

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Re-mapping H.P. Lovecraft: Geographies of the Weird and Absent

James Kneale

University College London

Abstract:

This paper offers a re-mapping of H.P. Lovecraft's writing as an example of one possible way into exploring the idea of mapping in literary geographies. It takes 'mapping' as a metaphor for critical interpretations of Lovecraft's work that pay attention to questions broadly defined as 'geographical', though this does of course include literal mappings, cartographic responses to his fiction. This means that 're-mapping' returns to existing critical mappings of Lovecraft's life and literary work, drawing our attention to those elements that have been included and asking what has been left out. Examining this question of *absence* is of course appropriate for an author famous for his fictions of 'cosmic terror', but the paper argues that it also allows us to explore the ways that Lovecraft wrote about *place*.

The body of the paper explores two possible re-mappings of Lovecraft. The first takes its cue from recent fictional and critical responses to Lovecraft's racism, particularly Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* (2016). These revisions open up his work to new interpretations by adding in relations to places and people that are otherwise absent or muted. The second considers Lovecraft's 'sunset cities' – Providence, Boston, and others – as waypoints on narrated itineraries. Drawing on Bakhtin's discussion of the chronotope, the paper suggests that we can see these cities as places of transformation, and that this also holds true for biographies of Lovecraft and perhaps for his own understanding of himself.

Keywords: Re-mapping; H. P. Lovecraft; chronotope; weird geographies.

Author contact: j.kneale@ucl.ac.uk

The term ‘mapping’ has been used in many different ways in literary geographies, spatial literary studies and other fields (Hones 2022). In this article, it is employed in relation to the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft as a metaphor for readings, responses or interpretations that pay attention to questions broadly defined as ‘geographical’, which might include literal mappings but is certainly not restricted to them. While ‘mapping’ may have ‘become synonymous with a way of reading’ in literary studies (Cooper and Gregory 2011: 91), it retains more specific meanings for many geographers and cartographers interested in fiction (Hones 2022). This article does not contain any maps, but it does discuss maps created in fictions and uses the word ‘mapping’ to capture something of both of these understandings, hopefully providing a point of contact between very different ideas of literary geography. By focusing on questions of selection and exclusion, the mapping explored here seeks to employ insights learned from critical discussions of cartographic practice and interpretation to set out an approach to literary geographical work that fits both senses of mapping.

Since geography’s cultural turn in the 1980s and 1990s, maps have been seen first as representations structured by the concerns of their makers (Harley 1988), and more recently as the sites of ongoing negotiations of meaning (Kitchin et al. 2013). Cartographers must select which phenomena to include when producing a map, excluding everything else in order to ensure that the map is smaller than the territory it represents. This process of selection is also true of literary geographies, of representations of space and place in fiction. Fredric Jameson suggested that speculative fiction works through what he called ‘world reduction’, ‘a principle of systematic exclusion [...] in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists, of what we call reality, is deliberately thinned and weeded out’ (2005: 271) and it seems likely that the difference between what we call ‘realist’ and ‘speculative’ fiction is one of degree in this regard. In a sense this represents one way of bringing together fictional ‘settings’ and the apparently ‘real’ places they represent, not to test the truth of one against the fictionality of the other, but to ask how fictions might have been different – not more truthful. The reader of a map is entitled to wonder about the elements that have been selected, and to imagine other ways it might have been constructed. The same is true of the reader of Lovecraft’s literary geographies, the spaces and places represented in his fictions.

Re-mapping Lovecraft’s work, then, does not lead to a more ‘accurate’ account of the settings of his writings and his life, just as geographers are increasingly wary of approaching maps as either truthful statements or lies to be unmasked. The processual approach to maps (Kitchin et al. 2013) echoes Sheila Hones’s argument that texts are (spatial) events (2008), which means re-mapping is part of the process of re-reading literary geographies. In this case it involves looking again at those elements that are included in any geographical reading of Lovecraft, as well as a consideration of elements that have been left out. This article will have quite a lot to say about absences, because of the kind of fiction Lovecraft wrote. However we can also consider what has been left out from other critical mappings of his life and work, re-reading other literary geographical interpretations of Lovecraft. In this regard re-mapping can be considered to be related to the idea of ‘restorying’, defined by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and Amy Stornaiuolo as ‘reshaping narratives to better reflect a diversity of perspectives and experiences’ (2016:

314). While Thomas and Stornaiuolo focus on restorying as ‘an act of asserting the importance of one’s existence in a world that tries to silence subaltern voices’, drawing upon audience research and reader-response theory to do so, re-mapping does at least make it clear that other interpretations of Lovecraft’s literary geographies are possible.

