

### *The Reversal of the Lost Race Narrative*

Questions about the relationship between narrative, identity, and belonging have come to populate the center of both current politics and democratic ethics with great urgency. A story arose in 2016 that put a morally corrupt and political inept person in the leadership seat of the most powerful nation in the world. The story that arose was not the only one that could have. In fact, in order to suppress the disconcerting rise of Donald Trump, other stories were told in opposition to the one he preferred: that America had lost its politico-sociological way and could only regain it by turning to its past. The work of resisting this narrative is important and doing so requires we, in this part of the division of labor, get clear on essential questions. What is the ethical story represented in ‘make America great again’ and why did it win? Who believes the story? Maybe most crucially for political thinkers, why does this story have power? This last question is important because the story that resonates most can set the ethical tone and agenda for a nation. And, it goes without saying, not all ethical tones and agendas are fit for a *decent* society.

In this paper I offer an initial attempt to address the questions about narrative, identity, and nation that hover over our everyday democratic comings and goings. I explore a set of tools to explicate their fitness for helping to address these questions. In particular, I am interested in the role of Afrofuturism as a tool of critical racial inquiry, imaginative nation building, and hopeful agenda setting. Despite the -ism, Afrofuturism does not represent a unified ideology of any sort. Rather, it is most helpfully understood as a narrative and interpretive sensibility dually tethered to questions of racial identity and justice and to the genres of science/speculative fiction, horror, and fantasy. I will have more to say later about what this tethering comes to. But to get our ideas in motion it is helpful to note that what makes Afrofuturism a distinct and distinctly helpful sensibility is that it is free from the strict confines of (often qualified and disqualifying) academic argumentation. Its relationship to various sorts of speculative fiction indicates that its charge is to provoke rather than to prove, to invite openness rather than to fight for conclusiveness. Yet, there is much that we as academics might more forcefully and conclusively argue for with the genre at our disposal.

What follows below amounts to a sort of agenda-setting paper with one immediate goal and a more open-ended, somewhat deferred goal. More immediately I want to offer a critical inquiry into what has turned into a defining and deeply troubling slogan for our time: make America great again. Despite its being recycled in various media as a way of making folly of Trump’s follies, it is a serious sort of thing to call to our present minds a past America and claim that that time is sacrosanct. Decent

people understand the danger of such a vision, filled with lynchings, fire hoses, and bloated bodies in southern rivers. One way to make sense of this slogan is to keep in view the late 19<sup>th</sup> century genre of *lost race fiction*. Works in this genre typically glorified the virility and adventurousness of white men going to wild lands to stumble upon previously unknown ‘savage’ races and romantically fetishizing their supposed savagery while usually pillaging loot. The slogan ‘make America great again’ is an inverse of this narrative: it laments a lost American time when whiteness was supreme. The dream of reclaiming the halcyon days that just so happened to encompass extreme black oppression and endangerment can be understood from an important narrative point of view by engaging its 19<sup>th</sup> century inverted cousin. The more open-ended goal of the paper is to display how Afrofuturism can be a productive partner to political thought by providing new avenues of imaginative analysis.

The paper is divided into two parts. Part I, making up the majority of the paper, takes on the ‘make America great again’ puzzle. It begins with an overview of maybe the most classic lost race story, H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines*. From there we move to set up the structure for the reversal of the lost race narrative by engaging what I am choosing to call ‘white frustrations studies’, exemplified here by Arlie Hochschild’s *Strangers In Their Own Land*, a book seemingly on track to become a contemporary classic in this new and energetic genre. We learn in her sociological analysis that poor whites have supposedly legitimate reasons for resentment against blacks and liberal government. In Part II, I change gears. I want to see what a black imaginative perspective might look like on the lost race narrative. It will come as little surprise that one effective response comes from a fantastical horror story, a recrafting of H. P. Lovecraft’s Cthullu mythos by Matt Ruff in his book, *Lovecraft Country*. In this work, we get the analytic rudiments of what Afrofuturism has to offer political theory proper. One way to read this paper is to see it as what a first chapter of a book might look like, thus, you may pardon its experimental nature – it is simply my attempt to rise to the level of a genre that promises us more if we unmoor ourselves from the usual and do so more than usual.

