Authenticity and the Gothic in Paul La Farge's *The Night Ocean*

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Paul La Farge's novel *The Night Ocean* (2017), published in the year following Donald Trump's election, engages with the ideas of truth and authenticity through one of the characters, L. C. Spinks, who, to borrow the words of a White House aide during the Bush administration, 'creates his own realities' through a fraudulent cocktail of historical facts and his own imagination, the outcome of which is misleading and damaging.[1] *The Night Ocean* counters Lucas Townsend's claim in a discussion of H. P. Lovecraft's legacy that 'post-truth' instead of 'post-postmodernism' or 'metamodernism' may be the most accurate sobriquet to describe the contemporary. In particular, he highlights 'the twenty-first century cultural movement's noticeable absence of empirical (or "true") points of reference in the creation of "convincingly true" – but objectively false – narratives by mass media producers, political leaders, and celebrity figures'.[2] He continues: 'The twenty-first century feels like a Baudrillardian simulation [...] in which the origins of a "proven" fact and the research to support it are instead based upon simulacra – the replacement of the actual objects of study with decidedly unreal and distorted versions of themselves'.[3] Townsend's observations are astute as 'post-truth' became a commonplace term shortly after Trump's election, when his representatives boldly and publicly proposed the concept of 'alternative facts', bizarre versions of historical events that have nothing to do with fact. One famous example of this is Kellyanne Conway insisting in an NBC interview on the 'alternative fact' that the size of the crowd during Trump's inauguration was indeed the largest in history, an assertion 'utterly false and easily disprovable'.[4] As Grant Kien observes, 'America is clearly living in a "post-truth" world' where truth is malleable and counterfactual, and historical narratives can be challenged, often in strange ways.[5]

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[1] Timothy Noah, 'How the Bush White House Synthesizes Reality', *Slate*, 22 October 2004 <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2004/10/how-the-bush-white-house-synthesizes-reality.html> [accessed 18 January 2024].
[2] Lucas Townsend, 'Reading Lovecraft in an Era of Post-Truth', *Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies*, 8.1 (2021), 91-103 (p. 92).
[3] Townsend, 'Reading Lovecraft', p. 92.
[4] Aaron Blake, 'Kellyanne Conway's Legacy: The 'Alternative Facts'-ification of the GOP', *The Washington Post*, 24 August 2020 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/08/24/kellyanne-conways-legacy-alternative-facts-ification-gop/> [accessed 18 January 2024].
[5] Richard Hand and Danielle Hancock, 'Beware the Untruths: Podcast Audio Horror in Post-Truth America', in *Make America Hate Again: Trump-Era Horror and the Politics of Fear*, ed. by Victoria McCollum (Taylor & Francis, 2019), pp. 165-74 (p. 165).

According to Amina Hussain, '[p]ost-truth today as it exist [*sic*], is an extreme manipulation of the fertile grounds laid by postmodern theories'.[6] Instead of arguing that the 'post' in 'post-truth' implies 'that we are past the era of truth', she refers to the 'prevalent marginalisation and trivialisation of truth'.[7] Post-truth is one of the most damaging legacies left behind by the now-historicised postmodernism, notorious for problematising truth and reality. Similar to post-truth, postmodern history examines how the historian's prejudices and decisions shape the 'facts' or the 'narrativization' of the past, as Hayden White puts it. From a postmodern perspective, he argues that facts contain no meaning in themselves; rather, it is the historian who bestows meaning through the 'narrativization' of the past, and this process is subject to the historian's own biases in choosing which facts to include in the historical record, indicating that history is not the narrative of a singular truth but of multiple truths.[8] While such a (re)imagining establishes history and historiography as 'an open or organic system,[9] there is also the risk or the possibility that the historian may, in his interpretation of 'facts', impose his own impressions. Consequently, he may come off as 'disrespectful'.[10]

Countering these postmodern mediations of the underlying narrative structures of historiography, Ihab Hassan affirms, '[h]istory, too, requires our tact, our respect'.[11] Unfortunately, post-truth politicians like Trump often lack this tact and respect, creating a destabilising reality. Post-truth is a disturbing exposition of how postmodernism, to use a gothic expression, thins the veil between reality and imagination. Indeed, post-truth, as a defining characteristic of Trump's presidency, epitomises postmodernism's 'gothic underside'.[12] That postmodernism would harmoniously intersect with the gothic seems only natural as both categories challenge authoritative versions of history and reality, in effect destabilizing the 'real' as we know it. In fact, one criticism Fredric Jameson had was that postmodernism championed a 'historical deafness', where history had lost its significance and was now only

[6] Amina Hussain, 'Theorising Post-Truth: A Postmodern Phenomenon', *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, 42 (2019), pp. 150-62 (p. 150).
[7] Hussain, 'Theorising Post-Truth', p. 151.
[8] Hayden White, 'The Historical Artifact as a Literary Text', in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (John Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 81-100 (pp. 83-84).
[9] Mehdi Ghassemi, 'Revisiting History in Hayden White's Philosophy', in *SAGE Open*, 4.3 (2014), pp. 1-7 (p. 3), doi:10.1177/2158244014542585.
[10] White, 'The Historical Artifact', p. 54.
[11] Ihab Hassan, 'Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust', in *Modern Greek Studies*, 11 (2003), pp. 303-16 (p. 305).
[12] Martin Fradley and John A. Riley, '"I Don't Understand How This Keeps Happening ... Over and Over Again': Trumpism, Uncanny Repetition, and *Twin Peaks: The Return*', in *Make America Hate Again*, pp. 195-210 (p. 196).

something to be consumed for entertainment.[13] This 'weakening historicity' and 'new depthlessness', terms that have since been used to define postmodernism, can also equally describe the gothic. As the late Allan Lloyd Smith observes, both the gothic and postmodern fiction are 'a playful admixture of inaccurate histories' with little regard for authenticity.[14] In particular, Catherine Spooner notes that the gothic 'has always been […] especially [about] fake history'.[15]

In interrogating the authoritative natures of established historiography, both the gothic and postmodernism expose '[t]he construction of fake histories', very much akin to alternative facts.[16] The gothic and the postmodern collapse the real and the fictional, the known and the unknown. In fact, many of the prime examples of historiographic metafiction have essential gothic elements. K. Kannan Prasad and G. Baskaran describe Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) as bearing the 'postmodern characteristic of a gothic text which questions everything [...] held as truth'.[17] Ashleigh Prosser argues that Peter Ackroyd's *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993), a postmodern text, is 'a Gothic narrative of uncanny returns in which the spectres of the past are returned to the present',[18] subverting 'historical reality'.[19] In the same way, the gothic disrupts secure boundaries between the certain and uncertain; it 'exploits the audience's desire for the real, while simultaneously providing very little solid information'.[20] By 'question[ing] its own veracity', Julia Round notes, the gothic 'interrogat[es] the nature of fact and fiction'.[21]