The article begins by introducing Lovecraft, and by considering his suitability as a subject for literary-geographical work, which in turn requires an explanation of what ‘literary-geographical’ means in this instance. The article then moves on to consider the question of absences by suggesting how we might approach the kind of fiction Lovecraft is famous for – ‘cosmic terror’, a response to the inhuman scale of the universe and deep time. Lovecraft’s stories of ‘cosmic terror’ were founded on ‘the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large’, as he put it in 1927 (Lovecraft 1968b: 150). In thinking about how Lovecraft wrote about *absence* – about nameless things and thingless names beyond representation – we can see that this also shaped the way that he wrote about *place*. Adopting a relational understanding of place, I will suggest that Lovecraft’s weird geographies are organised by occult – hidden, apparently absent – forces.

Having set out a framework for a critical analysis of Lovecraft’s literary geographies, the body of the article explores two possible re-mappings of these represented spaces and places. The first takes its cue from recent critical responses to Lovecraft’s racism that seek to multiply the meanings of his writing by adding in relations to other places and people that are otherwise absent or muted. The second considers Lovecraft’s ‘sunset cities’ – Providence, Boston, and the imagined cities of his fiction (Cannon 1990) – as sites that are waypoints on narrated itineraries. In this it draws upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of the chronotope, his term for the represented time-spaces of literature. Literary geographers and spatial literary scholars have found this idea useful (for example Brosseau 1995; Bushell et al. 2021) but it proves to be particularly helpful here as it formed a part of Bakhtin’s wider investigation of the importance of *dialogue* in testing and transforming the self. The chronotopes examined here are *spatialised dialogues*, sites at which characters encounter testing ideas, points where narratives may branch out into alternate paths. Following this argument, I will suggest that we can see these cities as places of transformation, and that this also holds true for biographies of Lovecraft and perhaps for his own understanding of himself.

Lovecraft Country

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was born in 1890 in Providence, Rhode Island, to a fading but respectable family (Joshi 2001). After his father died in 1898 Lovecraft was raised by his mother, grandfather, and aunts, but his grandfather’s death left the family in reduced circumstances. Largely self-educated due to ill health, Lovecraft only began to write seriously once he came into contact with the Amateur Press movement in 1914, exchanging stories and letters with other amateurs. Lovecraft did not write professionally until 1922, though, and publishing was always a struggle. He married another amateur writer, Sonia Greene, in 1924 and moved to New York City to live with her. Lovecraft hated living in New York, in part because of its cosmopolitan population, and his marriage

suffered. He returned to Providence in 1926, without his wife but with profound relief. Lovecraft spent the next decade writing what would become some of his best-known works, before dying in 1937. Largely unknown beyond the pulp magazines, Lovecraft became famous after his death through the efforts of a number of his fans. He is now considered to be one of the most influential and important horror authors of the twentieth century, and his ubiquity in contemporary popular culture has led some observers to claim that we are living in ‘the Age of Lovecraft’ (Sederholm and Weinstock 2016).

But Lovecraft is also infamous for his racism and his ultra-conservative views. Though his opinions did change over his adult life, in the early 1930s he expressed only slightly qualified support for Hitler and for the principle of slavery, and he complained about what he called the ‘overwhelming Semitism’ and un-American character of New York (Joshi 2001: 360-3). These views have prompted several critical re-tellings of Lovecraft’s best-known stories in recent years, including Victor LaValle’s *Ballad of Black Tom* (2016), Kij Johnson’s *The Dream-Quest of Vellitt Boe* (2016) and Matt Ruff’s *Lovecraft Country* (2016), which has also been revised for television by Misha Green (2020). The title of Ruff’s novel (and Green’s series) provides a convenient way into thinking about the geographies of Lovecraft’s life and fiction, as ‘Lovecraft Country’ is taken to refer to those parts of New England, fictional and real, that were important to him, while opening up conversations about the relationship between horror fiction and race.

Lovecraft’s identification with his home city was extremely strong. The headstone on his grave in Swan Point Cemetery reads, famously, ‘I AM PROVIDENCE’. This is only the most obvious manifestation of his close identification with and attention to place, however. As he put it himself, describing his ‘extreme & lifelong *geographic sensitiveness*’: ‘I have never been tremendously interested in *people*, but I have a veritably feline interest in & devotion to places’. (Lovecraft 1971a: 111, emphasis in original). Though he did not travel widely, his explorations of New England, New York and further afield sought out traces of North America’s colonial past. His travel writings are full of antiquarian detail, and he cherished places that seemed untouched by modernity. In this sense Lovecraft could be said to be strongly rooted in the New England landscape in which he spent most of his life, though it is worth noting that his sense of those origins was complicated; he identified as ‘English’, and was very conscious of the region’s historical development, its connections with Europe and the colonists’ encounters with Indigenous Americans. Still, though his sense of place acknowledged change, it remained largely nostalgic for the sights of a vanished past.