## **PART I – THE PROBLEM WITH WHITE STORIES**

§1. There is a story Alan Quartermain likes to tell about himself. It begins, “I am a timid man, and don’t like violence.”<sup>1</sup> Being the central character of H. Rider Haggard’s seminal entry into

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<sup>1</sup> H. Rider Haggard. *King Solomon’s Mines*. with an introduction by Benjamin Ivry (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), p. 9

*lost race fiction*, this introduction is important. It takes place within the very first paragraph. By the time this claim about his character is made we have already been provided some attending biographical facts that should make us wary of Quartermain's modesty. For example, we learn that "At an age when other boys are at school, I was earning my living as a trader in the old Colony. I have been trading, hunting, fighting, or mining ever since."<sup>2</sup> It seems doubtful that a person who has been hunting and fighting his entire life since late childhood could credibly claim to dislike violence. Moreover, the reference to 'the old Colony' directly implicates Quartermain in violence, for no population on any continent was ever colonized and maintained as a colony without the use and threat of deadly force.

But our doubts need not rest on speculation. Quartermain gives up the game on his own in the immediately ensuing passages. For example, we learn he shot and killed sixty-five lions before he got his due with the 66<sup>th</sup> when it bit a good chunk out of his leg. A few lines later, after he admits "I have had to do with niggers" while claiming himself a gentleman, he additionally reveals "I've killed many men in my time, but I have never slain wantonly or stained my hand in innocent blood, only in self-defence." So there we have it – a gentleman who sometimes deal with niggers and who hates violence while slaying more than 60 wild beasts and some significant number of humans. What Quartermain has done here is rig the game of moral evaluation by introducing radical disjunctures. I'll explain.

To claim that one does not like anything, including violence, is to ostensibly express disavowal as well as introduce prospective regret. To say one that one does not like violence is to express at minimum an aesthetic repugnance – violence is disagreeable for its grotesquery. But given that violence of any sort almost always invites immediate ethical reflection and leaves one open to judgment, to say one does not like violence is in the same moral arena as saying one disapproves of it. The expression of disliking it, then, amounts to something of a moral disavowal – one sees how violence is morally unfortunate *and* agrees that violence is morally unfortunate. This is what makes Quartermain's subsequent confessions all the more startling. If we take the statement of disliking violence as not disavowal, but more generously as prospective regret, then we would get something like the following: the fellows of my lodge

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

once took me hunting and being in a pinch to uphold manners, I found myself slaying a lion and found I could not do it again, because I do not like violence.” However, it turns out he does it more than sixty additional times. If one says one does not like violence, we might expect that person to say something like, “I once feared for my life and killed a man and endeavored to excuse myself from situations that might invite more killing.” Rather, Quartermain has killed *many* men. So what does this come to? What do we make of this?

Maybe now is a good time to take a step back, for I have put Alan Quartermain in front of you without saying much about why he is there. Quartermain is the central character of H. Rider Haggard’s breakout, late 19<sup>th</sup> century adventure novel, *King Solomon’s Mine*. Emblematic of its pulp literary contemporaries, the book is a work of astounding adventure against overwhelming and deadly odds in which white men inevitably and invariably triumph. In the end they get the loot, the glory, and maybe, a brown woman or two as well. The genre’s rise historically coincided with, if not a decline in empire, then at least with its greatest glory days in the rearview. This historical location is important for while the description of adventure or pulp novel was its contemporary category, scholars today have marked it as something much more precise and insightful: lost race fiction. In such works, white men explore far-away lands, hear of treasure that they cannot but help pursue, and in the process of acquiring riches, interfere in the politics of lands to which they do not have a right to claim, judge and influence cultures they have no business meddling with, and acquire esteem they clearly feel entitled to, but which is not deserved. But it is not only these aspects that are significant for these features on their own could mark any colonial adventure. What makes the genre a fascinating counterpoint to Afrofuturism is that while Afrofuturism ultimately seeks the political and social aims of emancipation and liberation, lost race fiction continuously re-inscribes white supremacy and the de facto superiority of white men. It does so by deploying the tropes of ‘discovering’ previously unknown savage cultures, and in doing so, juxtaposed whiteness against a romantic, pre-civilized past preserved for modern civilized men that serves to whet the appetite of adventure and riches while justifying condescension and disrespect, and yes, the killing of many men, not to mention lions.

