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'Don't be a Zombie': Deep Ecology and Zombie Misanthropy

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which the Gothic imagination has been used to convey the message of environmentalism, looking specifically at attempts to curb population growth, such as the video 'Zombie Overpopulation', produced by Population Matters, and the history of such thought, from Thomas Malthus onwards. Through an analysis of horror fiction, including the writing of the notoriously misanthropic H. P. Lovecraft, it questions if it is possible to develop an aesthetics and attitude of environmental conservation that does not have to resort to a Gothic vision of fear and loathing of humankind. It draws on the ideas of Timothy Morton, particularly *Dark Ecology* (2016), to contend with the very real possibility of falling into nihilism and hopelessness in the face of the destruction of the natural world, and the liability of the human race, despite individual efforts towards co-existence. It examines cases of such despair, such as the diaries of Columbine shooter Eric Harris, whose extreme contempt for humanity spilled over into deadly violence. Lovecraft writes in 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1928) of a 'bland optimism' as the only alternative to nihilistic horror in the face of forces larger than ourselves, referring to humanity as a whole. Pointing to Morton, and to Donna Haraway's notion of the 'Cthuluscene', this article argues that radical empathy and shared kinship might instead point the way towards the urgent change that is needed.

Sir David Attenborough, in a 2013 interview with the *Radio Times*, states that 'We are a plague on the Earth. It's coming home to roost over the next 50 years or so. It's not just climate change; it's sheer space, places to grow food for this enormous horde. Either we limit our population growth or the natural world will do it for us, and the natural world is doing it for us right now' (*Telegraph*, 2013). Attenborough is one of the world's most important popularisers of environmental thinking, and of course speaks with first-hand authority about the state of the planet, having travelled extensively to film the diversity of plant and animal species on Earth. His avuncular presence on the BBC is well-loved, and makes this bleak warning all the more

potent. This is an almost Biblical prophecy of apocalypse, although the implied revenge is associated with that of nature, rather than God. The language used is highly evocative of the Gothic, with a 'horde' of destroyers threatening the safety of the planet and of ourselves – although the threat, of course, is ultimately none other than *us*.

Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013), in their collection *EcoGothic*, make a firm connection between Gothic fiction and environmentalism, arguing that the Gothic mode is crucial to this discourse:

> 'Debates about climate change and environmental damage have been key issues on most industrialised countries' political agendas for some time. These issues have helped shape the direction and application of ecocritical languages. The Gothic seems to be the form which is well placed to capture these anxieties and provides a culturally significant point of contact between literary criticism, ecocritical theory and political process.' (p. 5)

In line with this way of thinking about the relationship between fiction and urgent political debates, this study will bring together overtly Gothic fiction, the science of population theory, and cultural criticism. Key to this will be the Gothic vision of environmental apocalypse put forward by Attenborough and other commentators who, I argue, put forward a 'zombie misanthropy' that likens human behaviour to that of the brain-dead creature of myth and of so much modern fiction. Darryl Jones (2018) points out that 'zombification has become one of our major metaphors for thinking through the contemporary scene and our own individual helplessness in the face of vast economic forces which we may feel are inimical to the good life, or of the seemingly inevitable environmental catastrophes brought on by those forces' (pp. 57-58). The ways in which the zombie is used as a metaphor to dehumanise others will be discussed through an examination of contemporary environmental discourse. The ways in which this tips over into misanthropy will be illustrated through comparisons with the hatred of humanity espoused by the Columbine killer Eric Harris. It will be located in the portrayal of cosmic horror found in the short stories of the most notoriously misanthropic author of the Gothic, H. P. Lovecraft, and the roots of this world view examined in the writing of population theorist Thomas Robert Malthus. Like Lovecraft and Malthus, most contemporary environmental thinkers indulge in speculation about what the future will entail if we do not change our ways. This speculation, at its worst, can lead to fear and revulsion, and even a sense

of utter hopelessness. Ways out of this trap, however, are possible by shifting our perspective on what 'nature' actually is; something suggested by literary critic-turned environmental theorist Timothy Morton, whose work on 'dark ecology' will be integral to the present argument.

There can be no doubt that we are in a state of environmental crisis and facing a crossroads. Although many might nod and agree with Attenborough's doom-laden proclamation, the real implications of limiting population growth are hard to accept. Potential measures might involve Government control, such as China's one-child policy, which ran in its strictest form from 1979-2015, and infamously involved forced abortions as well as fines and other punishments. Alternately, it might involve 'softer' methods, directed mainly at developing countries and conducted by NGOs. One such organisation is Population Matters, which proposes several practical ways of bringing birth rates down. These measures include: 'getting contraception used where it's needed', 'challenging assumptions about family size and contraception', 'lifting people out of poverty', 'women's empowerment', and 'exercising the choice' (Population Matters, 2018). Only the last point focuses on the developed world, whereas the previous ones aim to bring other nations up to the standard set by prosperous ones in terms of the cultural and social issues of contraception and women's rights. First world countries, however, lead the world not only in terms of social progress, but in overconsumption. Both developing and developed countries need a shift in attitude, according to Population Matters, but the focus shifts from wider-scale development in the former to personal ethical decisions in the latter. Citizens of developed countries are granted a power of agency lacking in developing ones, and this agency is held up as the primary goal, particularly for women, whose capacity to choose dictates the numbers of children that are born. A natural connection is made that when women have this capacity to choose, they will choose to have fewer children. Looking at broad-scale statistics, this assertion does indeed seem to be valid. Population Matters' website uses statistics from 2008, stating that:

'According to the UNPD's[1] 2008 Revision, the population of most developed
countries is expected to remain almost unchanged, at 1.28 billion, but that of
less developed regions to rise from 5.6 billion in 2009 to 7.9 billion in 2050,
with a tripling of numbers in some of the poorest nations. Net migration from

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[1] The United Nations Population Division.

developing to developed countries is projected to average 2.4 million people a year.' (Population Matters, 2010).