It can be argued that post-truth implicitly serves the same function in the twenty-first century, as it ironically creates an illusion of authenticity. Sam Browse argues that 'post-truth' rose from postmodern depthlessness and calls it 'mimetic authenticity', which is 'constructed' or 'performed', and the speaker's personal details are used for material advantages.[22] In other

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[13] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991) p. xi.
[14] Allan Lloyd-Smith, 'Postmodernism/Gothicism', in *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, ed. by Allan Lloyd Smith and Victor Sage (Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 6-19 (pp. 10-11).
[15] Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 28.
[16] Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic*, p. 38.
[17] K. Kannan Prasad and G. Baskaran, 'Gothic Elements in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*', *Language in India*, 13 (2013), pp. 485-95 (p. 493).
[18] Ashleigh Prosser, 'No Place Like Home: The Chronotope of the Haunted House in Peter Ackroyd's *The House of Doctor Dee*', *Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies*, 2 (2015), pp. 1-19 (p. 2).
[19] Prosser, 'No Place Like Home', p. 3.
[20] Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic*, pp. 40-41.
[21] Julia Round, 'Gothic and the Graphic Novel', in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), pp. 335-49 (p. 342).
[22] Sam Browse, 'Between Truth, Sincerity, and Satire: Post-Truth Politics and the Rhetoric of Authenticity', in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, ed. by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 167-81 (p. 171).

words, it is an act. These details are 'fabrication[s]' and 'complete opposite[s] of the truth'.[23] The speakers' own beliefs influence the 'truthiness' of their statements, annexing 'an explicitly moral dimension to' the 'negation of reality'.[24] What follows is 'dissatisfaction and impatience with the skin-deep performances of sincerity and authenticity', and 'a surface ringing hollow'.[25]

Ironically, as Browse continues, post-truth leaders, despite their 'fake news' and 'alternative facts', are popular because they are seemingly 'plain-speaking, gutsy and authentic', which shows a 'hunger' for 'reality', to borrow from David Shields, in our culture.[26] Browse goes on to use the example of Jeremy Corbyn, the former British Labour Party leader who rose to prominence during the same time as Trump, arguing that post-truth has shifted from the postmodern mimetic authenticity to the more recent depth-bearing 'curated authenticity'.[27] Curated authenticity is markedly altruistic and has to do with genuine conviction in the ideals one is upholding. It 'is about presenting and empathising with the "real" experiences of others'.[28] Curated authenticity, as exemplified by Corbyn, endorses objective reality over subjective perceptions, unlike post-truth.

Indeed, the loosening of postmodernism's grasp at the advent of the twenty-first century saw a return of authenticity, realism, and historicism, as a number of cultural and literary scholars have observed. Linda Hutcheon herself admitted that postmodernism was 'over' and that '[p]ost-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it and name it for the twenty-first century'.[29] Rising to the challenge, Dutch theorists Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen suggested the term 'metamodern' to describe the twenty-first century's 'dominant cultural logic'.[30] Metamodernism, they argue, is characterised by 'a kind of informed naivety' or 'a pragmatic idealism'.[31] As they continue, metamodernism 'oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity'.[32] In an article

[23] Browse, 'Between Truth, Sincerity, and Satire', p. 175.
[24] Browse, p. 174.
[25] Browse, p. 176.
[26] Browse, p. 168. See David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (Penguin Books, 2011).
[27] Browse, p. 168.
[28] Browse, pp. 178-179.
[29] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (Routledge, 2002), p. 181.
[30] Van den Akker and Vermeulen, 'Periodising the 2000s, or the Emergence of Metamodernism', in *Metamodernism*, pp. 1-19 (p. 4).
[31] Vermeulen and van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 2 (2010), pp. 1-14 (p. 5).
[32] Vermeulen and van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', pp. 5-6.

co-authored with Alison Gibbons, Vermeulen and van den Akker posit that '[m]etamodernist texts […] produce a "reality effect" […] and ironically they create this effect by using many of the same postmodern devices', allowing for what they call 'depthiness', which counters postmodernism's lack of centre.[33]

If postmodernism is indeed de-centred, then La Farge conversely emphasises the need for a centre and for historical depth in *The Night Ocean*.[34] He achieves this by using a frame structure. Traditionally frame structures in postmodern and gothic literature such as Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and Henry James' *Turn of the Screw* (1898) subtly remind readers that they are reading a piece of fiction. As Marshall Brown points out, frames can play havoc with any 'real experience' of history, since they impose a distance between the reader and the past.[35] La Farge himself admits a partiality towards the frame structure and gothic narrative techniques.[36] Conversely, instead of problematising truth and reality – and specifically historicity – La Farge uses what can be called 'anchors' in the extratextual world to prioritise historical verisimilitude. For instance, as I explore over the course of this essay, La Farge refers to the World Wars and McCarthyism several times. These 'anchors' remind readers that they are reading a novel about real people and that there is a historical basis for events in the narrative. As such, I argue that it would be incorrect to read *The Night Ocean* as a postmodern text, as does Matthias Regan, and I believe that it should instead be understood as a metamodernist text.[37]

La Farge never uses the term 'metamodernism' explicitly, but his preoccupation with authenticity identifies him as a metamodernist writer. In the last two decades, La Farge has written a number of historical books such as *Haussmann, or the Distinction* (2002) and *The Facts of Winter* (2011); despite the historical settings and intensive research that went into these novels, they were far from being historically accurate or authentic. For instance, the titular character of *Haussmann* is based on Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809-91), who is credited with the construction of modern Paris. However, his love interest, Madeleine, is completely fictional. Even the blurb of the novel's Macmillan edition states that it is 'steeped in history [though] not bound by facts'. Meanwhile, *The Facts of Winter* is a translation of surreal poems

[33] Gibbons and others, 'Reality Beckons: Metamodernist Depthiness Beyond Panfictionality', *European Journal of English Studies* 23 (2019), pp. 172-89 (p. 174).
[34] Richard Hand and Danielle Hancock, 'Beware the Untruths: Podcast Audio Horror in Post-Truth America', in *Make America Hate Again*, pp. 165-74 (p. 174).
[35] Marshall Brown, *The Gothic Text* (Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 110.
[36] '"I Think We're Going to Need Some Scary Monsters": An Interview with Picador Professor Paul La Farge', *Aspeers*, 10 (2017) <http://www.aspeers.com/sites/default/files/pdf/AV.pdf> [accessed 4 July 2022].
[37] Matthias Regan, 'Weird Fiction Review #4: *The Night Ocean*', *Matthiasregan.org* <https://matthiasregan.org/tag/the-night-ocean/> [accessed 18 January 2024].

by Paul Poissel, a little-known French poet. The book's blurb states that 'it is a fictional account of the imaginary loves of people who may or may not be real'. La Farge concedes to the historical inaccuracy and ambiguity of these texts and distinguishes them from *The Night Ocean*, in which 'historical accuracy, even in the smallest details, or maybe especially in them, *is* important because the book is trying to create a feeling of authenticity, and it's also about authenticity […] so I had a real urge to get things as right as I could'.[38]

