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Racism and Legacy of Slavery in Victor LaValle's *Up from Slavery*

In Victor LaValle's novel *The Ballard of Black Tom*, his dedication states "for H.P. Lovecraft, with all my conflicted feelings." (LaValle 2016). The ghost of Lovecraft haunts the genre of cosmic horror. Lovecraft's influence is cemented within modern culture with countless stories derived from his tales of incomprehensible beings and grotesque monstrosities. While known as a pioneer for the genre of cosmic horror, Lovecraft's racism is an undeniable part of his legacy. His fears of otherness are integrated into his writings, through Lovecraft's transformation of what he dreaded (e.g., immigrants, people of color) into alien monsters. Lovecraft's racism and xenophobia has created debates on whether to separate the author from their work, as Lovecraft's beliefs are ingrained within his works. Modern authors address this dilemma while addressing his racism in different manners; such as writing within Lovecraft's fictional universe to reimagine his monstrous creations that embodied his beliefs. One of those modern authors, Victor LaValle addresses the legacy of slavery and provides social commentary on racism through his short story *Up from Slavery* in response to Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*.

Victor LaValle is a mixed race author who grew up in Queens, New York. In his childhood, he enjoyed reading Lovecraft's works. However, he came to feel conflicted about

Lovecraft works as he grew aware of Lovecraft's racism; realizing that as an African American man, he himself was what Lovecraft hated. LaValle has wrote stories within Lovecraft's fictional universe to address Lovecraft's prejudices such as his novel *The Ballard of Black Tom* in response to one of Lovecraft's most overtly racist works *The Horror at Red Hook* born from Lovecraft's horrification of the immigrants living within Queens. Within his short story *Up from Slavery*, LaValle writes in response to Lovecraft's creation of the Shoggoths, formless shape morphing creatures who are enslaved under the extraterrestrial Elder Things. Moreover, in his story, he features a protagonist who faces the legacy of his heritage as a Shoggoth.

A summary of *Up from Slavery* follows the tale of Simon Dust, an editor overlooking an edition of Booker T. Washington's slave memoir *Up from Slavery*. After receiving the news of his father's untimely death, Simon Dust deals with his father's inheritance and in the process meets a mysterious man. The mysterious man reveals Simon Dust's true heritage as a Shoggoth and uses hypnotic control to put him under his control. Over time, the man reveals the true circumstances behind his father's death and is revealed to be the Outer God Nyarlathotep. Simon Dust takes advantage of his shape morphing abilities to prevent Nyarlathotep's use of hypnotic commands to work by changing his body to be without ears and overpowers Nyarlathotep. He leaves with the goal of returning to Antarctica to seek out his brethren to find the Outer Gods and kill them if they become weak. LaValle redefines Lovecraft's cosmic horror (fear of the unknown) and critiques the racist premise of his cosmic horror through his works.

Lovecraft's cosmic horror is rooted within his xenophobia and racism. Racist metaphors and overt racism are baked within the horrors of Lovecraft's works through the manifestation of his biological fears by the recurring themes of degeneration and hereditary evil. For instance, *The*

Dunwich Horror reflects Lovecraft's fear of racial mixing through the monstrous offspring born with genetic defects from an interracial relationship between a human and the Outer God Yog-Sothoth. Lovecraft's protagonists are driven to madness after encounters with cosmic horror due to the horrors of the realization of their descent from the monsters they feared or that they are gradually transforming into monsters. The horrors of the monster being oneself is where Lovecraft's racism comes into play, as it becomes a metaphor that represents his fear of social degeneration (biological devolution due to interracial relationships) and beliefs in eugenics (the scientifically erroneous theory of the improvement of human genetics by selective breeding). This was his scientific basis on justifying his racism through dubious interpretations of Darwin's theory of evolution and Mendel's laws of inheritance; which was prevalent within America during Lovecraft's life within the 20th century in proving white biological superiority. The landscape of white America was horrified by Darwin's theory of evolution in that the white race were no different and held no advantages over other races and sought to use science to support their racism. However, from a biological viewpoint: organisms do not devolve; rather organisms adapt to their environment which increases their odds of reproductive success. The language Lovecraft uses to describe the Shoggoths are infused with his fears of devolution, through the imagery of slime and "protoplasmic" in relation to the primal biological origins of humanity (Lovecraft). The Shoggoths represent Lovecraft's beliefs in scientific racism and xenophobia which Victor LaValle critiques through his short story.