Migration might seem to be less relevant, but Population Matters, while noting an opposition to discrimination, broadly oppose mass migration on the grounds that it causes an increase in the population of the destination country and reverses the trend towards ageing populations and falling birth rates, thus causing a net increase in global numbers. Furthermore, these migrants increase the populations of developed countries, which already have a disproportionately high level of consumption of natural resources.

These are difficult issues. Even if we accept that the goal of reducing the global population is an unconditional good, an immediate conflict is set up between the claims of feminism and individual liberty on one hand, and the rights of developing nations to reject what could be seen as neo-colonial policies on the other. The opposition to mass migration has much common ground, if not from the same ideological basis, with xenophobic and far-right political movements. Nonetheless, the stakes are high, and the warning is clear. The threat to all sustainable life on Earth is such that any effective means of dealing with it might have to involve a radical restructuring of how we view ourselves and our place on the planet. Human rights and concerns cannot, in such a vision of the future, remain at the centre of decision-making about the environment. Such a way of thinking, in fact, might involve casting humanity as the villain. This is exactly what Population Matters do in their 2016 short film, *Zombie Overpopulation*, uploaded to video-sharing website YouTube as well as appearing on their own website. *Zombie Overpopulation* presents the viewer with a familiar set of images. Shambolic human figures shuffle across an urban landscape, intent on consuming everything in their path. These particular zombies do not seem to attack people (who are absent), but instead destroy non-human animal life and drink all of the available water until there is none left. It is, of course, a less-than-subtle allegory for human behaviour towards the environment. It is narrated throughout by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* star Anthony Stewart Head, who ends the film with a series of stark facts about overpopulation before advising the viewer, 'Don't be a zombie. Use your brain. We all have a choice about how many babies to have and how much we consume' (*Zombie Overpopulation*, 2016). The choice of Head for the role of narrator is apposite, even beyond his association with the Gothic supernatural. His character in *Buffy*, Rupert Giles, is a 'Watcher', who has the responsibility of guiding the 'Slayer'. The presence of his voice gives

the listener the assurance of his wisdom, while simultaneously placing them into the role of the 'Chosen One' who must fight the forces of evil.

This is without doubt a Gothic vision of human existence, which presents us with a vision of a monstrous 'other' in the form of the zombies. The monstrous other in this scenario, however, is humanity, and the basic drive of the human race to consume, in order to continue to live. This is not just consumption, of course, but overconsumption: the *modus operandi* of the zombie. Fred Botting (1996) has famously suggested that 'Gothic signifies a writing of excess' (p. 1) and associates this with the figure of the tyrannical villain who emerges as the antagonist of the genre in the late eighteenth century. Gothic, however, remains a mode that presents excess in order to draw limits. Botting (1996) argues that: 'Gothic fiction is less an unrestrained celebration of unsanctioned excess and more an examination of the limits produced in the eighteenth century to distinguish good from evil, reason from passion, virtue from vice and self from other' (p. 5). If overconsumption itself is the villain in the case of *Zombie Overpopulation*, and if this is the current state of humanity, then we are urged to seek a sense of the proper limits in order to be saved. This imperative, of course, appears in the film's message: '*don't* be a zombie', the narrator advises. The way to avoid this is by exercising the right choices, which in this case means limiting the production of children and the consumption of natural resources. It is tempting to read this moral message in the older language of sin, specifically the deadly sins of lust,[2] greed, and gluttony. Writing on Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Carol A. Senf (1997) discusses Van Helsing's warning that to fail in their fight against the vampire would mean the heroes being turned into creatures like him: 'Becoming like Dracula, they too would be laws unto themselves—primitive, violent, irrational—with nothing to justify their actions except the force of their desires' (p. 428). This is exactly the situation warned against by *Zombie Overpopulation*, where the only way to avoid becoming a 'zombie' is to exercise restraint and thoughtful planning in terms of contraception and consumption. This also echoes George A. Romero's 1978 film *Dawn of the Dead*, which specifically parodies consumer capitalism by having the undead mindlessly congregate around a shopping mall, in an imitation or lingering memory of their habits whilst living.

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[2] It would be unfair to imply that Population Matters are anti-sex, given their strong pro-contraception stance. Nonetheless, the message involves an exhortation to moral responsibility and sensible foresight in the sexual realm. The concept of unplanned pregnancy and childbirth is unimaginable in its horror here.