What is especially urgent for us is that lost race fiction puts before it a fundamentally global sociological agenda that makes essential to the proper ordering of the world a white sensibility that is itself asserted as supreme in the face of stumbling upon supposed backwardness and redeeming that backwardness by the mere presence of the white man. As literary scholar John Reider puts it, “Lost race fiction...derives its fundamental “mythic” power from the way it negotiates the basic problem of ownership by simultaneously reveling in the discovery of uncharted territory and representing the journey as a *return* to a lost legacy, a place where the travelers find a fragment of their own history lodged in the midst of a native population that has usually forgotten the calculation.”<sup>3</sup>

Which brings us back to the importance of the disjuncture Quartermain insists upon. He does not like violence, yet he has, by his own admission, been the source of a great deal of it over the course of his life. It seems to me that we would normally describe such breaks with reality as pathological, a term I will have occasion to revisit a bit later. But crucially, neither Quartermain nor his white audience, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and probably not much in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, would describe him as being pathological. How is it, then, that one person could exhibit such contradictions between taste, actions, and value judgments and do so while expressing and being accepted by the audience as both sincere and honest? Most of what I have left to say in this section has to do with Quartermain’s relationship to his own narrative.

Recall that I began this section by saying that Alan Quartermain has a story he likes to tell about himself. You will see now that I chose this language intentionally. Haggard was recognized as a skilled genre writer and the opening passages of *King Solomon’s Mine* in fact take place after the events of the novel so that what follows in the book is a retrospective. Importantly, then, Quartermain introduces himself to us after there is even more evidence of the quality of his character as measured by his actions. You will be unsurprised to learn that in the course of the book, Quartermain indeed embarks on more killing and pillaging. But that is *my* language. Quartermain never describes himself or his co-participants in the novel’s adventure as murderers or plunderers. Thus, these opening passages give us something crucial – a narrative that serves as a frame by which we are meant to measure the man. The late

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<sup>3</sup> John Reider. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. (Wesleyan University Press: Middle,

Nelson Goodman gives us a handle on Quartermain's relationship to his self-description in his *Ways of Worldmaking*, and I want to note that the passage I cite comes from a section tellingly titled, "Versions and Visions." Here is what Goodman has to say: "Frames of reference...seem to belong less to what is described than to systems of description."<sup>4</sup> Yes, just so.

A frame of reference is an analytic structure that sets the bounds of possible observational interpretation by imposing a vocabulary, often ethical in nature, as well as setting the expectations for the range of appropriate responses. For example, let's suppose I am very well-off, my frame of reference will likely be bourgeois capitalist so when I say, well, I suppose \$50,000 isn't so much money in the long term, I am assigning to a certain amount of money the abstract valuation that it isn't a great quantity of money and in doing so the expected range of response for that frame of reference is: no, that isn't much money at all. If a frame of reference imposes a vocabulary, a system of description nurtures it; it provides the well of patterned locutions that are most sensible in the frame of reference. Though the example might seem a small one, the phrase "isn't much money at all" is highly unlikely to get spoken sincerely by low-income earners; I certainly never used it in my much poorer days, unless my intent was to seem better off than I was. But that is the point, is it not? – to use a story to locate myself and others within a particular scheme of material and status significance. In my case, the dissembling approximated privilege because I lacked it; in Quartermain's case he *persistently* and unreflectively deploys his frame of reference sincerely and fully expects its uptake. He is a violent man with a distaste for violence – and this violent man's quest is to explore a land in which he has no business but in which he will spill blood while claiming himself a gentleman. That is white terrorism, not gentlemanly behavior.