Lovecraft’s fiction, his amateur journalism and his letters to friends are all full of topographical descriptions. Providence, Boston and New York appear in several stories, as do invented towns like Arkham, Innsmouth, Kingsport and Dunwich, which were situated in Massachusetts, more-or-less north and east of Salem. Lovecraft’s careful development of a plausible fictional region in which highly implausible things happen reflects his approach to writing. In the essay ‘Notes on Writing Weird Fiction’ he suggested that ‘[i]nconceivable events and conditions have a special handicap to overcome and this can be accomplished only through the maintenance of a careful realism in every phase of the story *except* that touching on the one given marvel’ (Lovecraft 1995: 115, emphasis in original).

Realistic descriptions of places heightened the power of the marvellous elements introduced by Lovecraft. The consistency and ‘careful realism’ of his representations of these sites across many stories, and their use by later authors, has made ‘Lovecraft Country’ the fantastic equivalent of Hardy’s Wessex. As Angela Carter noted, ‘any competent map-maker could chart the world of H. P. Lovecraft in microscopic detail’ (1992: 173), though that mapping would still not rid it of its ambiguity. And indeed, this world has been mapped and remapped many times by fans and other authors, in literal maps and in professional and fan fictions, with the fictional settlements squeezed in alongside the real towns of New England. Some, like Ruff, have placed a different emphasis on their explorations of this area; others, like LaValle, have returned to Lovecraft’s time in New York to tell the other side of stories like ‘The Horror at Red Hook’.

Weird Geographies

Lovecraft’s approach to writing place needs some further discussion, though, and geographers, literary scholars, and others in the environmental humanities have suggested many ways to conceptualise what I prefer to call ‘literary geographies’. As a geographer I tend to follow Doreen Massey in seeing place as the ever-changing outcome of complex sets of relations. ‘What gives a place its specificity’, Massey argued, ‘is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus’ (1993: 67). Providence is not anything in and of itself, but derives its character from its relations with other places, people and things, and its history is, to quote Massey again, ‘the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages both local and to the wider world’ (69).

As a consequence, space is *multiple and heterogeneous*, and any one place contains many different narratives and experiences. It is also *in process*, becoming, rather than a fixed, unchanging thing. The different relations a place has with other sites, and the struggles between different groups that happen within it, make it open to future change. Place is animated, lively. Change does not come from time alone. As Massey put it, ‘What is needed [...] is to uproot “space” from that constellation of concepts in which it has so unquestioningly often been embedded (stasis; closure; representation) and to settle it among another set of ideas (heterogeneity; relationality; coevalness... liveliness indeed) where it releases a more challenging political landscape’ (2005: 13).

For Sheila Hones these insights suggest that we should be very wary of the traditional idea of literary setting, as it tends to privilege the real world as a ‘definitive and self-evident geography which is more authoritative than the geography of the text’ (2005 n. p.; see also Hones 2022: 165). There is little point in reading Lovecraft Country as a distortion of the real New England, then, and my re-mapping of this space is not an attempt to assess the accuracy of Lovecraft’s representations. Rather we should give the apparently ‘self-evident geography’ of New England and Lovecraft’s written descriptions the same amount of critical scrutiny.

Of course there is even less point in assessing the truthfulness of Lovecraft’s landscapes, which tend to contain fantastic and horrific elements not found in ‘real life’. Thankfully, arguments about the relational character of place can also help us explore the

geography of weird fiction. If sites are connected to many different places and times, then we may encounter puzzling traces of things and people that are now absent, distant from us in time or place. Nigel Thrift explains this kind of urban apparition as ‘the unintended consequences of the complexity of modern cities, cities in which multiple time-spaces are being produced, which overlap, interact, and interfere’ (2000: 405). A city like Providence will be haunted by some of its relations with other places, particularly those that are not currently mapped.