The challenge of overcoming human instinct and desire—of fighting our more 'zombie'-like propensities—is an ancient moral question, and radical solutions have been put forward in the form of religion. The challenge of deep ecology, however, is even more radical. Deep ecology attempts to think about the world from a point of view that is so radically dispassionate as to remove the relevance of human perspective, refocusing the question on nature as important in itself, rather than as mere 'environment' for humans. We need to think, as Morton proposes, on a global scale, and on a global timeline. How, though, can the global scale be articulated in human terms? Morton proposes an environmental dilemma as illustration. No one, when starting their car, intends to destroy other species on Earth, yet the resultant pollution and rise in global temperature does. If one person chooses not to drive on the other hand, then their gesture is so small compared to the greater mass of humanity that it makes no difference whatsoever. We are part of a larger species that has an undeniable impact on the environment, yet are individually insignificant. This is no longer a moral question, but one that renders morality and thus human agency meaningless:

'Thinking the human at Earth magnitude is utterly uncanny: strangely familiar and familiarly strange. It is as if I realize that I am a zombie – or, better, that I'm a component of a zombie despite my will. Again, every time I start my car I'm not meaning personally to destroy lifeforms – which is what "destroying Earth" actually means. Nor does my action have any statistical meaning whatsoever. And yet, mysteriously and disturbingly, scaled up to Earth magnitude so that there are billions of hands that are turning billions of ignitions in billions of starting engines every few minutes, the Sixth Mass Extinction event is precisely what is being caused. And some members of the zombie have been aware that there is a problem with human carbon emissions for at least sixty years.' (Morton, 2016: p. 35)

Morton's use of the zombie metaphor is an even bleaker one than we have seen in either *Dawn of the Dead* or *Zombie Overpopulation*. In both Romero's cinematic universe and in the world view of Population Matters, individual humans can use their brains to combat the zombies, which threaten to assimilate the living into their unthinkingly destructive ranks. In Morton's 'dark ecology', however, we are placed into context as part of a wide and interrelated ecosystem from which we are inseparable. It is dark, rather than deep, because we are connected to even that which is non-living. As he writes elsewhere (2010), 'we need to live up

to the truth of our desire to animate the dead' (p. 267). Morton's new term, 'dark ecology', takes deep ecology even further. It removes the conception of nature as object, and places human existence within its scope.

A fascination with the return of dead humans as monstrous destroyers, to stretch Morton's imagery, speaks to a lingering awareness that we are only part of this wider system, and that it is one in which our very existence carries with it the necessity of our own negation. We consume in order to push this awareness away. Ernest Becker (1973) influentially argued that civilisation is the result of a 'denial of death' (the title of his book), and in *Escape from Evil* (1975), added that that money, in particular, 'is the human mode *par excellence* of coolly denying animal boundedness, the determinism of nature' (p. 82). James K. Rowe extends this critique of capitalism in a 2016 essay, claiming that:

> 'Fantastical efforts to escape natural finitude by endlessly accumulating wealth are, ironically, undermining the environmental preconditions for modern life. As accelerating climate change has us teetering on the edge of the Holocene, there is heightened urgency to understand the driving forces behind consumer capitalism, the economic system that has prevailed over the great acceleration in ecological impact since 1950.' (para. 3)

It is here that we find ourselves returning to Attenborough's evocative description of humanity as a 'plague'. The claim is certainly catchy, and made many headlines at the time, yet it is difficult to reconcile this forthright misanthropy with Attenborough's sense of genuine wonder at the natural world and passion for communicating this to other humans. If we lack the capacity for choice, as bacteria do, then there would be little point in his mission of spreading this reverence for nature. This is an attitude born of frustration and anger, much like Bill Hicks' (1997) famous description of humanity as 'a virus with shoes' (np), which contrasts sharply with the comedian's more general vision of a world without conflict, prejudice, and oppression.

It is no wonder, though, that frustration results from the sense of powerlessness inherent in the destruction of the Earth on a large scale. It is not just that our will is frustrated, but that it is irrelevant, to think within the framework of deep ecology. When Arne Naess introduced the term 'deep ecology' in the early nineteen-seventies he was, as Alan Drengson (2012) points out, 'characterizing an existing grassroots movement, rather than simply stating his personal

philosophy' (para. 4). This is important, because deep ecology can then be seen as emerging from a genuine reaction to both environmental destruction and the failures/limitations of modern environmentalism. Drengson (2012) also specifically addresses the question of misanthropy, noting that although some supporters of the movement have indeed been misanthropic in their statements at times, 'supporters of the deep ecology movement are not anti-human, as is sometimes alleged' (para. 5). Even when Arne Naess and George Sessions (1984) go so far as to put together a manifesto in the shape of 'The Deep Ecology Platform', it remains committed to human 'rights', albeit in a very different form than we are used to. They claim in their first principle that: the well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: inherent worth, intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes' (Naess & Sessions, 1984: para 1). Humanity is not necessarily in opposition to the nonhuman, but quite the opposite is proposed. In fact, this preservation of the nonhuman may actually increase the quality of the human experience: 'the flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease' (Naess & Sessions, 1984: para. 5). What is decoupled here is the association of human 'flourishing' and relentless economic growth with its attendant increase in population and consumption per capita. Instead, Ness and Sessions (1984) argue: 'The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent worth) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living' (para. 7). This would also involve an increased value being ascribed to the diversity of people and cultures on Earth. Deep ecology aims to learn from, rather than reject, the lessons of aboriginal peoples who do not subscribe to the logic of capitalist growth, what Morton (2016) calls 'agrilogistics' (p. 42).[3] As Drengson (2012) notes, 'while industrial culture has represented itself as the only acceptable model for development, its monocultures destroy cultural and biological diversity in the name of human convenience and profit' (para. 6).