I want to pivot now, to the frame of reference Quartermain means to assume on our behalf in regards to the blacks he deals with in the book. For that, we should learn a bit more about the story.

Quartermain is a hunter and guide who is familiar with the fictional country, Kukuanaland. He gets involved with an expedition when two other white Europeans approach him to look for the lost brother of one them, Sir Henry. The clues which they possess send them

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<sup>4</sup> Nelson Goodman. *Ways of Worldmaking*. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), p. 2.

into a portion of Kukuanaaland that is known in mythology but from which no one has ever returned (so already, our white protagonists are being set up as mystically accomplishing the impossible, though, again, they have no business or relation with the land). In preparation for the journey he contracts with a mysterious African named Umbopa. Umbopa on more than one occasion irks Quartermain – the former is prone to cryptic speech and aloofness and the occasional sour mood; the latter is accustomed to the kind of immediate socially prostrate behavior displayed toward him and his colleagues by every other African. For a dose of the usual condescension expressed in the text: “He was a cheerful savage was Umbopa, in a dignified sort of a way...We had all got very fond of him.”<sup>5</sup> But there is a twist. After much hardship and nearly dying, the entourage ‘discovers’ the lost land from which no one else has ever returned. The land is ruled by King Twala who seized power from his brother after his brother’s son was banished and presumed dead, leaving Twala the uncontested ruler of his people. To no reader’s surprise, it turns out Umbopa – the dignified, cheerful savage – is the long-lost son and has happened to return to his own land by way of the white men in his entourage. So, it is the white men who make Umbopa’s destiny possible.

The generous retort would be that Haggard means to make the white men targets of reverse exploitation. But such generosity is not rewarded by Haggard. When it comes time in the narrative for the civil war that will place Umbopa on the throne, as his birthright, it turns out Quartermain and his associates continue to exert an undue amount of influence over the course of events. For example, there is a moment when it must be proven that Umbopa is indeed the prodigal son of legend. Though he bears the proper mark of a snake tattoo around his waist, it remains the responsibility of the white men to vouchsafe his claim thus they promise to perform a great act of magic – they will make the sun disappear at a very specific time on the following day. Of course, no power is involved except the possession of a solar calendar that predicts a full eclipse the next day. At a later point when making strategic arrangements for the final segment of the battle, again, though Umbopa is the rightful king of a great tribe of warriors numbering in the thousands, the legitimacy of his ability rests upon the ability of his white interlocutors: “Nay my father...do thou speak, and let me, who am but a

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<sup>5</sup> Haggard, *Mines*. p. 39.

child in wisdom beside thee, harken to thy words.”<sup>6</sup> Even a mighty warrior king is subservient to an outsider, timid white man.

Haggard’s story, then, means to fully subscribe to a particular vision (and version) of whites’ place in the world. In this vision, even foreign lands must submit to the will of white curiosity and greed; even ‘lost’ peoples intuitively recognize the superior abilities of white men. This pliability of the outside world, it turns out, is precisely what provides the fodder for Quartermain’s pathology. It is only in a world in which reality so readily bends to your own frame of reference that one’s frame of reference can float so freely from objectively valid descriptions of one’s character – one cannot dislike violence while at the same time being perfectly willing to kill men; one cannot so sincerely claim self-defence when one is in fact trespassing on lands and riches he has no business interfering with. The lost race genre, as exemplified by Haggard’s ‘classic’ makes apparent a certain kind of phenomenological disposition: the world is a properly ordered when it mirrors the self-conception of whites. And for centuries, whites had little reason to think the world in fact was not meant for their dominion – if it ever did disagree, they declared war and made sure that was the end of the conversation. But now we fast forward to 21<sup>st</sup> century, and while whites continue to be radically well-positioned beneficiaries of the history of global white supremacy, cracks have indeed begun to show in what was previously assumed an unassailable edifice. And, it turns out, once whites are faced with a reality that no longer comports to their preferred frame of reference, a whole new pathology sets in – the desire to re-impose a story that quite literally seeks to turn back the hands of time.

