically the same, but is rendered in and according to particular discourse networks across time. In horror fiction, however, it tends to fulfill the same function, figuration of the total other linked, time and again in Lovecraft's story, with the 'untenanted' or

with perverse tenancy: swarms occupy hills, which nobody visits, 'tenantless mountains' ('Whisperer' 229), the buzz of the voice itself suggesting further tenantlessness, that which has no 'soul'. If the flesh, in its surplus viscosity, 'living fungi' (257), as it were, designates an absence from a subject position—'before the "body," there is the "flesh"', so Hortense Spillers—the buzz is one expression of 'that zero degree of social conceptualisation' afforded to 'formless' beings (67). It is, also, the voice of *zoē*, the lack of eidos, of something without form, head or face, of a thing that is 'dangerously close to the arcana [the mystery or secret] of basic entity … [transcending] form and force and symmetry' (Lovecraft, 'Whisperer' 262).

The holy trinity of value, that is, form and force and symmetry, defines the discourse of absence with respect to basic entities, coded as a type of amoeboid life—without form, like the horror-swarm—, as subjectless assemblage with no speech of its own. In the buzz resonates that elimination of form, what either can't be formed into words or which, at best, nests within them, threatening their 'voiceless,' fleshless, integrity. The extraneous noise, that voice like a bee's, corresponds to the real of a 'vast outside' (Lovecraft, 'Whisperer' 250), swelling beyond the background to the good form to dissolve it. There is no 'logos without noise,' says Serres (7), which forms the underside (the outer limits) of information: noise is the material of form, from which form is shaped, and which simultaneously threatens its order.

The Good Form

Up until now, the more or less silent but nonetheless foundational influence to this article is Seb Franklin's 'The Context of Forms,' in which he analyses form and

formlessness in light of 'the complex, ever-shifting knot of settler colonialism, exploitation, and immiseration otherwise known as capitalism' (2). His study, flanked on either side by references to Lovecraft, examines the dynamics of formalisation entangled with commodity production—of bodies (human; non-human) and territories—always reliant on surplus formlessness as something that awaits being made productive. Capitalism moulds things into forms, contorts the shape of the worker and confers value on that which has been formed, made useful, yet while demanding and fetishizing form, it also depends on that which still, or temporarily, lies outside its processes of accumulation. Lovecraft functions as moment of entry to, and endpoint of, an investigation into the socio-historical conditions of formal assignation at the hands of capital. In other words, Franklin is interested in subsumption, formal and real, and the 'originary and ongoing violence' which determines form, as well as formlessness, both of which are integral to racial capitalist procedures and social formations (12).

Lovecraft's commitment to form in relation to an aspect that immediately refers to, or, if you will, succeeds, Franklin's work, exemplifies the relationship, in 'Whisperer,' between formalisation, settlement, and profit on the one side and formlessness, as excrescence, on the other:

> Most people simply knew that certain hilly regions were considered as highly
> unhealthy, unprofitable and generally unlucky to live in, and that the farther one
> kept from them the better off one usually was. In time the ruts of custom and
> economic interest became so deeply cut in approved places that there was no

longer any reason for going outside them, and the haunted hills were left

deserted by accident rather than by design. (221)

The misrecognition of accident and design is itself already significant, if accident is

taken to mean something that 'naturally' occurs, though words like 'approved' or

'economic interest' are indicative of, precisely, design. An approval is an attestation

of authority, and it is suggestive of form, a marking of territorial boundaries, coded as

healthy and productive, whereas the 'outside' is to be distrusted, regardless/despite of

its significance in sustaining and setting off the inside as all the more desirable. Here

is a gaze that claims and abjects, a politics that is everywhere apparent in Lovecraft's

writings, his fiction and letters, pitting '[men] of character, education and

intelligence' ('Whisperer' 223) against 'misshapen outcasts' (228) in 'hidden and

unwholesome [tenancies]' (230). Though 'destinies' of the human and the non/in-

human might be intertwined—'pits of primal life' trickling down into 'our own' pools

(231)—the logic at work, so resonant with mechanisms of racialization, is directed

against an enemy within, an inside that must be expelled. The point is not so much

that a stable separation between inside and outside, or form and formlessness, is

impossible, but that the former has to be safeguarded against the latter. The rights of

the settler and, by extension, the identity of the 'human' are, as such, troubled only in

the sense that they require an even deeper commitment to their maintenance, while

the system of thought that grants form stays unchallenged.