In this way we see a false dichotomy set up between environmentalism and human progress. The direction that progress might take, or rather the definition of what qualifies as progress, is the real issue at stake. Deep ecology involves a deep pessimism, not about

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[3] Morton's point of origin for our current age of Environmental destruction, or what we might term the Anthropocene, is twelve-thousand years ago in ancient Mesopotamia. There, the birth of agriculture and a specific focus on maximising yield of crops, as well as domesticating animals for the same purpose, came to be the dominant model for what we think of as 'civilisation', despite its failures through the millennia.

humanity itself, but about the adequacy of the current human way of looking at the world. Before Morton's 'dark' version of deep ecology, Sessions (1987) had already argued that ethical questions themselves are insignificant compared to the scale of the problem facing the environment. He suggests that 'the new ecological world view challenges Western ethics and calls into question the metaphysics of the modern world view' (p. 118). Science, in this formulation, cannot be the shining technological saviour, because it offers merely newer and better ways to manipulate the natural world, when what is needed is a paradigm shift towards a recognition of our interconnected place in a web that connects human and nonhuman life. Michelle Niemann (2017) discusses a more recent set of principles, 'The Uncivilisation Manifesto', (2009) by Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine, who write as part of their larger Dark Mountain Project. As she notes, 'the manifesto attacks "the myth of progress", the related myth that humans are separate from nature, and mainstream environmentalism, which they argue has been co-opted by capitalism' (p. 254). Kingsnorth and Hine (2009) begin with the proposition that the coming catastrophe cannot be averted; indeed we are already living through it. Niemann contrasts this with the preaching tradition of the Jeremiad, which warned the congregation of what would happen if they did not change their sinful ways. The Dark Mountain Project (and dark ecology more generally) suggests embracing the 'guilt and helplessness' (Niemann, 2017: p. 254) that results from this acceptance that we exist in an irreversible age of extinction caused by the human race (the Anthropocene). The first two principles of 'The Eight Principles of Uncivilisation' make this clear:

1.   We live in a time of social, economic and ecological unravelling. All around us are signs that our whole way of living is already passing into history. We will face this reality honestly and learn how to live with it.
2.   We reject the faith which holds that the converging crises of our times can be reduced to a set of 'problems' in need of technological or political 'solutions' (Kingsnorth and Hine, 2009, Section IV: para 12).

This is not hopelessness, but merely a rejection of faith. It is a call not so much to action, but to attitude: an ideological shift is needed. The Dark Mountain Project takes as central Sessions' claim that the problem lies in the way that we look at the world, rather than individual ethics. Accordingly, the third principle emphasises storytelling:

3.   We believe that the roots of these crises lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves. We intend to challenge the stories which underpin our civilisation: the myth of progress, the myth of human centrality, and the myth of our separation from 'nature'. These myths are more dangerous for the fact that we have forgotten they are myths (Kingsnorth and Hine, 2009, Section IV: para.12).

Kingsnorth and Hine subscribe, as does Morton, to the idea that language and storytelling function in a way that is analogous to a computer programme, or to use a word more apt in the context, a virus. The solution is to change the code, and ecocriticism, and indeed ecologically-minded art, emerge as something more akin to an ethical hacking of the cultural script, rather than a straightforward appeal to our reason. It is for this reason that The Black Mountain Project is an artistic one. It envisions an art that does not take itself seriously in order to entertain, but one that playfully engages with the making of a new reality. Morton (2016) puts forward a similar vision of play, contrasting its creative potential with that of Google's famously laid-back workplace, which 'hassles its employees with serious playfulness where what we want is playful seriousness' (p. 116.). In other words, we would be best served not to nihilistically distract ourselves from what is happening to the Earth (of which we are a continuous component), but to face up to the harsh reality, or 'darkness', of ecological awareness with a playful and joyous creativity.

Nihilism, Lovecraft, and Malthus: Fear at Earth Scale

This paper began by making links between misanthropy and the claims of deep ecology. Ecocritical thinkers like Morton have pointed ways beyond the potentially nihilistic consequences of thinking on a planetary scale. The temptation, however, remains potent. The examples we have seen borrow from horror fiction, and so it is appropriate to turn to this fiction, specifically that of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, whose massive contribution to fantasy fiction is only rivalled, and perhaps overshadowed, by the scale of his misanthropy. Lovecraft's relevance is shown by the critic Donna Haraway (as discussed later), calling for the age of the 'Chthulucene' (Haraway, 2016: p. 101). Lovecraft's loathing of humanity, and certain racial groups in particular, links together the set of attitudes seen elsewhere in this discussion, and goes some way to diagnosing an aesthetics of green misanthropy. The author Michel Houellebecq (2005), often noted for his own misanthropy, summarises Lovecraft's attitude as

'absolute hatred of the world, in general, aggravated by an aversion to the modern world in particular' (p. 57). It would, however, be more accurate to talk here about the *human* world, and indeed the 'modern world' might well be associated with the idea of the Anthropocene. Houellebecq sees value in adopting Lovecraft's philosophical position, while rejecting his racism and hatred of sexuality. What happens, however, when we take hatred of the modern world to its absolute conclusion? This is the nihilism of the terrorist.

Such terrorist nihilism was seen on the day of the Columbine High School Massacre in 1999. The motivations of the perpetrators, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were soon linked in a kneejerk media response to their alleged tastes, notoriously the band Marilyn Manson and the videogame *Doom* (far from unusual interests, given the existence of millions of fans of both). Harris does indeed seem to have used WAD files (a *Doom* level editor, and popular hobbyist activity) to recreate his neighbourhood, but did not limit himself to violent fantasies, as he wrote in a school essay: 'many times I have made levels with absolutely no monsters or guns in them. I have created worlds with beautiful, breath taking scenery that looks like something out of a science fiction movie, a fantasy movie, or even some "eldritch" from H. P. Lovecraft' (Kass, 2014: p. 58). It would be foolishly reductive to reduce, as some did, this complex incident to an enjoyment of specific pop cultural products. It did not, however, happen in a vacuum, and Harris' violent hatred of the modern world, while not stemming from Lovecraft in any direct way, shows the same kind of thinking that happens when nihilism and misanthropy collide. In his journal, Harris writes, 'the human race isn't worth fighting for, only worth killing. give the Earth back to the animals, they deserve it infinitely more than we do' (Harris, 1998-99: para. 5). He also fantasises about killing the whole human race: 'just thinking if I want ALL humans dead or maybe just the quote-unquote "civilized, developed, and known-of" places on Earth. maybe leave little tribes of natives in the rain forest er [sic] something' (Harris, 1998-99: para. 9). He indulges in racist rants, although in an inconsistent way that at times includes a hatred for the 'white' race. The only consistent thread of argument is a conviction that human beings are hypocritical, worthless, and deserve to be destroyed.