At the heart of *The Night Ocean*'s plot is a preoccupation with the ambiguous relationship between Lovecraft and his much-younger protégé Robert Barlow, posing the question of whether they were lovers or just friends. The issue is potentially sensational, but La Farge handles the matter with tact and objectivity, as I demonstrate over the course of this essay. The frame narrative, focusing on the main character Marina Willet, encloses a series of nested narratives, creating a chain of transmission where she, a psychiatrist, begins by talking about her husband Charlie, who is suspected of having committed suicide after escaping from a mental hospital. Embedded in her frame is Charlie's narrative, which reveals how he became obsessed with the Lovecraft/Barlow connection. His interest is further piqued when he discovers a forgotten book called the *Erotonomicon*, a proven forgery by an unknown author named L. C. Spinks, whose narrative is embedded in Charlie's. Spinks' narratives are presented as transcripts of audio interviews, wherein he falsely claims to be the deceased Barlow (he, as Barlow, claims to have faked his own death), having had a clandestine romantic relationship with Lovecraft.

A superficial consideration of the chain of narration appears to encourage analyses predicated on postmodernism. Reviewers such as Matthew Keeley,[39] Amy Brady,[40] and John Copenhaver[41] believe that the chain demonstrates postmodern infinite regression or *mise en abŷme*. The chain of transmission can be understood in the following visual representation:

Marina → Charlie → Spinks → Lovecraft

[38] Eric Farwell, 'An Interview with Paul La Farge', 27 June 2017, *TriQuarterly* <https://triquarterly.lb.mtiapp.northwestern.edu/interviews/interview-paul-la-farge> [accessed 12 July 2024], emphasis in original.
[39] Matthew Keeley, 'The Depths of Paul La Farge's *The Night Ocean*', 24 March 2017, *Reactor* <https://reactormag.com/book-reviews-paul-la-farges-the-night-ocean/> [accessed 31 August 2024].
[40] Amy Brady, '"The Night Ocean" Brings Lovecraft Back From The Dead', 8 March 2017, *Chicago Review of Books* <https://chireviewofbooks.com/2017/03/08/the-night-ocean-brings-lovecraft-back-from-the-dead/> [accessed 31 August 2024].
[41] John Copenhaver, '*The Night Ocean* Excavates One Man's Obsession With H. P. Lovecraft', 3 August 2017, *Lambda Literary* <https://lambdaliterary.org/2017/08/the-night-ocean-by-paul-la-farge/> [accessed 31 August 2024].

If Marina represents an initial certainty about history, she paradoxically finds herself 'los[ing] her rational distance from the events'[42] as her encompassing frame moves further away from those of Charlie, Spinks, and finally Lovecraft, who, as this essay demonstrates, represents a complete dissolution of history. However, a reversal of the chain of narration emphasises historical depth and authenticity:

> Lovecraft → Spinks → Charlie → Marina

Although, even in this reading, Lovecraft remains inaccessible because he is ventriloquised by Spinks, the initial historical vacuity becomes more and more real: Spinks remains a shady figure, but Charlie's motives become more comprehensible, and finally, Marina, despite never completely recovering the truth, represents a growing historical certitude.

In other words, the metamodern chain of transmission depicts a progression of historical perspectives, beginning with Lovecraft, a nihilist horror writer of the Modernist era, and then Spinks, who is like a postmodern historian narrating an (inaccurate) version of the past disguised as historical truth. Following Spinks is Charlie, who suffers from actually believing postmodern history as truth. It is through the characters of Spinks and Charlie that La Farge explores the historian's ethics and responsibilities, the problems of imagination reconstructing the past. La Farge demonstrates the negative outcomes of the imposition of the historian's own views on a past that defies understanding. I conclude the essay by discussing Marina as an antithesis to Lovecraft's nihilism, as she strives to retain her rationality to find closure and meaning in an uncertain world – and perhaps even succeeds. Through Marina's narrative that closes the story, the novel ends with the acknowledgement of depression in the failure to understand the past, but proposes hope, altruism, and being grounded in the present as a remedy for despair and despondence.

Lovecraft

> What I do know is that Charlie was planning to write a profile of Magnus, but then, one day in the summer of 2006, the two of them started talking about H. P. Lovecraft, whose stories, it turned out, they both admired: 'Who's that?' I asked. "You don't know?" Charlie said. 'Only the greatest American horror writer since Poe.'[43]

As a classic gothic writer, Lovecraft is often credited with inventing the genres of weird fiction

[42] Copenhaver, '*The Night Ocean*', n.p.
[43] Paul La Farge, *The Night Ocean* (Penguin, 2017), p. 11.

and cosmic horror, offshoots of mainstream gothic.[44] Fiction that sits within these subgenres tends to be dark and despondent, underscoring the insignificance of humanity in the grand scheme of the universe. According to Kevin Corstorphine, 'Lovecraft's own conception of horror was shaped by developments in science and culture [...]. His writing demonstrates a horror at the lack of meaning in the universe, as it is playing out the nihilism predicted by Nietzsche's madman […] as he sinks into despair'.[45] Lovecraft is best known for his Cthulhu mythos, which comprise stories that Charlie succinctly summarises in *The Night Ocean* as being 'about a universe inhabited by powerful alien beings, who feel about humanity the way a person coming home from a long trip might feel about an infestation of spiders'.[46] Lovecraft considered himself to be a literary descendent of Edgar Allen Poe.[47] Like Poe, he was not well-known 'during his lifetime',[48] but now, after his death, he is considered as one of the most noteworthy writers of the twentieth century, with his legacy manifest in a variety of fiction and other media.[49]

Creative authors have generally sidestepped writing about Lovecraft as a historical figure, instead preferring to engage with Lovecraft's literary creations. For example, Stephen King's short story 'Crouch End' (1980), which is set in the real London suburb of the same name, is explicitly positioned within Lovecraft's fictional universe, depicting the malevolent entity Shub-Niggurath, who consumes many of the human characters and drives others insane. In T. E. D. Klein's short story 'Black Man with a Horn' (1980), the anonymous protagonist discovers, to his horror, the real existence of the Tcho-Tcho tribe (which he had previously thought to be another one of Lovecraft's fictional creations), who regard the mysterious figure of a frightening black man as a harbinger of doom. The protagonist tries desperately to distance himself from this man, who repeatedly threatens him, but ultimately realises that there is no escape. An earlier novel, Colin Wilson's *The Philosopher's Stone* (1969), invokes various motifs from the Cthulhu mythos; it narrates the story of two researchers who make a horrifying discovery about the history of humanity's origins. In fact, as this example suggests, Lovecraft's

[44] Acep Hael, 'What Does "Cosmic Horror" Mean? Five Writers Weigh In', *The Lovecraft Ezine*, 13 May 2016 <https://lovecraftzine.com/2016/05/13/what-does-cosmic-horror-mean-five-horror-writers-weigh-in/> [accessed 19 January 2024].
[45] Kevin Corstorphine, 'Introduction', in *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature*, ed. by Kevin Corstorphine and Laura R. Kremmel (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1-17 (pp. 4-5).
[46] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, pp. 13-14.
[47] James Machin, 'Lovecraft, Decadence, and Aestheticism', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Clive Bloom (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 1223-37 (p. 1224).
[48] Townsend, 'Reading Lovecraft', p. 92.
[49] La Farge, 'The Complicated Friendship of H. P. Lovecraft and Robert Barlow, One of His Biggest Fans', *The New Yorker*, 9 March 2017 <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-complicated-friendship-of-h-p-lovecraft-and-robert-barlow-one-of-his-biggest-fans> [accessed 30 March 2022].

fiction itself often depicts a mysterious and terrifying past that invades the present, pushing characters to the edge of sanity.