Victor LaValle's *Up from Slavery* addresses Lovecraft's racism in *At the Mountains of Madness* that are represented through his creation of the Shoggoth, telling of a Black protagonist overcoming his legacy of slavery as a Shoggoth. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* depicts the Shoggoths, shapeless beings that are bioengineered by the race of the Elder Things to

provide slave labor to build their society. Shoggoths are controlled through hypnotic suggestion by their masters and able to transform and morph their bodies at will. The Shoggoths can be read to represent Lovecraft's racial fears through the similarities in the language used to describe them and minority workers within his personal letters. The motifs of aliens and imitation written in Lovecraft's description of the Shoggoths as "certain multicellular protoplasmic masses capable of moulding their tissues into all sorts of temporary organs" captures the essence of his white supremacy beliefs (Lovecraft). The narration refers to the Shoggoths as organisms rather than as sentient beings and portrays them as the inhuman other to be dreaded. Lovecraft saw "working-class minorities as alien outsiders who had invaded the fabric of the nation by way of entering the workforce" whom he saw were taking away the job opportunities he felt entitled to as a white man in America (Camara). His fear of immigrants overtaking white people is revealed through the depiction of the Shoggoths' uprising over their master the Elder Things. In addition, the struggles of the Shoggoths also parallels the oppression brought upon Black Americans with the legacy of slavery.

LaValle's choice to reimagine the Shoggoth is due to the parallels between the slavery of the Shoggoths and the slavery of African Americans. The biologically imposed fate of the status of slavery by the Shoggoths echoes the white supremacist reasoning of predestination to justify slavery in that "they [white masters] seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves" (Jacobs). The rhetorics used by white masters in religious racism use the same logic of the scientific racism associated with the Shoggoths in that the status of slavery has been already decided at birth. The comparison of the biological inferiority of the Shoggoths to their advanced masters the Elder Things within *At the Mountains of Madness* bring to mind the myth of black inferiority, the "white supremacist claims of a right to rule over 'inferior'

blacks” (Vinson). Similar to the usage of hypnotic suggestion by the Elder Things to prevent the Shoggoths from revolting against them, white slave masters used “religious instruction to keep them [the slaves] from murdering their masters” in reasserting their power through religious indoctrination (Jacobs). An additional comparison can be made between Lovecraft’s description of the Shoggoths “acquiring a dangerous degree of accidental intelligence, presented for a time a formidable problem” to the forbiddance of education for enslaved African Americans by white masters who feared their slaves would be more likely to revolt if they were educated (Lovecraft). Both the slavery of the Shoggoths and African Americans are dehumanized into nothing more than property that provides slave labor for their masters. By reimagining Lovecraft’s creation of the Shoggoth from a reviled inhuman other into a human with shape morphing abilities in his short story *Up from Slavery*, LaValle humanizes the Shoggoth.

The uprising of the Shoggoths over their masters are portrayed through the horrified lens of Lovecraft’s white protagonist who takes a sympathetic viewpoint with the Elder Things in Lovecraft’s novel *At the Mountains of Madness*. LaValle changes the lens in his short story *Up from Slavery* to be from the Shoggoth’s perspective in fighting against societal oppression and uplifting from the legacy of slavery. Thus, LaValle gives agency to the Shoggoths that were portrayed by Lovecraft as horrifying things.