Lovecraft, too, held racist views, and they are now generally acknowledged to have gone beyond the commonplace assumption of white supremacism that characterised his time, place, and class. These include a specific fear of Africans (and African-Americans) and non-English speaking immigrants, which clearly indicate a reactionary response to the Great Migration of African-Americans from the South to the North, and to the waves of immigration

from Europe, both of which were occurring early in his writing career and continued throughout. Houellebecq (2005) points out that it was when Lovecraft left the town of Providence, Rhode Island, and moved to New York, 'that his racist opinions turned into a full-fledged racist neurosis' (p. 105). Pointing to a now-infamous 1924 letter to Frank Belknap Long, where Lovecraft uses particularly racist language, Houellebecq claims that 'this is no longer the WASP's well-bred racism; it is the brutal hatred of a trapped animal who is forced to share his cage with other different and frightening creatures' (p. 106). In this world view, other people are reduced to something less than human, even something monstrous. His vision in this letter (quoted here by Houellebecq), is almost indistinguishable in style from his fictional prose, and describes a scene that would not altogether be out of place in the zombie fiction discussed earlier:

> 'The organic things—Italico-Semitico-Mongoloid—inhabiting that awful cesspool could not by any stretch of the imagination be call'd human. They were monstrous and nebulous adumbrations of the pithecanthropoid and amoebal; vaguely moulded from some stinking viscous slime of earth's corruption, and slithering and oozing in and on the filthy streets or in and out of windows and doorways in a fashion suggestive of nothing but infesting worms or deep-sea unnamabilities […] From that nightmare of perverse infection I could not carry away the memory of any living face. The individually grotesque was lost in the collectively devastating.' (Houellebecq, 2005: pp. 106-107)

Lovecraft combines an incredibly broad range of imagery that includes decay, disease, and the primitive (the pithecanthropus was considered at the time to be a kind of 'missing link' between humans and non-human apes). What is most striking is the way in which all individuality is lost in a hateful portrayal of one monstrous face. This is the essence of true racism, but is also so ludicrous as to almost transcend it. As Houellebecq (2005) points out, the description of the 'Italico-Semitico-Mongoloid', for example, is essentially meaningless: 'the ethnic realities at play had long been wiped out; what is certain is that he hated them all and was incapable of any greater specificity' (p. 107).

Lovecraft describes a common fear of his day: that immigration and race-mixing would lead to the decline of Western nations. L. Sprague de Camp identified this idea in Lovecraft's thinking in his 1975 biography of the author, noting the popularity of belief in the division of

humanity into the separate races, of which the Aryan is superior. De Camp notes that Lovecraft was a keen reader of Houston Stewart Chamberlain's *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, translated into English from the German in 1912. Chamberlain rails in particular against the mixing of supposedly superior and inferior races to create 'mongrel' races. As de Camp (1975) points out, 'these delusions were popularized in the United States by Madison Grant (*The Passing of the Great Race*, 1916) and Lothrop Stoddard (*The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy*, 1920)' (p. 97). De Camp associates Lovecraft's reading of these books with his belief, certainly in his early years, in the superiority of the Aryan race and his own membership of this group. He claims that this allowed Lovecraft, who never really managed to live up to any of his academic or career ambitions, to feel special: 'if he could succeed as an individual, at least he could belong to a superior breed of man' (de Camp, 1975: p. 99). There is, then, a desire for purity, as if the world could be cleansed of its flaws through the avoidance of miscegenation. Lovecraft continually returns to hybrid creatures as a source of horror, most famously the monstrous Cthulhu. When the narrator of 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1928) discovers a bas-relief representation of the thing, he declares 'my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature' (Lovecraft, 2008a: p. 205). This, however, is merely an impression from the carving, as the thing itself 'cannot be described' (Lovecraft, 2008a: p. 223) because it is so alien that it seems to contradict the very laws of nature. When a group of terrified sailors plough through the creature with their ship it bursts into a foul gas, only to end up '*recombining* in its hateful original form' (Lovecraft, 2008: p. 224). This is reminiscent of the 1991 action film *Terminator 2*, where the time-travelling killing machine, the T-1000, is frozen and shattered into pieces, before recombining to continue its pursuit of the human protagonists. The horror comes from the fact that these enemies cannot be destroyed. This is also the horror of the zombie, and as Morton (2016) suggests in *Dark Ecology*, the horror of the realisation that we are a part of the monster while simultaneously having no power to do anything about it.

