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Black Matters: The Cosmic Horror of Thomas Ligotti

In a webinar held at my university to mark the third anniversary of the murder of George Floyd, one of the participants reflected on the prospects of achieving racial justice. While repeatedly expressing outrage at the 'horror' of what happened in Minneapolis, he said he was an optimist by nature and believed that 'humanity generally progresses', despite 'some very dark episodes . . .' He also stressed the importance of maintaining vigilance against 'dark forces' intent on reversing progress.

There is a revealing irony in the prominent and negative use of the adjective 'dark' in a webinar to mark the daylight murder of an African American by a white police officer. At the very least, it might make us ask: What adjective could have taken the place of 'dark' to indicate the antithesis of progress? Since progress is so closely identified with light, as a journey from darkness to Enlightenment, alternatives to 'dark' do not easily come to mind. So when we talk of progressing from the dark horror of racist violence into a bright future of racial justice what place is there for black, the complete absence of light, the absolute of dark?

I want to pursue this question through a discussion of two short stories by the North American author Thomas Ligotti. Ligotti, an uncompromising pessimist who regards human beings as 'ontological nothings' and existence as 'malignantly useless'

(Ligotti, 2011), makes calculated use of dark and light in constructing his bleak fictional worlds.¹

Ontological Terror

Before proceeding to Ligotti, I want to make a short detour through the book *Ontological Terror* published by Afropessimist scholar Calvin L Warren in 2018. I want to say right away that I share neither Warren's premisses nor conclusions, but I do insist Warren's hermeneutics of absolute suspicion provides a necessary challenge to affirmative thinking about progress toward racial justice and his innovative application of Heideggerian ontology to explicating antiblack racism, if not entirely successful, yields crucial insights.

Warren's main contention is that antiblack racism arises when Dasein (human being) flees from the angst instilled by nothingness, which is Dasein's proper condition, and instead projects this angst as terror onto blacks. Blacks are, then, in a double sense objects of terror: both terror provoking and terrorised. Since it is given to blacks as such objects to hold the whole ontometaphysical structure in place, they are denied their own being. The black, according to Warren, is constitutionally excluded from the human family, having been sacrificed in a 'metaphysical holocaust', and so when he refers to 'black being', he does so catachrestically and under erasure. In practical terms, this means the struggle for racial justice is futile and short of the destruction of the world the best that blacks can do is live lives of endurance with recourse, perhaps, to a 'phenomenology of black spirit' (Warren, 2018, p. 171).

¹ The German word for pessimist is *Schwarzseher/in*, which literally translates as 'one who sees black'.

As I have said, I do not accept Warren's conclusions, not least because 'spirit', it seems to me, belongs to the very humanism Warren so relentlessly denounces. Yet I do believe thinking antiblackness via a race-adapted Heidegger, alert to the dark/light, black/white binary of metaphysical discourse, can help develop a reading of Ligotti's complex cosmic horror.

'The Shadow, the Darkness'

The first of the two short stories I want to consider is called 'The Shadow, the Darkness'. The narrative centres on a character called Reiner Grossvogel,² an artist who, following a painful illness, self-diagnosed as a 'gastrointestinal upheaval' (Ligotti, 2008, p. 257), is able to 'perceive' the world directly through his physical senses and without recourse to an 'illusory mind or a self' (p. 272). What Grossvogel perceives is a primordial 'energy' or 'activating force' that sets in motion all entities, human and non-human, which he describes as 'a pervasive shadow that causes things to be what they would not be, [an] all-moving darkness that makes things do what they would not do.' This lyrical description of the force is repeated multiple times throughout the story, reminiscent of a refrain, and it is worth noting the words darkness and blackness are used interchangeably. This dark, animating force, which provides the substance or ground of the phenomenal world, bears imaginative comparison with Kant's noumena, Schopenhauer's Will, Heidegger's Being, and dark matter/energy. It also has a literary precedent in Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), which features a mysterious island called Tsalal whose inhabitants have 'jet black' complexions and where even the albatrosses are black

² The name Reiner, an alternative spelling of Rainer, also suggests the German adjective *rein*, which means pure.

(Poe, 1838, p. 150). Tsalal is a Hebrew word found in the Old Testament and means to grow dark, to be sunk in shadow.