It is, then, surprising, not to say irresponsible, that Lovecraft is claimed by a

philosophical system apparently attentive to the non/in-human, bearing in mind how

insistently he corroborates form, in the face of its deliquescence, and the form-giving

structures of racial capitalism. Form might imply vision—and vision, in Western metaphysics, posits a rational, self-identical subject in command—but it has a sonic dimension. Form is audible as well as visual, though sound is even more readily linked to dissolution or, at the very least, to diffusion. In *À L'Écoute*, Nancy prehends the sonic as existing beyond form, in that it might evoke a form but can't be expressed, that is contained, as such:

> [Sound] does not dissolve [form], but rather enlarges it; it gives it an amplitude, a density, and a vibration or an undulation whose outline never does anything but approach. The visual persists until its disappearance; the sonorous appears and fades away into its permanence. (14)

What arises in/as sound is something that can travel, stretch; it seems by definition to be formless, though it isn't. Harmony is form—music is an endowment of noise with form, according to Jacques Attali (6)—emerging from a background noise that, so Serres, is 'limitless, continuous, unending, unchanging' (13). Sound liquidates form in the sense that it passes the bounds of visual form. A sound is, hence, of uncertain ontological status, just as it is 'placed under the sign of a fall,' as language's remainder (Chion 15), the excess of the voice, unnecessary for, even disruptive to, its messages.

The intertwining of materiality (the source of a sound) and immateriality (a sound's distribution; its affect), and the reason, remembering van Elferen's argument, that sound features so prominently in Lovecraft's mythos, gives it its function with respect to form. Serres likens sound to a phenomenon like radiation, settling in subjects and

things, moving through flesh and walls, 'bounding, abounding, unbounding' space (15); its coextension with space also comes with the faculty or the incapacity of filtering it out. Sound can, then, have form, or rather can be arranged into form, and undo form, often at the same time: if a source is visible, can be isolated, it doesn't mean that sound can be captured as belonging, being proper, to that single source. Hearing, as such, is not necessarily something that occurs before formalisation, but is in fact trained to respond to it. The nominal good is, yet again, form, which affects our ability and/or willingness to listen to that which interferes with said good. 'I hear without clear frontiers,' observes Serres, continuing that the 'ear knows how to lose track' (7), but 'Whisperer,' although *à l'écoute*, is case in point of hearing as obedience, attending exclusively to that which has already been coded. The ear, in these circumstances, is an organ keeping to track, to orders/forms given and standing in stark contrast to 'malformations,' the kinds of sounds that are made by matter utterly remote to 'our' understanding of good form.

In this vein, and in a lengthy passage, the narrator in 'Whisperer' describes his first, and traumatically retained, point of contact with 'outer' voices. Initially, the encounter (not first hand) is relayed via mailed transcript, lost but etched into memory, then by phonograph recording received from his correspondent Henry Wentworth Akeley (note his middle name, referring to Governor Wentworth, dispensing 'colonial grants' to settlers in what became the state of Vermont):

To me, with my first-hand impression of the actual sounds and with my knowledge of the background and surrounding circumstances, the voice was a monstrous thing. It swiftly followed the human voice in ritualistic response, but

in my imagination it was a morbid echo wringing its way across unimaginable

abysses from unimaginable outer hells. It is more than two years now since I

last ran off that blasphemous waxen cylinder: but at this moment, and at all

other moments, I can still hear that feeble, fiendish buzzing as it reached me for

the first time.

…

But though the voice is always in my ears, I have not even yet been able to

analyse it well enough for a graphic description. It was like the drone of some

loathsome, gigantic insect ponderously shaped into the articulate speech of an

alien species, and I am perfectly certain that the organs producing it can have no

resemblance to the vocal organs of man, or indeed to those of any of the other

mammalia [sic]. There were singularities in timbre, range and overtones, which

placed this phenomenon wholly outside the sphere of humanity and earth-life.

(234–235)

In the story, Lovecraft repeatedly mentions the disruption caused to channels of

communication, letters lost, phonograph records destroyed, wires going dead, evident

references, as mentioned earlier, to Dracula: in this case, however, the vampiric

systems of telecommunications are not equal to the task. The phonograph, as

Friedrich Kittler tells us, seized the real, the excesses or residue of the voice,

everything whispered, rattled, all that which is excluded in the discrete notations of

the alphabet (3). It is a technology of noise or of 'waste,'—the Viennese psychiatrist

Erwin Stransky used the phonograph to register the 'uninterrupted, indiscriminate'

utterances of his subjects (Kittler 86)—though it was initially developed as 'archival

apparatus' to preserve the 'exemplary words' of political leaders etc., in other words,

the discourse of power, rather than the babblings of the unconscious (Attali 92). Employed, in 'Whisperer,' to make analysis possible, the mechanism succeeds only in entrenching the trace or trauma of pure difference, its spiral groove recording and reproducing, in memory, the sound waves of an 'outward logic' (228). The outside is, in this way, reterritorialised as something inside, but which can't be admitted.