It is perhaps no wonder, then, that Lovecraft might want to step back from the world, as constructed by his racially-tinged consciousness, and to imagine himself superior. There is no doubt that this hybridity is racially charged. S. T. Joshi (1990), discussing Lovecraft's monstrous creations, notes that 'if subhuman creatures are cases of individual decadence, hybrids are symbols of a racial degeneracy still more horrible because vastly more widespread' (p. 221). This is a horror that cannot be contained. In this context, Joshi quotes from Lovecraft's

short story 'The Horror at Red Hook' (1927), which is worth repeating here (with a slightly different selection of text) because of the way that it demonstrates this racialised threat:

'Red Hook is a maze of hybrid squalor […] The population is a hopeless tangle and enigma; Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements impinging upon one another, and fragments of Scandinavian and American belts lying not far distant. It is a babel of sound and filth, and sends out strange cries to answer the lapping of oily waves at its grimy piers and the monstrous organ litanies of the harbour whistles […] From this tangle of material and spiritual putrescence the blasphemies of an hundred dialects assail the sky.' (pp. 150-151)

It is curious that Lovecraft associates environmental squalor with the 'horror' of this mingling of people, represented by the sound of their different dialects. The 'oily waves' and 'grimy piers' speak of modernity and industrialisation, although Red Hook, positioned in Brooklyn on the Upper New York Bay, was indeed massively polluted in the early twentieth century, before the introduction of the 1972 Clean Water Act and the subsequent Red Hook Water Pollution Control Project (NYC Department of City Planning, 2014: p. 14). This is simultaneously a fear for humanity, and a disgust at the human race. As Joshi (1990) notes, 'Lovecraft does not offer humanity much hope in the end: we shall either be wiped out by those unassailable nuclei of aliens on the fringe of our civilization or destroy ourselves through repeated miscegenation' (p. 227).

There is not much room here for choice. It is easy to see Lovecraft in the position, as Houellebecq (2005) describes it, as displaying, 'the brutal hatred of a trapped animal' (p. 106). This is the same kind of hatred shown in Eric Harris' journal (1998-99), although his thoughts are tinged with a kind of environmental consciousness that is as vague and simplistic as his racial thinking:

'we arent GODS. Just because we are at the top of the food chain with our technology doesnt mean we can be "judges" of nature […] I think we are all a waste of natural resources and should be killed off, and since humans have the ability to choose... and I'm human... I think I will choose to kill and damage as much as nature allows me to so take that […] only Nature can stop me. I know I could get shot by a cop after only killing a single person, but hey guess the

fuck WHAT! I chose to kill that one person so get over it! Its MY fault! not my parents, not my brothers, not my friends, not my favorite bands, not computer games, not the media. IT is MINE! [sic].' (para. 10).

Harris is adamant in his assertion of free will, even as he plans his destruction of human will through murder and suicide. This is clearly the rambling of a severely disturbed young man, but his choice of language is revealing. Human civilisation is portrayed as simply being 'a waste of natural resources', and 'nature' is invoked as something much larger that does not involve a consideration of human moral values. It is, according to Harris, in his 'nature' to kill, and the possibility of society's influence is completely rejected. It is through this desire to be free of a corrupt society, and to act with impunity, that Harris feels a comradeship with the Nazis. Fascism offers a way out of the tangled complexity of politics, and racial purity offers a sense of identity and belonging that can all too often be lacked. Lovecraft found horror in this complexity and represented it through his monstrously hybrid creatures. To transfer this onto the real world, however, is dangerous territory, and territory which Lovecraft came close to in some of his sentiments. Morton (2007), writing on deep ecology, warns against the temptation to simplify. Nature, he argues, is not 'over there' (p. 19); it is not something detached from the reality of our existence. Whatever 'nature' might be, human existence and culture are inseparable from it, as is the fact of our own death and the death of our species. We should not, however, wish for these to come about. An overly fond wish for death, he suggests, is 'a warning to deep ecology: if we aestheticize this acceptance, we arrive at fascism, the cult of death' (p. 205).

Such a potential line of thinking springs from the work of Thomas Robert Malthus, the most famous and influential advocate of the reduction of population growth. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, published in 1798 and expanded in 1803, argued that unchecked human population growth would inevitably outstrip resources, leading to various types of natural misery, with famine chief among them.[4] To prevent this misery, Malthus argues that preventative measures should be taken. Over the years, his name has become a byword for misanthropy, with the adjective 'Malthusian' used to describe any kind of pessimistic attitude

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[4] The later term 'carrying capacity' appears in the mid-nineteenth century to describe this limit on natural resources in a given area. Population control groups commonly use this to refer to a hypothetical maximum human population on the Earth as a whole.

towards population growth.[5] Malthus himself would not have identified as a misanthrope, claiming instead the goal to reduce human suffering. Claiming that a check to population is inevitably necessary in nature, he suggests that, 'it was better that this check should arise from a foresight of the difficulties attending a family and the fear of dependent poverty, than from the actual presence of want and sickness' (Malthus, 2018, Book IV, Chapter I: para. 3). As with *Zombie Overpopulation*, the goal is to reduce human suffering through a targeted and intelligent strategy of limiting numbers. Nonetheless, an unhappy legacy of Malthus' thinking has been a callous indifference to the plight of the poor. In an article marking the end of China's one-child policy, Matt Ridley (2014) traces the influence of Malthus, claiming that he 'thought we should be cruel to be kind to the poor, lest they have too many babies' (Ridley, 2014: para. 7). This claim is not strictly true, but there is no doubt that this interpretation of Malthus, particularly his implication that overpopulation should be curbed by moral restraint, led directly to an official indifference to the suffering of millions. We might look to Charles Trevelyan, who blamed the 1845-49 Great Irish Famine on the laziness of the people, or Winston Churchill, who blamed the 1943 Bengal famine on the overbreeding of Indians.