In an interview with Lovecraft eZine, LaValle rebukes the belief of racism as a prejudice that can be remedied and defines racism as a tenacious part of society that influences its function: When it comes to discussions of racism I think a mistake many Americans make (not just white ones, but certainly many white ones) is to think that being racist means being mean, or rude, or impolite. They think of racism as a problem of how one individual treats another. Thus, a person

who never says nigger and never lynches non-white people thinks they have passed the test for being non-racist. But that's not what racism is. Racism is systematic. Racism (and sexism and homophobia and more) is a way that the United States does favors for some people simply because of who they were at birth and penalizes others for the same. (LaValle 2016)

Rather than treating racism as a matter of prejudices, LaValle approaches racism as a structure; something that shapes the fabric of Western society (Kumler 2-3). He reveals that racism itself is a cosmic horror: the uncaring society towards people of color (Kumler 3). Victor LaValle writes to transform Lovecraft's horrors of the unknown into the more known horrors of everyday racism people of color experience. Nyarlathotep, the Outer God who appears within the short story, symbolizes the white master and imposes the legacy of slavery onto the black mixed race protagonist Simon Dust.

Within Lovecraft's mythos, Nyarlathotep is the Outer God with the most contact with humanity; serving as the herald of the Outer Gods and delights in trampling over humans (physically or mentally) to amuse himself. LaValle frames Nyarlathotep as the white master through his appearance and the language Nyarlathotep refers to the Shoggoths and humanity with. Nyarlathotep is depicted as a formal man through his choice of outfit of a "baggy suit", of a civilized man compared to Simon Dust's status as a common folk (LaValle 7). Within the story, Nyarlathotep refers to humans as "mudbound", insinuating that he views humans akin to the dirt beneath Nyarlathotep's feet (LaValle 13). Humans to Nyarlathotep are nothing more than playthings he can mess with at his whim, mere things that cannot do a thing against him. A parallel can be made between Nyarlathotep and Southern slaveowners through their power dynamics with their slaves. Slaves are seen as property that their masters believe to have

inherently possess the power to control by both the slaveowners and Nyarlathotep. The two also use various methods to manipulate and maintain control over their slaves to prevent them from rebelling and obtaining their freedom. The powerlessness of slaves against their masters is horrifying, as they are seen as an insignificant cog running the capitalist machine of slavery. Historically, slaves had no legal protection and were seen as property rather than human, the government that is supposed to protect the rights and freedoms of its civilization uncaring of the brutality and infringes of slaves by masters. This feeling of powerlessness is the premise of the horror in Lovecraft's cosmic horror albeit on a cosmic scale, of the insignificance of oneself to the cosmos.

The horror within Lovecraft's cosmic horror lies within the horrifying realization of the uncaring universe by his white protagonists, that one is of little than a speck within the depths of grand scale of the universe. This horror is based on the fears of white America, of which the white majority in America would no longer exist with demographic change. The backlash and uneasiness brought upon the loss of the historical privilege granted to white Americans as the majority or the 'dominant' race has stirred the reactionary conservatism in America.

However, this horrifying realization of overwhelming insignificance of oneself is nothing new to Black Americans. In *Lovecraftian horror - and the racism at its core - explained*, Victor LaValle explains how his book *The Ballard of Black Tom* critiques how Lovecraft's horror is based on white privilege:

"If you're Black," he said, "you don't think the universe as a whole thinks you are wonderful because all you have to do, if you're a Black American, all you have to do is walk through America, and this country teaches you. ... The idea that you would be driven mad

because you found out that the universe doesn't think you're special is a joke to me as a Black American." (LaValle 2020)

Whether overt or subtle, people of color are taught that Western society views them as something alien, the process of othering that reinforces the structure of racism. This knowledge learned through numerous experiences within life of the rejection of Western society on the basis of not being white othering is a common experience for people of color. Society treats one lesser on the basis of race and appearance, shaping the assumptions and perspectives people make. This uncomfortable truth of systematic racism, the insignificance of one's existence to society is what LaValle writes to respond to Lovecraft's racism. Racial identity is a strong focus within *Up from Slavery*, as social commentary on the oppression faced due to race are made in Simon Dust's narration.