Perhaps this is what Graham Harman is referring to when he discusses the ‘weird geography’ of Lovecraft’s story ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’. The narrator of this story, researching the folklore of mysterious and frightening beings in the Vermont backwoods, suggests that their presence seems to have influenced the locals’ use of the area:

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. (1999b: 205)

Harman reads this as suggesting that ‘the entire demographic layout of modern-day Vermont turns out to be grounded in the “irrational” fears of its early countryside folk’ (2012: 125). Settlement patterns reflect ancient but forgotten fears, not social factors or economic development. Following this line of enquiry suggests that a weird geography may trace out the relations between a place and its absent presences; Lovecraft Country is haunted not just by its past, but by its ongoing relationships with strange, lost, and distant things.

Harman’s identification of Lovecraft’s weird geography forms part of his sustained analysis of the author’s use of language to communicate the weirdness of reality. Through *catachresis* Lovecraft ‘deliberately paralyzes his own powers of language’ (42). In fact, the opening sentence of ‘Whisperer in Darkness’ is a good example: ‘Bear in mind closely that I did not see any actual visual horror at the end’ (1999b: 200). The description of the entities glimpsed at the end of another story, ‘The Festival’, similarly undoes itself as it goes on: ‘They were not altogether crows, nor moles, nor buzzards, nor ants, nor vampire bats, nor decomposed human beings; but something I cannot and must not recall’ (1999a: 116). Harman likens Lovecraft’s description of Cthulhu, perhaps his most famous monstrous invention, to ‘a metaphor with one of the terms deleted’ (2012: 238). It is easy to see why critics like Edmund Wilson dismissed Lovecraft’s writing as ‘bad taste and bad art’ (1980: 49), but his mangling of language serves a purpose: to distance the reader from the things the author is describing.

It is also noticeable that this is often a *literal* distancing, as Lovecraft works hard to ensure that these strange things remain indescribable by keeping them at arm’s length. This is his solution to what Roger Salomon calls the problem of witnessing: ‘how to naturalize such narrative enough to make it credible without limiting the implications of issues raised and thus explaining away the horror’ (2002: 76-77). Despite his antiquarian interests,

Lovecraft was fascinated by the science and technology of his day, and in a number of his stories different forms of modern media – telegraphy, telephones, radio, phonograms – play an important role. As Jeffrey Sconce reminds us, ‘The electronically mediated worlds of telecommunications often evoke the supernatural by creating virtual beings that appear to have no physical form’ (2000: 4). Lovecraft often doubles this distancing. In ‘Whisperer’, for example, a glimpse of one of the Vermont creatures is distanced twice, first by a poor-quality photograph of the original entity, and second by the narrator’s hesitant description of this photograph. In ‘The Dunwich Horror’ the reader is not shown the final titanic battle with the horror of the title, and has to make do with the running commentary of a group of locals who are watching the distant struggle through a telescope. Distance and mediation expand the relations between one place and another, just as modern media multiply places as they connect us to others who are not co-present in space and time.

All of this means that Lovecraft seems to be a writer very much concerned with proximity and distance, and with the relations between places. Many of his stories revolve around the consequences of some form of contact between people, things and places which are normally kept apart in space or time. Dimensional barriers are breached in the story ‘From Beyond’; sensitive dreamers are contacted by psychic messages in ‘The Call of Cthulhu’; the discovery of strange monoliths and ancient books of wisdom leads to terrifying revelations about reality in several other stories. In this way Lovecraft brought together the two things he was most interested in – the inhuman scale of the universe and the local places he cared about. Indicatively, he said:

I want to know what stretches *Outside*, & be able to *visit* all the gulfs & dimensions beyond Space & Time. I want, too, to juggle the calendar at will; bringing things from the immemorial past down into the present, & making long journeys into the forgotten years. But I want the familiar Old Providence of my childhood as a perpetual base for these necromancies & excursions – & in a good part of these necromancies & excursions I want certain transmuted features of Old Providence to form part of the alien voids I visit or conjure up. (1971b: 214)

These necromancies and excursions – imagined travels in time, and in space – are central to Lovecraft’s work, and again remind us that Providence was brought into contact with the terrifying vastness of the cosmos and deep time. His weird fiction remapped the relations between the places he knew intimately and the strange places he imagined, to highly productive effect.

Having set out my sense of the nature of Lovecraft’s literary geographies, it is time to consider two re-mappings of ‘Lovecraft Country’. The first returns to the point that mapping always involves the inclusion of some phenomena and the elision of others and seeks to re-map Providence by investigating Lovecraft’s treatment of its place in the traffic in enslaved Africans.