Critics like David Punter note that Lovecraft's preoccupation with hidden histories positions the past as harbouring disturbing secrets that carry destructive implications for the present. Punter asserts that Lovecraft's writing 'hinges on an unassimilable fear of the past […] symbolised in terms of unholy aspiration after forbidden knowledge […] imaged by Lovecraft in a whole range of invented books'.[50] In a study of what she categorises as 'romances of the archive', Suzanne Keen observes that Lovecraft's protagonists are often academics who have discovered an unexpected, shocking truth after meticulous archival research, and they try to make sense of what they have learnt.[51] As Keen continues, the 'over-curious researchers' manifest an altered 'state of mind, from rationality and scepticism to horrified belief', implying that it is best to avoid stirring up the past. Indeed, Lovecraft's protagonists realise that terminating the transmission of knowledge about these entities prevents them from resurfacing.[52]

Lovecraft's novella *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1941), published posthumously, is a prominent example of the focus in his fiction on the dangers involved in digging up the past. 'A parable on the perils of research', as Marina describes it in *The Night Ocean*, the novella is a pastiche of different documentary sources such as newspaper advertisements, historical accounts, and letters.[53] *Charles Dexter Ward* is broken down into smaller sections, each with its own title, a style which La Farge adapts to both create a gothic frame story and pay homage to Lovecraft. Lovecraft's narrative is told in the third person by a psychiatrist called Dr Marinus Willet, who has become concerned with one of his patients, the eponymous Charles Dexter Ward, a young man from a respectable family.[54] Charles Ward has recently gained an unhealthy interest in one of his ancestors, Joseph Curwen, who practised black magic at the time of the American Revolution. When the townspeople realised what was going on, they executed Curwen and his fellow necromancers. Some of Curwen's papers survive, despite instructions to destroy all of them. After gaining access to these remaining documents, Charles begins to dabble in the dark arts and succeeds in resurrecting his evil ancestor. Unfortunately for Charles, he dies shortly after Curwen takes possession of his body. Dr Willet is ultimately

[50] David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: Volume 2: The Modern Gothic*, 2nd edn (Longman, 1996), p. 39.
[51] Suzanne Keen, *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 64 and p. 78.
[52] Keen, *Romances of the Archive*, p. 26.
[53] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 24.
[54] The similarity between the names Marina and Marinus is very interesting, but the novel does not acknowledge it.

able to destroy Curwen and prevent his diabolical plans. Notwithstanding Willet's success, the novella ends without any note of elation or triumph. However, as elaborated on below, the final section that La Farge adds in his novel goes beyond postmodern preoccupations as it ends on a more hopeful note.

Charles Dexter Ward is only one of the fictional works that influenced La Farge's book, the other one being a short story that Lovecraft wrote with Barlow called 'The Night Ocean' (1936), from which La Farge's novel takes its title.[55] 'The Night Ocean' tells the story of a young man holidaying alone in a seaside town when he suddenly happens upon petrifying humanoid creatures who dwell in the sea and quite possibly consume human flesh. Marina believes the story's main theme is that the sea will outlive mankind as it is eternal. The main focus of 'The Night Ocean' is the protagonist's isolation and solitude, a depiction that can be understood as reflecting Lovecraft's own solitary life. Historically, Lovecraft was an eccentric homebody, perhaps what would be called 'anti-social' today. During his lifetime, he had two important attachments. One was with his wife of two years, a Ukrainian immigrant called Sonia Greene, who would later go on to pen one of his biographies, *The Private Life of H. P. Lovecraft*, published in 1985. The other consequential relationship Lovecraft had was with Barlow, who was sixteen years his junior. Despite the notable age gap, the two formed a long-term attachment, regularly corresponded with each other, and embarked on joint literary endeavours.

Many Lovecraft fans and scholars have debated the enigmatic and ambiguous nature of their relationship. Some opine that for the younger Barlow, Lovecraft was a paternal figure, rendering theirs a platonic friendship. Others strongly believe that the two were lovers and turn to their letters and stories to support this claim. Punter notes, perhaps with a touch of irony, that while Lovecraft's anxieties pertained to race and sexuality, '[t]here are almost no sexual references in Lovecraft's […] stories', and this may be due to Lovecraft's ambiguous sexuality.[56] La Farge, however, concedes that an intimate relationship between the two men was unlikely because the 'salient feature of his [Lovecraft's] sexuality [...] seems to be how indifferent he was to it'.[57] Nevertheless, his fondness for Barlow contradicts his 'absolute hatred of the world', a sentiment that Spinks echoes towards the end of *The Night Ocean*.[58]

[55] Ironically, as La Farge notes in 'The Complicated Friendship', while Barlow may have been the main author of the story, it is 'attributed primarily to Lovecraft now' (n. p.).
[56] Punter, *The Literature of Terror: Volume 2*, p. 43.
[57] La Farge, 'Complicated Friendship,' n. p.
[58] Machin, 'Lovecraft, Decadence, and Aestheticism', p. 1224.

'It's the Riddle of the Spinks'

> The video is unsettling. It's like watching a soul dissolve into dust before your eyes – like watching a mask drop and finding no face behind it. The only way to understand it is to think that Spinks didn't care anymore about how he was seen; he only wanted to be seen. But, in fact, the last known photograph of Spinks was taken in front of the CBS studio on Park Avenue, before the interview. He is wearing dark glasses and looking anxiously at something that's happening up the street. A stranger's arm obscures most of his torso. It adds to the impression he gave in the interview, that he was someone who had never really been.[59]

The various roles that Spinks plays throughout the story makes it difficult for Marina and the reader to understand his true self. Indeed, as Marina notes when Charlie and she first 'encounter' Spinks on a video, he appears, as she says in the above quotation. to be 'someone who had never really been'. However, his chilling revelation to Marina after they meet in person that he 'hated [...] [e]veryone in the world' alerts her early on to the fact that he is, in her words, a 'biographical vampire' who steals the lives of others to make himself look more interesting.[60] The possible reason behind this is complex as it seems he wants some form of revenge for his own perceived 'ordinariness'. To achieve his goals, Spinks researches the depths of history to tell credible 'autobiographies' that others will believe. Marina calls these stories 'roles' because for him, as his notes reveal, they are mere live performances and not the disclosure of facts. It is noteworthy that his surname rhymes with *sphinx*. The pun is not lost on Charlie, who jokes to Marina, 'It's the riddle of the Spinks'.[61] When we meet Spinks in the novel, he appears to be a solitary old man (much like Lovecraft) with no apparent significant relationships. He is relatively unknown, first having found some fame with the publication of the *Erotonomicon*, a proven forgery, and then with the help of Charlie, who interviews him about his relationship with Lovecraft, and subsequently Marina, who tracks him down to learn what happened to Charlie, unwittingly giving him the attention that he craves.