Throughout *Up from Slavery*, Simon Dusts faces everyday struggles brought by the legacy of slavery. Racial identity is a focus in *Up from Slavery*, as it colors Simon Dust's viewpoint of the world. Simon Dust is aware of how his racial identity and appearance influences how people treat him and relates to the audience with his frustrations in common experiences of oppression faced by people of color in their daily lives. His acute awareness of his racial identity and the common racially charged experiences he faces is how Victor LaValle writes racism within *Up from Slavery*. For instance, the neighbor of Dust's father is in disbelief when Simon Dust arrives as she did not expect the son of a white man to look black. Dust comments on the neighbor "let this idea [of his mixed-race identity] roll around in her brain", trying to comprehend the idea of an interracial relationship (LaValle 8). When her assumptions of his heritage based on his appearance as a black man are upended, she becomes uncomfortable when

her implicit bias is addressed by Dust. By LaValle's choice to include this interaction, he highlights society's reaction when someone does not fit within stereotypes. In addition, LaValle portrays everyday racism through Simon Dust's experiences throughout the story.

Everyday racism is race-based discrimination that occurs on the small-scale level on an everyday basis. The common phrase "it doesn't hurt to ask" needs to be applied with nuance, as in some cases, asking can be hurtful. For instance, the question of "Where are you *really* from?". This kind of questioning is everyday racism. It could be justified by plain curiosity, but does mere curiosity justify the reasoning behind asking these sorts of questions in the first place? The implications behind this line of questioning are what makes it charged, as the asker insinuates that the person in question doesn't belong in the country. LaValle writes such experiences into *Up from Slavery* and addresses them through Dust's narration. Throughout Dust's trips to and back from his father's estate on the subway, he notices that no one would sit next to him even when the train got crowded and grows frustrated over how people treat him "like a monster" (LaValle 11). This everyday racism, small things such as people being unwilling to sit next to a person of color, is what LaValle uses to highlight the horrors of racism as a system within Western Society. Rather than being overt, everyday racism lies within the subconscious, in the implicit bias with the assumptions that are made based on appearances. Furthermore, LaValle draws the ties between Dust's and the Shoggoths together through his references of Washington T. Booker's slave memoir, *Up from Slavery*, to build up towards Dust's uprising from his inherited status of a slave.

LaValle refers to the short story's titular work *Up from Slavery* to connect the experiences his protagonist undergoes and the plight of the Shoggoths to the core theme of the legacy of

slavery. LaValle sets up the plotline of *Up from Slavery* similarly to Booker's memoir and *At the Mountains of Madness* in that Dust moves through Booker's opening chapter of his life as a slave to revolting against his master Nyarlathotep like the Shoggoths whom have overcome their masters. Through this, LaValle critiques both works in how they address the legacy of slavery. For example, LaValle critiques the resignation of Lovecraft of the Shoggoth's fate to be doomed as slaves through inheritance in this interaction: "You were born to serve," he [Nyarlathotep] said. "It's genetic." "I've heard this shit before," I [Simon Dust] said." (LaValle 14). LaValle indicates the historic racist bias towards slaves and subverts it in his plotline. He does this through what ultimately uplifts Dust from his status of slavery, his removal of Nyarlathotep's control over him through attacking him. This ends the chapter of Simon Dust's life as a slave under Nyarlathotep, moving him on from the legacy of slavery into his future to free other slaves.

Through taking this approach in subverting Lovecraft's racism within *At the Mountains of Madness* through Simon Dust's journey from having slavery imposed onto him due to his biology to uplifting his slavery, LaValle addresses the legacy of slavery and how it influences society. He addresses this through his usage of the themes of inheritance and legacy of slavery by portraying them through Simon Dust's experiences with everyday racism and enforcement into slavery by Nyarlathotep. With this, LaValle's short story *Up from Slavery* brings light to the oppression brought by the legacy of slavery and provides social commentary on racism.

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