'A freakish importation'

Lovecraft's short novel *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, written in 1927, is a good example of the collision of childhood experience and cosmic terror described in the passage from his letter quoted above. Ward, a young man from a good Providence family, becomes obsessed with his sinister eighteenth-century ancestor, Joseph Curwen, whom he resembles to an uncanny degree. Researching Curwen's life, Ward discovers that Curwen was a necromancer who brought the dead back to life in order to learn their secret knowledge. Fearing retribution, Curwen ensured that his own life could be restored in the same way, leaving clues as to how this may be done. Ward retraces the steps Curwen took, learns his rituals, and succeeds in bringing his ancestor back from death. Curwen kills Ward and replaces him without anyone realising, continuing his sorcerous projects until Ward's doctor puts two and two together and destroys Curwen. True to Lovecraft's working method, Ward travels in time (through his research) and space (retracing Curwen's journeys across the world) to bring the eighteenth-century alchemist into the twentieth century.

How might we re-map this novel's literary geography? I would suggest that we could look to Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* for a hint. *Lovecraft Country* folds together two nightmares: Lovecraft's cosmic terror and his white supremacist beliefs. As a group of African-Americans struggle against both otherworldly threats and racism in the 1950s, they actively and literally *map* the racism they encounter in areas subject to 'Jim Crow' rules enforcing segregation and in 'sundown towns' where only whites are permitted after sunset (Loewen 2018). Guides like *The Negro Motorist Green Book* listed hotels and businesses that would welcome African-American travellers, and in Ruff's novel *The Safe Negro Travel Guide* fulfils a similar role, mapping areas of safety. The teenage son of the Guide's publisher marks up a road atlas to show additional areas of danger, including a sundown county in Massachusetts: 'Devon County was marked with an icon he'd seen in numerous other places in the atlas: a sundial. Standing beside it, casting his own shadow over the gnomon, was a grim Templar holding a noose' (Ruff 2016: 20). Unlike Lovecraft, who wandered freely through the Atlantic states of the US in the 1920s, 'travelling while black' means risking surveillance, arrest and murderous assault. Mapping racism re-animates this place, in Doreen Massey's terms, by placing this struggle at its heart: racism multiplies the meanings and experiences of Devon County and the struggle over it might bring change. For its African-American visitors, Lovecraft Country is haunted by that struggle, as well as by its relations to weird horrors.

Returning to *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* with an eye to restoring questions of 'race' to Lovecraft's novel, we find it relatively open about the connections between Providence and the Atlantic trade in enslaved people. Rhode Island's ports were responsible for 111,000 or so African captives trafficked to the Americas, accounting for about half of all voyages of that kind from the North American mainland between the 1720s and 1807 (Eltis and Richardson 2010: 39, 71). Between them, ships registered in Rhode Island and Boston carried almost all of the African captives who landed in New England (215). This trade enriched Rhode Island, setting 'Newport and Bristol merchants apart as the preeminent, in fact, the only serious American slave traders', as Jay Alan

Coughtry put it (1978: 2). Providence families like the Browns were involved in a lesser way, alongside ordinary shopkeepers who might buy a share to support a single voyage and others who produced the commodities that filled Rhode Island ships on their outward journeys, chiefly rum made from Caribbean molasses, and food and materials for the Caribbean plantations (Chernos Lin 2002). Some captives were brought back to Rhode Island; 'the streets of Newport were literally paved by revenues generated from a duty on slave imports' as Brown University's Report into its connections to the trade concludes (2006: 16). And while most of the enslaved Africans shipped on Rhode Island vessels were sold in the Caribbean, ten per cent of Rhode Islanders were enslaved people in the middle of the eighteenth century, mostly in Newport and the plantations in the South County (9).

While Providence's ships played a much smaller part in Rhode Island's dominance of the American slave trade than Newport's did, the city was clearly closely connected to it, both directly through involvement in the 'African trade' and indirectly through voyages to support the Caribbean plantations. Between the abolition of the trade and the abolition of slavery Providence displaced Newport as Rhode Island's preeminent city as mills were developed to work on cotton grown on southern plantations. In fact, Charles Dexter Ward's father is described as 'a practical man of power and affairs – a cotton manufacturer with extensive mills at Riverpoint in the Pawtuxet Valley' (Lovecraft 2001: 133), though we are not told whether the family business was established before abolition. Both before and after the abolition of the trade in enslaved Africans, Providence's connections to it were significant, but not always in obvious ways.