2. Public conversations by definition seek to make salient competing points of view that ultimately inform opinions and norms. Since the rise of slave abolitionism, and, more proximately, since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Civil Rights Movement, a major public conversation has centered on the moral bankrupt-ness of racism and white supremacy. To be sure, despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other laws, racism has remained alive. But there were signs it wasn’t always well. While systemic racial inequality has remained a plain empirical

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

fact of American society, it has also remained true that certain modes of racist behavior have been pushed to the margins and that, despite the exceptionalist nature of such successes, many black and brown Americans have risen to great success and have become everything from president to culture-makers. It is fair to say that there has been more change than progress with respect to race in America, but that is not also to deny that there has been no progress at all. Enough has been made to offer a hope of a redeemed America, but not enough to suggest our redemption is certain. And in that space between hope and doubt has remained a wedge upon which white Americans have begun to express their resentments at having lost their nation to line-cutters and ingrates, to blacks and Latinos.

One of the black Americans to have caused the most resentment among whites has without a doubt been Barack Obama. A phenotypically black man of Kenyan ancestry whose middle name is Hussein, thus raising in the numb minds of the lazy and stupid, the specter of radical Islam, Obama faced eight years of being doubted not only in his capacity for policy-making by the conservative right, but also in his legitimacy to be president. Among those leading the charge to cast an unfavorable light on Obama, Donald Trump relentlessly led a campaign insisting that Obama was not even a born American. Thus the birther movement came alive, the sole aim of which was to put forth a story – that word again – that Obama was a dangerous outsider with unprecedented power and access to the levers of American fortune and influence. But just because something is a story doesn't mean that it will get taken up. Some stories ask too much of their listeners. For example, a story about a foreigner who somehow made it through various elite educational institutions, then Chicago's state senate, then the United States senate, and finally, the office of the presidency asked Americans to believe what could only amount to either the greatest hoax in America on Obama's part, or, more likely, the crackpot sentiments of racist paranoiacs. The birther story did get more play than is reasonable, but rationality prevailed, helped, as always, with the provision of basic evidence, this time in the form of a birth certificate.

However, being the implacable bully he is, Trump smelled racial blood in the democratic waters. It was on November 7, 2012, the day after Barack Obama defeated Mitt Romney in the presidential election, that Trump first officially used as his slogan "make America great again."

Though Obama had managed to navigate America through one of its worst financial crises in history and achieved other smaller yet significant successes, Trump had a story to tell – there was a time before this black man was in power that we should reach toward as being a much better time; this black man, who even if he really is an American, does not belong. This story stuck, as Trump rode it all the way to his own presidential victory four years later. Trump’s story is that of an imagined nation of white property owning men, and as Benedict Anderson, the most authoritative voice in the academy on the sociology of nationhood, tells us: “The fact of the matter is that nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history. Niggers are, thanks to the invisible tar-brush, forever niggers[.]”<sup>7</sup> Enter the crypto-supremacist nationalistic president who wasted no time installing similarly racially riled figures in his administration.

It is at this point that we see the reversal of the lost race narrative. Whereas the 19<sup>th</sup> century instances of these narratives were concerned with the imperialistic virility of white men in foreign lands, the 21<sup>st</sup> century Trump version is concerned about the recapture of white male nationalistic virility against the forces of racial egalitarianism and cosmopolitanism. Where once the white man stood supreme in all things social, economic, and political, the rise of urban culture, black wealth (truncated as it is), and a black president against the backdrop of the fight over affirmative action and voting rights, has shown the assumption of white supremacy to be not only a biological lie but also socio-politically vulnerable. And this story has stuck. And we, as academics, know it has stuck because it has done that magical thing that signals the arrival of all real conversations – given rise to a literature I am choosing to call ‘white frustration studies’. In these studies, well-meaning and earnest white liberals sojourn to the rough and hard-scrabbled lands of white rural poverty to learn just what it is that they think they’ve lost in America over the past 50 years. And, to no one’s surprise, the complaints, while proffering explanations of economic anxiety, invariably center on the loss of something much more important to these individuals: white status.