It is not as if the network of technique, at any rate disabled, managed to process buzzing as object or function of an organism that can somehow enter representation. Form, or form-making, fails here, but not exclusively because machines, and the technology of language, fail; a discourse network, needless to say, is ideological, the failure, consequently, also one of the imagination. The recordings follow an already grooved loop, in that the impressions they make are guided by a colonially organised idea of what form is, a program that is apparent when looking at how these recorded iterations are relayed in the story. Punctuation is key here: 'marks of oral delivery,' they are usually 'friendly spirits,' according to Theodor Adorno (300), bound up with the 'musical form,' the schema of tonality (301). The remembered transcript of the phonograph record, preceding Wilmarth's reaction shown in the previously cited passage, however, is evidence of being unsettled, displaced. Punctuation marks— largely ellipses, but also exclamation points and square brackets, either filled with descriptions of the 'outside' voices in italics or supplementing garbled words—are 'bodiless' indicators that don't, here, resemble music (a culturally sanctioned form), but disorder (Adorno 300). Indicative of an 'interplay that takes place in the interior of language' (300)—'good English grammar,' according to Wilmarth (233), disrupted and undone by parasites—punctuation marks explode the good form from within. If the phonograph hears everything, the transcript (and its engraving in memory) is able

to record chaos through the 'noise' of frequent elliptical interludes, signalling incomprehension, a trailing off, unmoored, into infinitude. The 'silent cymbal clashes' (Adorno 301) of exclamation points, the 'enclave[s]' of the parentheses, corrupt the 'integrity' of the sentence and of the 'linguistic form' (304). For Adorno, the 'micrological power' of punctuation (304)—a comment about Proust's use of punctuation marks but repurposed, here, to talk more generally about their potential—lies in the silent ways it approximates writing to the voice, to the sound that writing suppresses (305). The impact of the excessive use of punctuation marks is degeneration, an assault on the symbolic order by the terror of the voice of the other.

Defined through its, or his, capacity to not only use language—the default position by which to assert 'human' supremacy over the animal other—but through the ability to use (particularly the English) language well, the 'human' is determined as, and with respect to, English colonial man (Akeley; Wilmarth). Transcript and phonograph record stage a conversation between outer voice and recruit or 'reformed' subject (Bhabha 124), speaking in a 'mellow, educated voice which seemed vaguely Bostonian in accent' (Lovecraft, 'Whisperer' 234). This reformed subject—a Mister Noyes, onomatopoeically referring to what is provoked; later also Akeley—is an ambassador of sorts; both his voice of privilege and the voice of the other, exerting an 'almost paralysing fascination' (250), disturb (un)familiar sounds to the extent that they reveal their repressed source, namely that all language is mimicry:

At times it seemed as if he [Akeley, by this point colonised] were pumping me to see what I knew of the monstrous secrets of the place, and with every fresh utterance that vague, teasing, baffling familiarity in his voice increased. It was

not an ordinary or healthy familiarity despite the thoroughly wholesome and

cultivated nature of the voice. I somehow linked it with forgotten nightmares,

and felt that I might go mad if I recognised it. (255)

The voice is that which arrives from outside to take up residence within, but the result

of this not-quite recognition—exiled from the ego—is less a dethroning of the

properly colonial man than a consolidation of his power. Even though the story, in a

way a retelling of the Medusa myth, appears to demonstrate how easily man is de-

phallisized, pumped of his Gestalt and bios, it obsessively and aggressively seeks to

maintain what Wynter calls the 'coloniality of Being,' over-representing colonial man

as the 'human' per se (260). Considering that the 'bare' matter of the brain is the only

organic residue left of this subject (Lovecraft, 'Whisperer' 263), and that his/its voice,

too, is losing form—Akeley, towards the end of the story, speaks in a monologue full

of dashes, openings toward the 'gulfs of space and time' (259) now heard in the

voice—the assault on the 'human' is total, unrelenting. And yet, he persists: his form

upheld as centre of all reference and the appropriate instantiation of the 'human,'

because the narrative in all instances prioritizes the 'wholesomeness' of form over its

deliquescent other: indescribable, fungoid flesh, the pulsations of the insectile.

In light, then, of the analysis above, the mythic resonance that Miéville fails to see

with respect to the formless occurs elsewhere, that is, in the construct of form,

privileged over and against the insectile/cephalopodic. This construct or myth, both

originary and ongoing, is the ultraviolent logic of organisation that defers to colonial

man, articulating the following equation: colonial man = eternal good form. What

resonates not only throughout Lovecraft's work, but also across the scholarship

establishing and legitimising him as a writer stretching his ear towards the

non/in/anti-human, is the discourse of the valorisation of form: man—the ultimate

apparition of form— emboldened against the murmur, the buzzzzzzzzzz of a

background without form.

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