As evidence for this ideology, Ridley points to a section of Malthus's expanded version of his essay, where the following passage appears, suggesting that because overpopulation inevitably leads to death by famine, we should avoid famine by actively encouraging disease:

> '[W]e should facilitate, instead of foolishly and vainly endeavouring to impede, the operations of nature in producing this mortality; and if we dread the too frequent visitation of the horrid form of famine, we should sedulously encourage the other forms of destruction, which we compel nature to use. Instead of recommending cleanliness to the poor, we should encourage contrary habits. In our towns we should make the streets narrower, crowd more people into the houses, and court the return of the plague. In the country, we should build our villages near stagnant pools, and particularly encourage settlements in all marshy and unwholesome situations.' (Malthus, 2018, Book IV, Chapter V: p. 1)

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[5] See, for example, thirty-six references to 'Malthus' or 'Malthusian' in a relatively short pro-population growth essay by journalist Brendan O'Neill: 'Our Brave New World of Malthusian Madmen' (2010), published on the overtly anti-Malthusian website *Sp¡ked*.

What Ridley does not note is that this is an extremely disingenuous section of Malthus' essay, where he deploys a sarcastic tone, along the lines of 'well, we're letting famine happen, so why not plague while we're at it?' The target of his barb is this failure to curb population, with specific reference to a moral argument that has been made elsewhere for early marriage (if people marry later, his reasoning goes, then they will have fewer children). As Gregory Bungo (2003) argues, this is 'an extreme statement of what he believes would be a consistent policy for people who think that early marriages are conducive to good morality. He is not describing what he wants to occur — he is satirizing the proponents of early marriage' (para. 3). Bungo compares this to Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' (1729), where Swift makes the famous (and brutally ironic) suggestion that poor Irish people could benefit by cooking and eating their excess children. In all these cases, the imagery is consistent, and consistent too, with Lovecraft's description of the overcrowded and filthy Red Hook district. Disease, horror, and inevitable death are attendant on overpopulation.

Despite this overly straightforward reading of Malthus (which is far from the first time this has happened), Ridley makes important links to Western green thinking, and how it was Western environmentalism, rather than Chinese Communist ideology, that directly influenced the implementation of the one-child policy. In fact, despite the human rights abuses the policy entailed, many thinkers are beginning to reappraise the policy from an environmental standpoint. Sarah Conly (2015) writes in *The Boston Globe* that the policy was implemented in a heavy-handed way in terms of forced sterilisation and abortions and argues that its other ill effects such as sex-selective abortion and the consequent gender imbalance can be blamed on sexism rather than the policy itself. She continues: 'the idea that people should limit the number of children they have to just one is not, I would argue, a bad one, for the Chinese or for the rest of us' (para. 2). A paper published in 2017 in the prestigious journal *Demography* led to calls for its withdrawal, notably by demographers Wang Feng and Cai Yong, due to the fact that the author, Daniel Goodkind, goes some way towards backing up the Chinese government's claim that the policy led to four hundred million avoided births, rather than dismissing this as propaganda, as is the standard Western view (2017: p. 1375). This argument, however, is about whether or not China has done what it has claimed. There is increasingly little dispute about the idea that if the policy has indeed lessened population, then from an environmental standpoint this is a moral good. This is in contrast to the population optimism proposed by Ridley (2014), who claims that economic growth and technological development are our best hope, and that populations tend to balance out when reaching enough prosperity

(para. 8). This moves towards a debate about human nature: are we indeed a 'plague' on the Earth, or will the human potential for both rationality and compassion make us its saviours? Conly (2015) argues that we must be cautious:

> 'Of course, things might change. Maybe technological fixes will save us, ending our unsustainable depletion of natural resources and our contributions to climate change. When we speak of the future, we can never be completely certain. But, at present, when the probability of harm is high, and the damage in question is great, we have no right to risk the danger. Certainty isn't required […] It's new for us to think of something as immediately joyful as childbearing as harmful, and it's hard to change our ideas when we are confronted with new circumstances. This is natural. Natural, but dangerous.' (para. 22)

Both the media understanding of overpopulation and the academic appraisal of solutions present a dichotomy that is hard to avoid. The future is indeed uncertain, and speculation tainted by either pessimism or optimism.

Lovecraft (1928) recognised this in his famous opening to 'The Call of Cthulhu', where he suggests that science will not save us, but will eventually reveal the truth of the universe, and that this will be overwhelming in its horror:

> 'The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind 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 sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.' (pp. 201-202)

This concept is a brilliant one, but however it may be shaped by Lovecraft's own pessimism and misanthropy, it is also a literary device designed entirely to set up the appearance of Cthulhu and the rest of his pantheon of fictional monsters. Lovecraft's racism and fear of modernity doubtless inform his fiction, but are not its purpose. This contrasts with something

like *Zombie Overpopulation* that draws on shared cultural imagery in order to advance its polemic. There is another telling phrase used in the story: the narrator claims that theosophists[6] have guessed at the truth, but present it 'in terms which would freeze the blood if not masked by a bland optimism' (Lovecraft, 2008a: p. 202). 'Bland Optimism' is exactly how a deep ecological perspective views the hope that technology and human ingenuity will save the planet. In contrast to this, Gothic imagery is deployed in order to shock us out of this complacency.