To garner this attention, Spinks exploits historical ambivalences for his own gain. The stories that he tells Charlie and then Marina are, in fact, just stories. His historical knowledge embellishes his performed 'autobiographies', the stories that he tells Charlie and Marina, into credible accounts, with which he manages to dupe them both. For example, when he speaks to Charlie, he purports to be the real Robert Barlow and claims to have faked his death in 1951. Following this staged suicide, Spinks tells them that, under the guise of Barlow, he emigrated to Canada to live under a false identity. He continues to weave in a variety of factual details of

[59] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 76.
[60] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 373 and p. 379.
[61] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 77.

Barlow's life, mingled with the products of his own imagination. For example, he casually refers to having known Alfred Kroeber, a renowned American anthropologist who the historical Barlow studied with, and Kroeber's daughter Ursula Le Guin, who would later go on to become a famous science-fiction and fantasy writer.[62] When he talks to Marina, Spinks concocts a more colourful version of his own life, painting himself as a Jewish child refugee landing on Canadian shores to escape anti-Semitic persecution in his native Hungary. While both accounts turn out to be false, ironically, it is through the character of Spinks that *The Night Ocean* dramatises its commitment to the methodology of historical realism, highlighting the importance of an ethical engagement with historical sources. There were indeed Jewish children who were sent to other countries so that they could escape persecution in their own, and this experience left a lifelong emotional scar on them. Spinks uses that trauma for entertainment purposes, an act that the novel condemns as it is disrespectful to both history and the emotional damage that real people suffer.

The reason it is so easy to believe what Spinks says is that he 'adorns' his stories with verifiable historical facts, both in the context of the novel and the real world. When he first claims to be Lovecraft's secret paramour, his account is filled with so many historical facts about both Barlow and Lovecraft and their relationship that it is difficult not to take him seriously. For example, he casually mentions that he (as Barlow) was on first-name terms with Lovecraft, and Lovecraft often signed off in letters as 'Old Gent', which can be seen in their published correspondence.[63] Spinks even inserts Lovecraft's idiosyncratic love language to depict a moment of emotional connection to authenticate his story:

> RHB: [...] Howard wrapped his pinky around mine, and said ...
> CW: Umph.
> RHB: Umph.[64]

As a unique gesture of affection, this 'umph' is recognisable to Lovecraft fans and historians in both the extratextual world and the world of the narrative. This detail also appears in the *Erotonomicon*, making the text look genuine: 'Then in jest I took hold on Bobby's pinky finger and said, "Umph"'.[65] This episode correlates with Sonia Greene's revelation in Lovecraft's biography, which La Farge paraphrases: apparently, 'Lovecraft never kissed Sonia, never said

[62] While Barlow and Kroeber did indeed know each other, it is unknown if Barlow ever interacted with Le Guin.
[63] H. P. Lovecraft, *O Fortunate Floridian: H. P. Lovecraft's Letters to R. H. Barlow*, ed. by S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (University of Tampa Press, 2007).
[64] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 123.
[65] La Farge, p. 58.

he loved her. When he wanted to express affection, he wrapped his pinky-finger around hers and said, "Umph".'[66] Lovecraft's alleged non-heteronormative sexuality and its 'disclosure' in the *Erotonomicon* foreshadows scandal and chaos for both Spinks and other writers who were inspired by Lovecraft.

Spinks' narrative is also set in the recognisable context of mid-twentieth-century America. For instance, in the early 1950s, politicians such as Senators Joseph McCarthy and Clyde Hooey (to whom the novel refers by name) were involved in an anti-Communist witch hunt, which very nearly ruined the lives of many innocent people such as Charlie Chaplin, Langston Hughes, and Leonard Bernstein. The precursor of these actions is HUAC or the House Un-American Activities Committee (also mentioned in the novel), whose 'work served as a blueprint for the tactics employed by US Senator Joseph McCarthy'.[67] In *The Night Ocean*, HUAC turns its investigation on horror writers, accusing them of Communism and socialism because of their divergent political affiliations. Thus, the horror community becomes vulnerable; as the novel briefly explains, HUAC was 'roaming the nation, looking in ever less likely places for signs of Communist conspiracy. Homosexuality was, as everyone knew, a gateway to Communism.'[68] Such an inquisition of horror writers never took place.[69] In the novel, it is incited by the publication of Spinks' forgery, which alleges that Lovecraft was gay. Marina notes sardonically, 'history did not conclude that L. C. Spinks had done Lovecraft a favor by publishing the *Erotonomicon*'.[70] When horror writers are wrongly persecuted following the publication of the *Erotonomicon*, Spinks shows no true remorse for his false allegations, and instead defends his actions in the most absurd way on a televised interview with Edward Murrow:[71]

> Murrow: […] [Y]ou destroyed the reputation, the posthumous reputation, of a writer named H. P. Lovecraft. Now the question I think most Americans want answered is, why did you do it?
> Spinks: Why?
> Murrow: Yes, why?
> Spinks: I ... I guess I ...
> Murrow: Surely you must have had a reason.
> Spinks: Well, Mr Murrow, I'm from a small town in Canada. And all my life, I've dreamed of having an adventure. You know, like going on a safari, or climbing a

[66] La Farge, p. 22.
[67] 'HUAC', *HISTORY*, 7 March 2019 <http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/huac> [accessed 10 February 2022].
[68] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 67.
[69] There were, however, notable writers like Ray Bradbury and Arthur Miller who were affected.
[70] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 66.
[71] Alongside Murrow, other real people like Horace Tudhope, Doris Baumgardt, and John Macfie make interesting appearances in the novel.