TSALAL NO I is the name Grossvogel gives to the first artistic work he presents, following what he calls a 'metamorphic recovery' (p. 266) from his illness. In the words of the first-person narrator the work:

appeared to be a sculpture of some kind The surface of the piece was uniformly of a shining darkness, having a glossy sheen beneath which was spread a swirling murk of shades that almost seemed to be in motion There appeared to be a resemblance in its general outline to some kind of creature, perhaps a grossly distorted version of a scorpion or a crab, since it displayed more than a few clawlike extensions reaching out from a central, highly shapeless mass. But it also appeared to have elements poking upward, peaks or horns that jutted at roughly vertical angles and ended sometimes in a sharp point and sometimes in a soft, headlike bulge . . . a chaotic world of bodies of every kind . . . (p. 265)

Not satisfied with producing a series of TSALAL sculptures, Grossvogel organises a 'physical-metaphysical excursion' to enable a first-hand and embodied experience of his artistic vision. The excursion is to a town called Crampton, described as:

a dead town, a finished town, a failed town, a false and unreal setting . . . the product of unsuccessful organisms . . . (p. 270)

Perhaps by means of a drug, it is left unclear, the excursion participants begin to experience intense gastrointestinal pain ('a great black pain' (p. 277), the narrator calls it) and the world around them discloses its concealed truth:

the town's empty streets and the desolate season was undergoing a visible metamorphosis . . . as though an eclipse were occurring. But what we were now seeing was not a darkness descending from far skies but a shadow which was arising from within the dead town . . . as if a torrent of black blood had begun roaring through its pale body. (p. 276)

This racially provocative biological analogy dramatises whiteness as vacant and lifeless in contrast to energizing blackness. In the narrative whiteness is also associated with fraud and deception, in short, the phenomenal world of false appearances. The clearest example is the hospital staff, who wear gleaming white uniforms and seem to be agents in a medical conspiracy. As already mentioned, the mind and self also belong to this world of illusory appearances.

To put it in simple terms, Ligotti enlists darkness/blackness to outrage the Enlightenment fantasy of humanism and progress. In the story's title, 'The Shadow, the Darkness', I can detect the rhythm of Kurtz's whispered cry of despair in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 1996, p. 86). Ligotti discusses the novella in his *Conspiracy Against the Human Race* and credits Conrad with 'artfully suggest[ing] a malignity conjoining the latent turpitude of human beings with that active in being itself' (no page). The penultimate paragraph of 'The Shadow, the Darkness' does evoke a colonial outpost being physically-metaphysically overwhelmed:

[W]hat I saw was a black snow falling from a black sky There was only this blackness above and this blackness below. There was only this consuming, proliferating blackness whose only true and final success was in merely perpetuating itself an infinite body of blackness activating itself

and thriving upon itself with eternal success in the deepest abyss of entity. (p. 280)

Yet if Being is disclosed as an all-consuming and eclipsing blackness, then the question arises to whom is this nightmare disclosed? What type of Dasein is open to this dark illumination? This is the paradox at the heart of the story: Ligotti's 'black-universe' (Laruelle, 2012) antihumanism relies on the humanist illusions of mind and self to be experienced as horror or, indeed, to be intelligible at all.

'Purity'

The second story I want to discuss is 'Purity'. In 'Purity' blackness features more as terrorised than terrorising, through the figure of Candy – one of the very few African American characters to appear in Ligotti's fiction. Through Candy, Ligotti's defining obsession with ruination, deprivation, precarity, and perverse conspiracies finds expression in the lived reality of antiblack racism. For example, in the apparently segregated neighbourhood in which Candy lives there is 'nothing left to protect or to save or to care about in any way . . . it [is] another world altogether . . . a twisted paradise of danger and derangement . . . [that] sent the imagination swirling into a pit of black mysteries' (pp. 8-9). Significantly, for this discussion, the perverse threat to human life – notably black life – is embodied by a white police detective. Candy, while sympathetically portrayed by the young, white, male narrator, is also an assemblage of stereotypes. In *Ontological Terror*, Warren identifies one such stereotype, which emerged during the Antebellum period in response to the paradoxical existence of so-called 'free blacks' and gained legitimacy in the pseudomedical diagnosis of 'dysaesthesia aethiopica'. Warren cites a physician from

the period: '[T]he disease is "the natural offspring of Negro liberty — the liberty to be idle, to wallow in filth and to indulge in improper food and drinks"' (p. 128).

On his first meeting with Candy, the narrator finds her sprawled on a couch, watching TV and eating uncooked hotdogs from the jar and dipped in mayonnaise. Her derelict home is without furniture or utilities and lacks even a functioning toilet, which has fallen into the basement through the collapsed floor of the bathroom. Candy survives by dealing drugs and hosts visitors, who remain anonymous and in the shadows and are referred to merely as 'figures'. It is precisely Candy's fantastically impoverished and precarious existence that attracts the young narrator to her. With her candidness and apparent listlessness, she provides a foil to his secretive and scheming mother and intrepid and ultrarational father, who conducts unethical experiments in the basement to free unwitting participants from their humanist illusions and help them 'approach to a pure conception of existence' (p. 6).