Lovecraft was aware of this. A keen historian of his own city, he had read Gertrude Selwyn Kimball's *Providence in Colonial Times*, and this had prompted him to set *Charles Dexter Ward* in his own city, as well as providing him with material for the story (Joshi 2001: 253-54). We are shown the city's mid-eighteenth-century docks, filled with 'infinite rum, slave, and molasses sloops, the rakish privateers, and the great brigs of the Browns, Crawfords, and Tillinghasts' (Lovecraft 2001: 103); Curwen imports 'saltpetre, black pepper, and cinnamon' and English manufactures, exporting rum, food, and horses as 'one of the prime exporters of the colony' (104, 104). Secretly he conducts a more sinister trade in bodies, a 'freakish importation', as he has commissioned agents around the world to rob the graves of great thinkers to smuggle into Providence to be resurrected and tortured for their wisdom (113).

Curwen is also involved in the slave trade, though he sells very few captives on, as Charles Ward notices when looking at his ancestor's accounts. These show a discrepancy 'between the large number of Guinea blacks he imported until 1766, and the disturbingly small number for whom he could produce bona fide bills of sale either to slave-dealers at the Great Bridge or to the planters of the Narragansett Country' (105). We later learn that this discrepancy is the result of Curwen feeding these trafficked men and women to the resurrected bodies he has smuggled in and revived, along with livestock bought for the same purpose. After 1766 Curwen 'altogether abandoned the slave trade, alleging that its profits were constantly decreasing' (109), though his real reason for withdrawing from the trade is that he now has fewer undead interlocutors to feed.

Lovecraft does not hide the importance of the trade in enslaved Africans to the city, but he identifies only one participant: Curwen. When a group of the 'most learned and

prominent citizens of Providence' assemble to challenge Curwen's necromancy in 1771 (115), Lovecraft lists the four Moses brothers, Governor Stephen Hopkins, the Reverend James Manning (the first president of what would later become Brown University), and Abraham Whipple. These men would go on to play important roles in the history of Providence, the American Revolution and the new Republic, but their ownership of slaves or participation in the Atlantic trade is not mentioned. Only Curwen is identified as a slaver, and because his motivation for slaving is in fact subordinate to his real agenda – the 'freakish importation' of cadavers – its presence in the foreground of the story helps obscure the other slave ships in the background. Providence's prominent citizens draw the line at necromancy, not slavery, and the implications of the city's close connections to the Atlantic trade are raised and then passed over.

In *Ward* Lovecraft openly maps some of the layered sets of linkages that shaped Providence and Rhode Island, but his presentation of Curwen's slaving obscures the kinds of local connections that are now being brought to light (Brown University 2006). While 'race' could be said to be one of Lovecraft's central concerns, then, in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* it remains something half-seen, present but out of focus. Mapping Providence's links to slavery tells us something about Lovecraft's literary geography, adding in elements absent from his novel in order to better understand the way he deals with 'race'. But while Providence's relations with Africa and the Caribbean bear highlighting, it is also worth thinking about the way that places are brought to life as they are narrated.

Sunset Cities

Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation of the chronotope remains one of the more interesting ways of thinking about literary geography because it forms a part of his wider conceptualisation of dialogue (1981). Many of the chronotopes Bakhtin identified are time-spaces where ideas and people encounter one another, engaging in dialogues that may transform them. As a result, thresholds of all kinds, as well as public spaces like market squares, taverns, and above all the road, are key sites where narratives develop and people change. For Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's 'artistic conception of time and space', for example, was concerned only with 'points of crisis, ... turning points and catastrophes' (1984: 176, 149). If we pay attention to these sites where narratives turn and lives change, we may see these chronotopes in action in Lovecraft's stories, as well as in accounts of his own life.

Lovecraft's biographer S. T. Joshi notes that when Lovecraft left New York City and his disastrous marriage behind him to return to Providence in April 1926, it prompted 'the most remarkable outburst of fiction-writing in Lovecraft's entire career' (2001: 242). Within a year he had written three short stories and four novels, including *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*. We have already considered *Ward*; in *Dream-Quest*, Bostonian Randolph Carter dreams of a beautiful city which is then hidden from him by the jealous gods of the Dreamlands, who take it for themselves. Carter's quest is to find Kadath, the city of those gods in the strange world of dream, in order to beg them to restore his city to him. This is how the novel begins:

Three times Randolph Carter dreamed of the marvellous city, and three times was he snatched away while still he paused on the high terrace above it. All golden and lovely it blazed in the sunset, with walls, temples, colonnades, and arched bridges of veined marble, silver-basined fountains of prismatic spray in broad squares and perfumed gardens, and wide streets marching between delicate trees and blossom-laden urns and ivory statues in gleaming rows; while on steep northward slopes climbed tiers of red roofs and old peaked gables harbouring little lanes of grassy cobbles. It was a fever of the gods; a fanfare of supernal trumpets and a clash of immortal cymbals. Mystery hung about it as clouds about a fabulous unvisited mountain; and as Carter stood breathless and expectant on that balustraded parapet there swept up to him the poignancy and suspense of almost-vanished memory, the pain of lost things, and the maddening need to place again what once had been an awesome and momentous place. (2005: 155)