> mountain, or fighting in a war. And I guess this book was my adventure.
> Murrow: Do you mean to tell me that you ruined a man's reputation because you wanted an adventure? […]
> Spinks: Well, I don't know. I'm just telling you how it seemed to me at the time when I, uh, when I did it. I guess I just wanted to do something daring.
> Murrow: So you defamed an innocent person. A man who had never done anything to *you*.[72]

The historical Murrow, who passed away in 1965, was a renowned American journalist, known for his expository interviews.[73] In the context of the novel, the above transcript, which is presented as verbatim, is depicted as an indisputable record of the past. La Farge uses an iconic historical figure to reveal Spinks as a fraud who is well versed in making his lies credible, and who engages in such fraudulence for his own benefits. His actions imply a similarity between him and the typical postmodern historian, in that Spinks builds up an imaginary narrative around the remaining traces of the past and uses that to tell his version of events.[74] Of course, this is not to say that postmodern historians are dishonest or selfish, but postmodern historical theory, according to White, Keith Jenkins, and Alan Munslow, generally encouraged a wariness about believing history as the 'truth', since the past only remained through incomplete traces, and historians would have to imagine what the past was like. In addition, as mentioned earlier, according to White, incomplete traces of the past could lead to different narratives or interpretations of historical events.[75] Spinks' actions portray the 'historical imagination', as postmodern historians called it, in a negative light.[76] When Charlie goes missing, Marina suspects that her husband's disappearance has to do with Spinks because the latter had revealed extensive information about Barlow and Lovecraft's supposed love affair. When Marina finally meets with Spinks, his lack of concern for how his lies impact and damage others gradually becomes more evident. Spinks feels no remorse or obligation to tell the truth, even when he sees that Marina is distressed because Charlie is missing; Spinks even proposes an absurd hypothesis on the 'transmigration of souls' to justify his actions. Through false histories, *The Night Ocean* examines the question of historical honesty, implying the importance of historical objectivity as the trait of an ethical historian. As discussed in the next section, Charlie, as

[72] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 75.
[73] His reporting on the award-winning television program *See It Now* (1951-58) contributed significantly to the condemnation of McCarthyism.
[74] White, 'The Historical Artifact', pp. 83-84.
[75] Alan Muslow, *Deconstructing History* (Routledge, 2006), p. 47.
[76] White has discussed the historical imagination at length across his oeuvre. By the term 'historical imagination', he means the narrative constructions that historians use to imagine events in the past. The historian is the one who endows meaning on the records of the past, which have no inherent meaning in themselves.

someone who has been duped by the postmodern historian, is the victim. He also appears to have his blind spots, as becomes evident when he investigates the Lovecraft/Barlow connection, but the mental breakdown he suffers is portrayed as the direct result of Spinks' lies, underlining how deleterious false histories can be.

Charlie

> When I was a kid, I thought Necronomicon meant *the book of dead names*, but according to the article, it means *the image of the law of the dead*, or just *a book concerning the dead*. So the *Erotonomicon* would be the *image of the law of love*, which, you have to admit, is kind of intriguing.[77]

It is Charlie's naïve trust in Spinks' story that causes his mental breakdown and disappearance. Of course, he is not insane when *The Night Ocean* begins. But his obsessive quest to find the truth about Lovecraft's relationship with Barlow clouds his judgement several times. When he begins his (re)search, he tracks down the *Erotonomicon*, a book clearly based on the *Necronomicon*, a fictional text that Lovecraft would often quote from in his work. The *Erotonomicon*, similarly non-existent in the real world, purports to be Lovecraft's secret diary, recording his sexual escapades with men, many of whom are not white. The book was proven to be a forgery when it first came out, but that does not dissuade Charlie from tracking down its author, L. C. Spinks.

The reference to 'images' in the titles of both the *Necronomicon* and *Erotonomicon* provides an interesting connection to postmodern and gothic superficialities and surfaces. There are multiple pages in La Farge's novel that describe how Spinks was able to make the Erotonomicon *look* real. For example, in the diary, Lovecraftian creations are reduced to a nomenclature of various sex acts. As Phillip Mead notes about the credibility of literary hoaxes, '[t]he point is that readers want to believe and they will easily overlook discrepancies and even exposure. Authenticity *effects* are what is necessary.'[78] By 'authenticity effects', Mead refers to works that *look* real but are not, and La Farge is particularly critical of authenticity effects' potential to deceive, as they can have damaging outcomes. For instance, Charlie's insistence on believing that the *Erotonomicon* is a legitimate source ultimately destroys his marriage and his career. Charlie prefers to believe that *Erotonomicon*'s status as genuine was already once disproven, is actually a reliable documentary source.

[77] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 26, emphasis in original.
[78] Philip Mead, 'Hoax-Poetry and Inauthencity', in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. by Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale (Routledge, 2012), pp. 338-54 (p. 344).

Charlie himself is not entirely blameless for his eventual downfall, for he imagines all sorts of absurdities even after finding proof that his speculations have no factual support.[79] One instance is when he toys with the idea that Robert Barlow might still be alive. Historically, Barlow was born in 1918 and took his own life in 1951 after a 'disgruntled student' blackmailed him, threatening to reveal Barlow's homosexuality.[80] Charlie notes to Marina that if Barlow were still alive, he might be almost a century old in the present time. Initially, Charlie concedes that the possibility is indeed absurd, but he continues to entertain it even when Marina and he watch the recording of a television interview where the journalist 'takes down' Spinks. In a way, Charlie is similar to Spinks because he, too, can be seen to be investigating (though not exploiting) historical lacunae to make a name for himself. Being African American, Charlie is already socially (and historically) marginalised. Moreover, he is initially portrayed as a little-known journalist who must often financially rely on his wife. For Charlie, concrete proof about the true nature of the Lovecraft/Barlow relationship will surely bring the stability and dignity that he feels are missing from his life.

In his determination to discover the truth, Charlie does indeed seem like a romancer of the archive because of his marginalised status and unique perspective, qualities that Keen posits belong to the protagonist of such a romance.[81] Like a responsible historian, he painstakingly cross-checks historical facts and voices his own doubts about the reliability of Spinks' sources for the *Erotonomicon*:

> 'Even though I know, I still can't believe it. Where did this freak get his information?' The *Erotonomicon* was published in 1952, and the first biography of Lovecraft didn't appear until 1975. When Spinks wrote his book, Lovecraft's letters to Barlow were still uncataloged and off-limits, in the vaults of the John Hay Library, at Brown. Even if Spinks had read the letters, they didn't have any sex in them.[82]

As Marina recalls the time she spent with Charlie in solitude, she mentions that one of the shows they would watch together was *The X-Files.* There is a strong parallel between the character of Agent Fox Mulder and Charlie because Charlie, like Mulder, becomes not only paranoid but also determined to uncover a truth that he hopes has remained hidden until now. And Mulder, like Charlie, is often obsessed with fantastic possibilities that appear to conceal shattering truths. As R. L. Rutksey comments, the show, which problematised the idea of truth long before Trump and the issue of post-truth, situates truth within the realm of the unknown

[79] Farwell, "An Interview with Paul La Farge," n. p.
[80] La Farge, "Complicated Friendship", n. p.
[81] Keen, *Romances of the Archive*, p. 3.
[82] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 65.

instead of the known: 'the obsession with finding the truth […] motivates the characters' actions'.[83] Thus, Charlie's fixation resonates with the novel's epigraph, a quotation from *Dexter Ward*: 'I say to you againe, doe not call up/Any that you can not put downe'.[84] However, this refusal to 'put down' his obsessive research becomes his hamartia. Like his namesake Charles Dexter Ward, Charlie becomes destroyed by his investigation of historical mysteries that are best left alone. As suggested above, he also disregards any contradictory evidence. For instance, when Charlie encounters Horace Tudhope, a resident of Parry Sound in Canada (where Spinks lives) who has known Spinks for decades, Tudhope produces a photograph of Spinks that casts doubt on Spinks' identity.[85] However, Charlie ignores this and continues to stick to the narrative that Spinks told him. La Farge's novel considers it an imperative to be truthful about the nature of the discovered resources and posits that an historian should be truthful and objective, with no ulterior motives. The narrative is therefore implicitly critical of Charlie for ignoring evidence and losing journalistic and historic objectivity in pursuit of his obsession, diverging from the path of an ideal historian.