The narrator acknowledges he and Candy are separated by vastly different lived experiences, creating a 'chasm . . . that could not be bridged by either of us' (p. 11). In particular, he mentions Candy's difficulty understanding the idea of "European" and his own inability to supply a context from his own life to help make sense of the casual remarks Candy makes while watching TV. The narrator and Candy bond emotionally when she reveals, in a tone of tired resignation, that her 'little boy', who was the same age as the narrator, 'got killed' (p. 11). The killer is responsible for the murder of an unspecified number of children in the neighbourhood and even the narrator has been warned by his mother about the 'dangerous pervert' in the 'terrible neighbourhood where your friend lives' (p. 12).

As I have suggested, it is significant that the perverse threat to life should be unveiled as a white police detective. The revelation occurs in a scene in which the casual brutality of policing is strongly apparent. The detective makes an aggressive entrance into Candy's home, addresses her as 'fat lady', and demands she hand over the 'white kid' (p. 16), indicative, perhaps, of the law's role in enforcing racial boundaries that have been transgressed. He uses his foot to 'nudge' the two 'figures' on the floor and threatens retribution.

In Hollywood style, the young white narrator steps to the rescue and stabs the detective with a pen-like gadget his inventor father has given to him for self-defence.³ It causes the instant death of the detective, who is subsequently stripped of his belongings down to his boxer shorts. Only when these are lowered is the revelation complete.

Instead of the anticipated male sexual organ, the narrator is confronted with something he finds confusing and is initially unable or unwilling to describe. We later learn the detective has non-binary or ambiguous genitalia. Moreover, they are not in conformity with the ultimately reassuring humanist-classicist aesthetic of the hermaphrodite. Instead of a neat separation of parts 'everything was all mixed together' (p. 20). The detective's *con-fused* genitalia recall, then, on a small scale, the shapeless mass of the Tsalal sculpture, 'a chaotic world of bodies of every kind' (p. 265) and the hybrid abominations of HP Lovecraft. The detective's body – now

³ One in a series of phallus substitutes in the story, which includes hot dogs, salami sticks, cigarettes, a pistol, and various types of pen, and whose significance is apparent in the light of the final revelation of the detective's mixed-up genitalia.

marked as impure, rather than white and male – is cast into to the excremental abyss of Candy's basement.⁴

Candy's story closes with her fleeing the house in search of a new dwelling place to continue her precarious black life of resigned endurance. In her words: 'There are plenty of places like this one in the city. No heat, no electricity, no plumbing. And no rent. I'll be all right' (p. 17).

The narrator returns to his home to discover the floor of his father's basement laboratory running with a greenish liquid syphoned from the head of the latest research victim. Written with a 'thick, black marker' pen in his father's scattered papers, 'like graffiti scrawled on the walls of a public toilet', and once again reminiscent of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, are the following words of outrage and despair:

'NOTHING BUT IMPURITIES', 'IMPURE HEADS' . . . 'NO PURE CONCEPTION' . . . 'THE FORCES OF AN IMPURE UNIVERSE' (p. 19, original capitalisation)

In the story 'Purity', the disorientating exposure of an impure or sexually mixed-up body runs parallel to the disclosure of cosmic disorder. Candy's black life matters only in so far as it provides sensational material for the narrator's dark epiphany. It has no proper being or value. Her life turns in a circle in a 'dark pit of mystery', a propertyless abyss of negativity: 'No heat, no electricity, no plumbing. And no rent.'

⁴ Purity and excrement, while apparently standing in opposition to one another are, perhaps, for that very reason also intimately related. For example, the verb to purge (to cleanse the body or digestive tract) derives, like pure, from the Latin *purus*, which means 'clean, clear; unmixed; unadorned; chaste, undefiled' (<https://www.etymonline.com/>). The urban poor of the nineteenth century who collected dog faeces from the streets to sell to the tanneries as an ingredient in the leather curing process were known as pure finders.

To conclude

I have tried to sketch out a non-reductive, philosophically and politically informed approach to reading Ligotti's cosmic horror. In particular, I wanted to show how deeply foundational and overarching are binary codes of dark/light and black/white and stereotypical racialised tropes in Ligotti's metaphysics. The question I want to leave you with is this: Can such a metaphysics be successfully transcended or subverted in the genre of cosmic horror, whose most celebrated progenitor is Lovecraft, a self-proclaimed Anglo-supremacist, or is such a metaphysics, as Warren would maintain, constitutive of historical Dasein's terrified and terrorising white world?

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