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<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*: (New York: Verso, 2006) [Kindle Edition] p. 152.

The leading example in this newly emergent literature is Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers In Their Own Land*. Arlie Hochschild writes (on behalf) of her Southern poor white subjects: "If the civil rights movement and the women's movement had pointed the finger of blame at the entitled white male, maybe it was time for people to see white men as victims, too, to be heard, honored, and put – or left – ahead in line."<sup>8</sup> Hochschild's book is an attempt to take seriously the recently popular view that Trump's victory, which dropped all pretensions to racial and gender civility, depended on a surge of white disaffection. The claimed reason many commentators sought to impose on this frustration was that elites and capitalism had left rural whites completely behind. This itself was then used to soften the next acknowledgment – racism might very well be expressed at each and every Trump rally, but if so, it was an outgrowth of this economic exclusion and the perception that blacks and other groups that had in fact legitimately suffered under white male supremacy were now cutting in line through affirmative action, the welfare state, and any other expression of state decency and compassion. In fact this is what Hochschild identifies as a deep story (yet, again, that word): "A deep story is a *feels-as-if* story – it's the story feeling tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact."<sup>9</sup> Any story might remove fact; doing so is what can make stories fun. But notice two things here. This is a *deep* story – it doesn't remove judgment; rather, it removes *rational* judgment by removing facts. This story becomes a problem because it is the kind of story that got black protestors punched at Trump rallies. A story without facts is just a story. A story without facts that informs actions, especially violent action is pathology. Just as with Quartermain, the simultaneous view of innocence while perpetrating violence is not reasonable, it is not responsible. It is the continuation of pernicious bias through perverse means.

One might possibly respond to my claims that whether or not the deep story of poor whites is sensitive to all facts, it is nevertheless grounded in some facts, such as the poverty that is part of much of Southern living. Hochschild herself is a conduit for this view: "[Older

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<sup>8</sup> Arlie Hochschild. *Strangers In Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016), p. 212. [emphasis in original]

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

white men] were beginning to *feel* like victims. Others has moved forward....but they had suffered from wage cuts, the dream trap..."<sup>10</sup> What we are meant to sympathize with here is the testimony that rural whites (and by sociological extension, all non-elite whites) have been losers in a system in which they expect a fair shot at winning. But it seems to me a lot depends on what one takes the prize to be. For example, if you're a black youth at high risk of being shot by the police without justice later being served to your family, you might very think that the prize in America is simply basic safety. After all, the constitution does not guarantee material well-being – it guarantees life and liberty, so now who's winning and who's losing? When we further consider that our history of material inequality and mortal endangerment depends on a concurrent history of white enrichment quite literally on the backs of black Americans, one wonders about the audacity of limited scope utilized by whites in these stories of reverse marginalization. Moreover, they seem to conveniently overlook the wages of whiteness extend far beyond wealth – they extend into national privilege. So now they have less money than they want, and less prestige than they feel entitled to but their position has depended on the Quartermain-like pillaging, plundering, and murdering done in their name. It brings to mind a recent Dave Chappelle joke: you were in on the heist; you just don't like your cut.<sup>11</sup>

We have then, in this narrative offered by Trump and tacitly legitimized by Hochschild, a true reversal of the lost race narrative. Where once white men went to exotic lands to exert their virility, here in 'their own land' they are in search of a whiteness that has been lost to the winds of progressive time. Though whites still categorically do better than blacks in nearly every measure of well-being, this is not enough. A kind of unquestionable supremacy has been lost and to make America great again is to reinstate it, and this time for good. At least, that's how the story goes.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>11</sup> Dave Chappelle. *The Age of Spin*. 2017