It is Charlie's unhealthy obsession that engenders a kind of 'confirmation bias' in him. He even goes to Barlow's now-abandoned house where Lovecraft stayed during the summer of 1931. For Charlie, the house is a physical trace of the past as it may hold a secret that has hitherto remained undiscovered:

> The amber shelves were empty, but there were pencil marks on the door frame, charting Bobby's meager youthful growth. One mark was much higher than the others: H. P. L., 6/7/1935. Charlie shuddered. He imagined Lovecraft stooping beside Barlow in the small closet. The two of them so close, they could feel one another's breath ... .[86]

These height markings are more suggestive of a parent-child relationship than a sexual or intimate one. Charlie admits to himself that he 'would never know what happened for sure' and the two men's relationship might have been platonic, but he still does not let go of his speculation that Lovecraft and Barlow were romantically involved: 'Up until that point, Charlie

[83] R. L. Rutsky, 'The Scene of Truth in *The X-Files*', *Strategies: A Journal of Theory, Culture, and Politics*, 12.1 (1999), pp. 61-70 (p. 61).
[84] H. P. Lovecraft, 'The Case of Charles Dexter Ward', *Electronic Texts of H. P. Lovecraft's Works*, <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/cdw.aspx> [accessed 18 January 2024].
[85] The real Tudhope, who passed in 2009, was a war veteran in Parry Sound, just as he is in the novel. Murrow, who passed in 1965, was a renowned American journalist, known for his expository interviews. John Macfie was still alive when *The Night Ocean* was published but passed the following year. As portrayed in the novel, Macfie was the town historian of Parry Sound. The usage of these people/characters is metamodern in two distinct ways: firstly, the 'cameo appearances' of real people as characters in the novel provide a touch of realism; and secondly, these characters reveal a truth to oppose the false stories that Charlie and Marina unwittingly believed in.
[86] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 83.

had been rooting for sex to turn up at the heart of his story. He figured that Lovecraft needed it, and Barlow wanted it, and where was the harm?'[87] He even collects an unimportant matchbook from the room even though the item 'could not have been an authentic Barlovian artifact'.[88] It is possible to suggest that the reason he keeps holding on to these ambiguous pieces of evidence is that he hopes they might one day confirm his speculations.

Despite his careful research, Charlie is therefore not objective like an historian should be. His hopes and speculations drive him to readily believe in Spinks' bizarre 'confession' that *he* is Robert Barlow. When they finally speak, Charlie even goes as far as to ask a voyeuristic question: 'Did you? Make love, I mean.'[89] This question marks his suspension of disbelief. Instead of thinking critically about the plausibility of Spinks' 'autobiography', Charlie is fixated on wondering about whether Lovecraft and Barlow consummated their relationship. La Farge's metafictional critique of the postmodern historian's subjective approach, or indeed of the historical imagination more broadly, is very tongue-in-cheek here. He appears to be mocking scholars who argue that Lovecraft and Barlow were indeed lovers, extrapolating purely from reading between the lines in their fiction and correspondence. *The Night Ocean* seems to be saying the same thing: that if the historian is not sure, they should just say so, instead of trying to imagine and thus giving us an inaccurate view.

One way that Charlie differs from Spinks, however, is that he possesses more empathy. Brady observes that the novel is 'a timely mediation on the challenge of separating artist from art and the limits of human understanding'.[90] Charlie, Spinks, and even Marina are portrayed as having mixed feelings about Lovecraft, but attempt to love him and understand him, despite his shortcomings. Charlie also denunciates Lovecraft's bigotry but still focuses on Lovecraft as a person, and tries to humanise him, on one occasion sharing the following with a fan at a sci-fi convention:

> Lovecraft believed some things that I can't condone. But I wonder if in the end we maybe need our heroes to have feet of clay, or even of mud. Barlow was able to love Lovecraft, for all his flaws. And I want to tell you something he told me, when he was finished telling his story, which was, that although Barlow saw all the harm he'd done with the *Erotonomicon* hoax, he didn't regret it, because he'd made Lovecraft into a person who was capable of love.[91]

[87] La Farge, pp. 83-84.
[88] La Farge, p. 84.
[89] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 111.
[90] Brady, '*The Night Ocean* Brings Lovecraft', n.p.
[91] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 192.

Charlie's attempt to highlight Lovecraft's humanity is a significant divergence from postmodern practice. Postmodern fiction often took pleasure in tearing down admired historical figures from their pedestals. As Debbie Atkinson comments when describing our present time, there are 'attempts to move away from the weary cynicism and disconnectedness of late Postmodern discourse to find […] an alternative to postmodern alienation through interactivity and interpersonal connection'.[92]

However, Charlie's attempt to sympathise with Lovecraft does not come without unexpected consequences. When other Lovecraft scholars begin to point out historical discrepancies in his book *The Law of Love*, Charlie becomes paranoid. When the several townspeople from the Canadian small town of Parry Sound, where Spinks lives, attest that he was never anyone else, Charlie's paranoia increases as he starts to think they are plotting against him. He remains unconvinced by any of the documentary evidence that is presented to him, whether that is a transcript or a photograph. For example, he turns a blind eye to Horace Tudhope's photograph of Spinks, and this photograph clearly shows that Spinks is not who he claims to be. Unable to accept that he may have unwittingly perpetrated a hoax, Charlie goes back to talk to Spinks. The novel never reveals their second conversation, but shortly after, Charlie becomes withdrawn and engages in a variety of uncharacteristic behaviours, one example being that he strays from his marriage. Shortly after talking to Spinks for the second time, Charlie is admitted to a psychiatric institution, escapes, and allegedly drowns himself in a lake.

As I argue in the next section, Marina's attempt to find Charlie and her refusal to give up contrasts the nihilism apparent in Lovecraft's work. If Charlie's case serves as a warning against digging up the past, Marina's narrative seems to be saying that the past, with its unsolved mysteries, does not necessarily prevent one from having a meaningful existence.