After losing the city, and a long and dangerous journey through the Dreamlands, Carter arrives at Kadath and is told:

[Y]our gold and marble city of wonder is only the sum of what you have seen and loved in youth. It is the glory of Boston's hillside roofs and western windows aflame with sunset; of the flower-fragrant Common and the great dome on the hill and the tangle of gables and chimneys in the violet valley where the many-bridged Charles flows drowsily. These things you saw, Randolph Carter, when your nurse first wheeled you out in the springtime, and they will be the last things you will ever see with eyes of memory and of love. (245)

Expelled from the Dreamlands, Carter wakes up in his own bed in Boston, to 'dawn's blaze thrown dazzling through purple panes by the great gold dome of the State House on the hill': his city has been returned to him (251).

Lovecraft gives us a similar view of Providence in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*:

one of the child's [Ward's] first memories was of the great westward sea of hazy roofs and domes and steeples and far hills which he saw one winter afternoon from that great railed embankment, all violet and mystic against a fevered, apocalyptic sunset of reds and golds and purples and curious greens. The vast marble dome of the State House stood out in massive silhouette, its crowning statue haloed fantastically by a break in one of the tinted stratus clouds that barred the flaming sky. (2001: 95)

After travelling the world learning the hidden wisdom that will allow him to bring Curwen back to life, Ward returns to Providence to yet another sunset vista:

At the high square where Broad, Weybosset, and Empire Streets join, he saw before and below him in the fire of sunset the pleasant, remembered houses and domes and steeples of the old town; and his head swam curiously as the vehicle rolled down the

terminal behind the Biltmore, bringing into view the great dome and soft, roof-pierced greenery of the ancient hill across the river, and the tall colonial spire of the First Baptist Church limned pink in the magic evening light against the fresh springtime verdure of its precipitous background ... It was twilight, and Charles Dexter Ward had come home. (142-3)

And to complete this list of sunset cities, here is Lovecraft's description of his own return to Providence after exile in New York, in a letter to his friend Frank Belknap Long:

Well – the train sped on, & I experienced silent convulsions of joy in returning step by step to a waking & tridimensional life. New Haven – New London – & then quaint Mystic, with its colonial hillside & landlocked cove. Then at last a still subtler magick fill'd the air – nobler roofs & steeples, with the train rushing airily above them on its lofty viaduct – Westerly – in His Majesty's Province of RHODE ISLAND & PROVIDENCE-PLANTATIONS! GOD SAVE THE KING!! Intoxication follow'd – Kingston – East Greenwich with its steep Georgian alleys climbing up from the railway – Apponaug & its ancient roofs – Auburn – just outside the city limits – I fumble with bags & wraps in a desperate effort to appear calm – THEN – a delirious marble dome outside the window – a hissing of air brakes – a slackening of speed – surges of ecstasy & dropping of clouds from my eyes & mind – HOME – UNION STATION – PROVIDENCE!!!! (Lovecraft 1968a: 46-47)

As Joshi suggests, it is not hard to see the similarity between Ward's and Lovecraft's feelings on returning to their hometown, and between these descriptions of domes and spires. We might also note his claim in the same letter that 'America has lost New York to the mongrels' (46). But – like Ward and Carter – Lovecraft was not just returning home, but travelling back in time. Carter's *Dream-Quest* is for the city of his childhood; in 'The Silver Key', another story written shortly after Lovecraft returned to Providence, Carter tires of the world and disappears into his past. Lovecraft too was returning to the city of his childhood and to the eighteenth-century scenes he loved. Later in the letter he writes: 'The walk down town can be varied to suit one's mood, but it is always colonial' (48). Ward's return to Providence is also a return to his antiquarian researches; he is now able to try the ritual which will bring Joseph Curwen back from the grave. Where Carter and Lovecraft seek only to return to their youth, Ward is fated to be replaced by his long-dead ancestor.

Both Boston and Providence are animated by their connections to distant places, too: Boston to the lands of dream via Carter's travels, Providence to Curwen's international occult network of sorcerers, libraries and graveyards. Not the self-contained places they appear to be, these sunset cities are shaped by hidden forces and relations. In the same year after his return to Providence, for example, Lovecraft also wrote 'Pickman's Model', revealing that Boston was infested with subterranean cannibal ghouls, and 'The Call of Cthulhu', which brought Providence into contact with a worldwide cult, with its tentacles in Louisiana and the Pacific. Lovecraft's New England was full of hauntings.