## PART II – THE POWER OF BLACK STORIES

The basic role of political theory is to organize ideas and arguments in such a way to shed light on various social and political puzzles. I have suggested in this paper that one puzzle worth thinking about is the recent pivot towards a narrative in which whites are the disaffected and victimized; that black and brown Americans have moved ahead in ‘the line’ pushing whites, especially poorer whites farther back in the line. I have further suggested that this story is one captured in Donald Trump’s electorally winning slogan “make America great again”; and, finally, that this pivot can be mapped as a reversal of a classic genre – the lost race narrative. Except that rather than whites being assumptively triumphant in foreign lands, now, they are losers and strangers in their own land; and one supposes, especially following the tone of the 2016 presidential election season, that victory requires the reacquisition of classical whiteness. What, then, can we as political thinkers say about this? Insofar as stories set national ethical agendas – and who can doubt that? – this one is a dangerous story and we must read it correctly.

In these closing paragraphs I want to explore a critical work of black fiction that can offer insight into a source of black anxiety over the idea of whites making America great again. To be clear, I don’t offer what follows as complete or comprehensive. Rather, look upon it as, hopefully, an interesting way to deploy a new resource for critical social inquiry. Here, I mean to turn to Afrofuturism widely construed by focusing for a moment on Matt Ruff’s *Lovecraft Country*.

To begin, it is significant to explain that the book is a critical engagement with two types of things. H. P. Lovecraft was by all accounts an explicit and virulent racist, whose racism found its way into much of his fiction. Moreover, the Cthullu mythos itself is one in which a great reckoning will come for all of civilization, when the Old Gods will in effect reset life on earth. The mythos was one white man’s dream of an amoral world where only the necessity for a lost race of gods to express supremacy mattered. And this particular white man, was a racist, yet his mythos is part of the canon of not only great American horror but great American fiction – I

knew of Lovecraft before I really knew of Langston Hughes in my youth. The other type of thing that Ruff is responding to is the place of the black body in whites' quest for supremacy. Ruff's take on this problem, though introduces an important twist in the story.

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jim Crow still governs America's social landscape. Atticus Turner returns from military service in 1954 to a nation in which there are sundown towns enforced by the police. Atticus travels to Chicago upon receiving a cryptic note from his father, Montrose, who had been obsessed with family genealogy and was persistently irate with his late wife who had an incomplete knowledge of her family background and didn't care to know it. The note reveals that the father has found an important clue in the mystery and has gone to Ardham, Massachusetts, a place known to the sci-fi loving Atticus as Lovecraft Country – given the area's relation to the Cthullu mythos in Lovecraft's work. Atticus, with his uncle and a family friend, make the road trip to Ardham and find themselves the guest of Samuel Braithwaite, who turns out to be the leader of a natural philosophy secret society that has taken the teachings of Lovecraft as doctrine and seek to practice magic as natural philosophy in order to call forth the old gods.

A few very important things to note about what is happening in the story. First, there is the idea that a white man can control forces beyond his control through the mastery of knowledge. Here Ruff cleverly collapses the enlightenment ideal with mysticism to lay waste to the underlying arrogance of natural mastery. Second, it turns out that Atticus's father was tricked into going to Ardham. Why? Atticus's mother's family line ties back to the Braithwaites's in the time of slavery (as a matter of fact, the relative was the only survivor of the last attempt at conjuration when it went lethally wrong); and it turns out Atticus's blood makes him arcane royalty – literally, his blood is needed to fulfill Braithwaite's agenda. Notice their exchange upon first meeting:

““So, Mister Turner, you want to know what you're doing here?”  
Atticus nodded. “I guess it's not to share in the family fortune.”  
“No,” Samuel Braithwaite said. “You *are* the family fortune.””<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Matt Ruff. *Lovecraft Country* (New York: Harper, 2016), p. 83-4.

This admission has two implications. One obvious, the other not so much and as much a possible remedy to the reversed lost race narrative as it is potentially distressing.