It is in adopting such a Gothic tone that ecological thinking tends to reach a wide audience. This device was used by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* (1962), which is widely regarded as the 'birth' of ecocriticism as we know it and depicts a dystopian future without birdsong. It continues with Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), which uses the language of warfare to warn of mass starvation in the near future. William and Paul Paddock's *Famine 1975! America's Decision: Who Will Survive* (1967) goes so far as to suggest a system of triage that in the future would see starving nations such as India abandoned to their fate. The crossover between scientific speculation and science fiction is nowhere more obvious than in Ehrlich's introduction to the SF collection *Nightmare Age* (1970). Under the heading 'Eco-Catastrophe!' he imagines a future where the Green Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s fails and leads only to further starvation, world chaos, and eventually global warfare. As William Yeatman (2017) points out, however:

'In real life, these green revolutionaries—led by Norman Borlaug—saved as many as a billion lives. Simply put, Ehrlich's vision of the future, which he based on appeals to his scientific knowledge, was the exact opposite of what occurred. His vision is apocalyptic; reality was a story of human progress.' (para. 5)

Nonetheless, this saving of lives can yet be viewed as a negative development, if we take a misanthropically green view. The environmental apocalypse is only deferred. So where to go in this future? It is curiously appropriate that the futurist thinker Donna Haraway (2016) has turned to Lovecraft, albeit obliquely, in her call for a 'Chthulucene' to replace the Anthropocene (p. 101). Here she changes the spelling to move the connection away from

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[6] An esoteric philosophy popularised in the United States by Helena Blavatsky in the late nineteenth century.

'Lovecraft's misogynist racial nightmare monster' (p. 101) and towards the ancient Greek term *Chthonic*, or those things related to the underworld, which she identifies with the Californian *Pimoa Cthulhu* spider. The spider lives under stumps, and also possesses long legs, which are reminiscent of the tentacles emerging from Lovecraft's creature. We should view ourselves as connected, she argues, by webs or by tentacles, and adopt a radical rejection of anthropocentrism that would have us 'make kin, not babies!' (p. 102). Thus, although we should not subscribe to the top-down hierarchies that have characterised movements such as China's one-child policy, we nonetheless should make part of our living on Earth a commitment to reducing the numbers of our species for the good of all.[7]

Critics like Haraway and Morton recognise that we are already living in an environment which has been substantially destroyed by human activity, yet neither suggest that should inevitably lead to misanthropic nihilism. It is yet possible to engage with the Earth as the living part of it we are. If we are to succeed it will not be through viewing nature as a Gothic villain, or alternately by casting ourselves in the role. Gothic fiction, however, can force us to recognise these extremes of thinking about our place in Earth's ecosystem. Are we the monstrous villain, mindlessly consuming and destroying, or can we face up to the moral responsibility thrust on us by the nature of our species, which has set itself up as master of the planet's destiny? The former view is tempting, and even if we take the latter, we are dragged back to a hopeless nihilism by the impossibility of working together as one. As Morton (2016) points out, when we see ourselves as we truly are, as part of an uncontrollable whole, then the experience is terrifyingly uncanny, or rather, he writes, 'it is *weird*' (p. 1). The only solutions are tyranny, violence, or at least the yearning for cataclysmic destruction. This is a Gothic way of looking at the world, and it is in this very recognition that this represents an excess of pessimistic vision that we may reach a position of nuance where we can avoid a continued destruction of the environment without indulging in moral inhumanity. If this is a question of cultural programming then we need to urgently replace the narrative, and the stories we tell could not be more crucial.

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[7] Morton amusingly rejects Haraway's term, while acknowledging her a friend, writing: 'Sorry Donna, It's Not the Cthulhucene. Cthulhu is a being that *doesn't* link shit in its tentacles. Cthulhu means *shit doesn't matter at all.* I'm sticking with *Anthropocene*.' (Morton, 2016). Here Morton rejects the spelling variation and admits to his irritation with critics who reject 'Anthropocene' as a term.
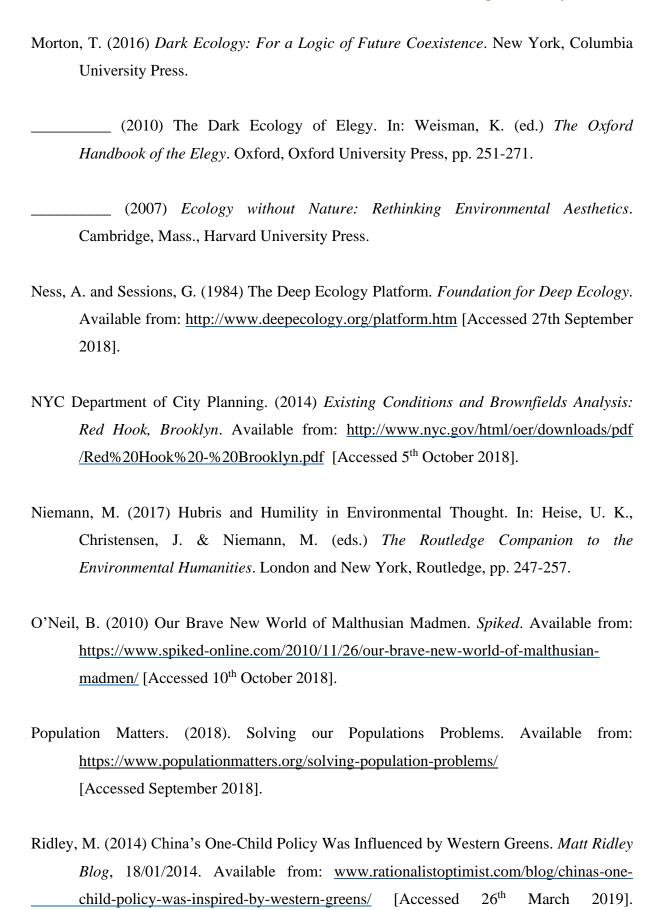
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