For Joshi and many other critics, the parallels between Lovecraft's fiction and his life suggest that his biography is the key that allows a deeper understanding of his fiction. From this perspective his literary geographies are translated versions of his relationships with place; we read the former through the latter. Indeed for Joshi, *Dream-Quest's* 'chief feature may be its autobiographical significance: it is, in fact, Lovecraft's spiritual autobiography for this precise moment in his life' (251). However this reminds us of Hones' warning not to try to ground the meanings of one text – Lovecraft's story – by reference to another; while Hones' comments refer to the comparison of a 'true' geographical place with a re-presented 'setting', they apply just as well to biographical readings of fiction. These auto- and biographical accounts, in other words, are still narrations that conform to the genres and chronotopes considered by Bakhtin.

Take Bakhtin's 'adventure novel of everyday life' for example, which portrayed a life 'sheathed in the context of a "metamorphosis"', a life that can be made to 'correspond to an *actual course of travel*' (1981: 111, emphasis in original). Lovecraft's journey to New York and subsequent trials in that city represented a point of biographical crisis and his return to Providence involves a transformation. One of his friends, W. Paul Cook, noted 'He came back to Providence a human being – and what a human being! He had been tried in the fire and came out pure gold' (Joshi 2001: 241). Lovecraft's ordeal is seen to have refined something in him, just as Ward has been transformed by his travels; some of the alienists called in to examine Ward 'believe that his conduct upon returning implies a disastrous change' (143).

Carter's quest, however, is much more like the travels of adventure time, reflecting the 'abstract-alien world' typical of this chronotope (Bakhtin 1981: 101). Nothing that happens to Carter really reflects his own world, and none of it changes him. The plot is, as Bakhtin put it, 'a test of the heroes' integrity, their selfhood [...] The hammer of events shatters nothing and forges nothing – it merely tries the durability of an already finished product' (1981: 106, 107). Adventure time is associated with the sundered romances of the early novel, where the narrative simply follows the lovers' attempts to find one another again; Carter is also desperate to be reunited with the one thing he loves: the city of his birth. Unlike Lovecraft and Ward, Carter has simply come full circle; it was, after all, just a dream, and he wakes at the dawn of what looks set to be another perfect day. In contrast, Lovecraft and Ward have finished one day and await the next knowing it will be different, looking to the future. While Lovecraft's return to Providence is said to have marked a positive change in him, and Carter is safely returned to the waking world in Boston, Ward's homecoming in 'the faery goldenness of a late spring afternoon' (Joshi 2001: 142) is a significant step on the path which will lead to his death. These descriptions present us with places that are significant within their narratives as sites of return, as end-points. Two of these cities also mark a point of crisis where the protagonist is changed forever, one appearing in a fictional account of a life – Ward's – and one in Joshi's biography. These chronotopes can be traced in both fiction and biographies, not because the latter dictates the former, but because both are forms of narrative.

In this way these sunset cities produce a range of meanings, positive and negative, across two different chronotopes. And if we compare them with sundown towns, we can

also see that the passing of time changes places differently for their different inhabitants; sundown brings a very particular crisis for the protagonists of *Lovecraft Country*.

Conclusions

In summary, this tour of some of Lovecraft's literary geographies demonstrates three things. First, that approaching places with an eye to the way they have been shaped by their internal and external relations can be a productive way to think about textual, literary geographies. Second, this means considering relations with elements that might otherwise seem to be absent through distance in time or space. Providence's connections to Atlantic slavery were very significant, though this has not always been obvious. Looking for absences is even more important when we are dealing with fantastic literatures, with their thresholds, portals and other connections to impossible places, and their occulted, hidden phenomena. In Lovecraft's case I have, I hope, shown that it is also important to try to populate his literary geographies with the things and people his racism lead him to play down or ignore.

And finally, it is worth remembering that fictional places are given meaning through narrative; this can be approached in a number of ways but Bakhtin's chronotope provides one productive lens through which to view his represented sites. Lovecraft's 'sunset cities' also remind us that while we might take an author's biography as the key with which to unlock their fictions, those biographies are also texts, ones with narratives and, perhaps, chronotopes. Comparing Lovecraft's fictions against the apparent 'truths' of biography or place closes down our potential readings of his stories. For me that is contrary to the spirit of Massey's geography, with its call to animate and enliven space.

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