The first implication is one with which are all familiar. Any claims whites make to supremacy, and attempts to secure supremacy, have and always have depended on the participation of blacks. There is no white supremacy without black oppression; there is no white wealth, material or symbolic, without black poverty. In essence, every black person *is* the white family fortune. The second implication is less apparent, but it is there. Ruff's narrative brilliance relies on the way history binds people in ways that cannot be undone. Atticus can desire all he wants to be done with Braithwaite but his captor is correct that Atticus is related to the family line through a former slaver, thus history, rape, and pillage binds them. And Braithwaite would like to be done with Atticus but he can't. Here is his double bind, and by way of his double bind, that of white Americans generally: "The problem is that you're two very different things at once. On the one hand, you're the avatar of Titus Braithwaite, the closest thing to him still walking on this earth....But at the same time, yes, you're Turner, the Negro. And *that* I have no particular respect for."<sup>13</sup> Braithwaite cannot eliminate or expel Atticus no matter what he wishes.

Thus, Ruff has something to say about the ways in which blacks' and whites' history binds them for the future. That revelation is not especially novel. However, Ruff does make one contribution that speaks directly to the problem of the reversal of the lost race narrative. To the extent that the reversed narrative seeks the re-imposition of white male virility in a bid to bring proper order to American society, Ruff seems to be suggesting that whites need to be as clear eyed as Braithwaite – they must acknowledge that blacks *are* the family fortune – there is no white well-being without blacks. Now, maybe you think this is unsatisfactory since at most it only seems to underwrite that whites acknowledge black exploitation as crucial, and surely many whites could be fine with that. But I am not done with the story.

Atticus agrees to donate his body and blood to Braithwaite's conjuring of the Old Gods – he does this to save his own father's life. But Braithwaite's younger son, Caleb, who seems to have a slightly more tolerant social stance as well as his own scheme of power to pursue, slips

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

to Atticus an incantation that will reverse the murder that is about to claim Atticus's life – the incantation provokes the Old Gods to annihilate Braithwaite and his co-conspirators leaving Atticus untouched. In this moment, a new generation of white Americans sees no profit in sacrificing black life. Now, I can't support the claim that Atticus is saved out of an egalitarian impulse. Rather, Caleb does perceive that his father's insistence on returning to the past can only bring the kind of ruin that almost eliminated the family line once before. Atticus's end of the equation is more complex. He was willing to make the sacrifice for his family – for his father; but doing so required him becoming complicit with another part of his family. He was a man split in two, a color line if there ever was one. It seems to me significant that Atticus is not the hero of the story in the typical way stories have heroes. His bravery is in coming to peace with what seems an impossible situation and doing it with dignity. And in this I think is a negative lesson offered by Ruff, the kind of thing we as political thinkers can suss out but that Ruff's statement of it would ruin his novel. But I can say it, and we should hear it: there can be no reliance on whites' sense of the past or future to secure black flourishing and safety. Caleb sees the past as bringing ruin but his idea of the future is angled towards dominance by other means – he spares Atticus to be made vulnerable another day. Insofar as democracy is anything like family – ties that are inextricably bound by history – those concerned with racial justice will have to think not only about reparation or redistribution. More radically, and I admit, maybe impossibly, we will have to think, if we follow Ruff and the problem of the reversed lost race narrative seriously, how we can break history. Many have thought that those who forget history embark on a journey of ignorance that is bad for democracy. The reasons for making that case are abundant. But if we are in an era when whites are looking to reach back into history to reclaim greatness, and that history is one in which blacks have even less power than now, well, I rather not find myself in the midst of a new ritual conjuring the old gods of Jim Crow. And I'd also rather not utter the incantation that annihilates those who would put me at great risk. I don't think it has to be us vs. them. But it might have to be the future vs. the past, and we, the living, only experience time in one inexorable direction – tomorrow.

- Pathological quest for forgiveness and absolution (for safety)
  - o Anatomy of different types of pathology
- Nietzsche on history/remembering
- Patternmaker series (re: breaking history) & NK Jemison (the 5<sup>th</sup> season)
- Marisa Parham (chapter on Butler and the loss of Dana's arm)
- Fanon on pathology (BSWM)
- Not breaking history – but breaking *the hold* history has on us
- Toni Morrison - *A Mercy*
- Orlando Patterson – “Towards A Future That Has No Past”
- The relationship between the quest for domination and the idea of vulnerability