Marina

> How close I came to being drawn into the same unreality![93]

Sigmund Freud's essay on 'The Uncanny' (1919) has led many scholars to see him as a 'gothic writer', which may be a reason psychoanalysis is a popular method of analysis for gothic

[92] Debbie Atkinson, 'Participation and Affect', *Notes on Metamodernism*, 2 July 2013 <https://www.metamodernism.com/2013/07/02/participation-and-affect/> [accessed 18 January 2024].
[93] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 238.

literature.[94] In *The Night Ocean*, Marina's profession as a psychotherapist allows for the exploration of significant similarities between psychoanalysis and history. These two disciplines are also linked with literary criticism as literary critics, when studying a text, often also consider historical contexts and characters' underlying motives to illuminate their understanding. Fred Weinstein and Gerard M. Platt observe that both historians and psychoanalysts are interested in the past, the causality of events, and the motivations that drive people to their actions.[95] Laura Saxton concurs that 'historians must also engage with aspects of the past that are not recorded and similarly speculate about an individual's intentions'.[96] It is the same with literary critics, who may consider historical contexts and psychological driving forces to illuminate their understanding of a text. This echoes a character's assertion in A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) that '[l]iterary critics make natural detectives'.[97] Marina similarly states that '[b]eing a psychoanalyst is in some ways like a detective' as she tries to uncover and understand what happened to her husband.[98] Like an historian, Marina, as a psychotherapist, turns to the past to understand what happened to Charlie and the reasons behind Spinks' actions. In a desperate attempt to trace her husband's last steps after he goes missing, she travels to Parry Sound, meets with Spinks, and undertakes additional research to verify the details in his 'autobiographies'. An encounter with John Macfie, the town historian, reveals Spinks to be a compulsive liar. For example, in Spinks' second 'autobiography', he claims that 'he was discharged from the Algonquin Regiment for shooting at a German U-boat, in Newfoundland', probably to depict himself as a hero. However, it is Macfie who reveals the truth that Spinks 'was discharged because he was a homosexual [...] they caught him fooling around with a First Nations boy up in Thunder Bay'.[99] In Macfie's books about Parry Sound residents who fought in the Second World War, Marina finds Spinks' name absent, and she is shocked when a visit to his study reveals Google searches and countless books that show how Spinks tailored his life stories to entice her.

Marina undeniably has a personal stake in finding Charlie, but this personal stake does not make her lose her objectivity. In fact, it is her objectivity that makes her, in a sense, the

[94] Christine Berthin, *Gothic Hauntings: Melancholy Crypts and Textual Ghosts* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 2.
[95] Fred Weinstein and Gerard M. Platt, 'History and Theory: The Question of Psychoanalysis', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2.4 (1972), pp. 419-34 (pp. 419-22).
[96] Laura Saxton, 'A True Story: Defining Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Fiction', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 24.2 (2020), pp. 127-44 (pp. 129-30), https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2020.1727189.
[97] A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (Vintage, 1990), p. 237.
[98] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 234.
[99] La Farge, p. 370.

ideal historian. Unlike Charlie, she does not have any preconceived ideas about Lovecraft and Barlow, and she genuinely tries to understand the other characters. Instead of entertaining bizarre speculations about history, she admits, '[o]h, he'd told me a horror story, all right. The horror was that I had believed in it'.[100] In a way, Spinks' lies are more horrifying than any of the unknowable terrors of the past in Lovecraft's fiction. Shortly before the end of the novel, she ponders over Freud's idea of the 'navel of the dream',

> the place where all the lines of meaning the analyst has so carefully traced through the patient's life vanish into the unknown. But where the navel of the dream is an essentially harmless phenomenon, a point where the dream's meaning is sufficiently understood, and further interpretation would be pointless, evil is a mystery with power. It reaches up into the world and makes everything mysterious.[101]

Here, the 'navel of the dream' is a metaphor for research into the black holes of history, a threatening past emblematic of gothic fiction. Marina wonders what to do in the face of such despair and answers her own question: 'When faced with such a phenomenon, what can you do? For me, the answer is clear: You walk away. You get back to your life and make meaning where you can.'[102] She refuses to become overwhelmed by a mysterious and ambiguous past and does her best to hold onto her sanity. According to Vermeulen and van den Akker, metamodern writers 'pick out from the scrapheap of history those elements that allow them to resignify the present and reimagine a future'.[103] We see this when Marina finally presents what she has been able to put together as the truth, and attempts to forget about Spinks and try to move on with her life, as the idea of 'the navel of the dream' advises her.

The final section of the novel, fittingly called 'The Navel of the Dream', goes beyond postmodern ideas of an unknowable past and focuses on recuperation. In other words, the mysteries of the past are of little importance here compared to what can be known for sure in one's present, immediate surroundings. We see a severely unhappy Marina trying to forget the past. This is oddly optimistic instead of pessimistic. Even if '[t]he entire world was a story told by L. C. Spinks', Marina is trying to find some stability on her own.[104] Just as metamodern oscillates between naivety and cynicism, Marina oscillates between accepting her husband's death and still not being ready to discard his possessions.[105] The final chapter of the book

[100] La Farge, p. 372.
[101] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 238.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Van den Akker and Vermeulen, 'Periodising the 2000s', p. 10.
[104] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 380.
[105] Vermeulen and van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', pp. 5-6.

depicts Marina, whose name means 'of the sea', on vacation with her family in Miami Beach. Here, she is distinguished from the narrator of Lovecraft's 'The Night Ocean' because she is not alone. In trying not to dwell on Spinks, Marina attempts to put the past behind her. She is understandably depressed and distraught, but her family is there to support her. She particularly enjoys 'being near my grandmother. She held out the possibility that there was happiness, or at least contentment, on the far side of grief'.[106] This is particularly telling, even more so when Marina empathises with her grandmother's concern when the older woman implores her to start a new life and have children. Despite her sadness, she still understands her grandmother's worry. More broadly, she creates a metaphoric bridge between the present and the past, indicating a desire to understand the past, as frightening as it may be. Like the metamodern protagonist, she is aware that it may be impossible to completely know the past, but she still aspires for the possibility of authenticity, harbouring hope that she may be reunited with her husband.

Yvonne Liebermann observes that metamodernist fiction may acknowledge that the world is 'constructed', but it still makes it possible for the text to 'connect us to the real in one form or another'.[107] Marina is apprehensive that the world around her could very well be some kind of artefact, but she tries to heal by going into therapy herself and nursing the hope that Charlie may still be alive because his body was never recovered. Additionally, her family represents the 'real' for her because they act like safeguards. Over the course of the narrative, there are glimpses that her family is far from perfect, but it is evident at the end that they genuinely care about her. And in turn, Marina also cares about them, for she appreciates how her family, even a year after Charlie's disappearance, 'still treated me with more kindness than I wanted or could do anything with'.[108] Moreover, Marina's attachment to her family places her in stark contrast to the protagonist of 'Black Man with a Horn', where, despite his frequent visits to his family members, he apparently prefers to be alone and seems to be detached from his surroundings.

In the novel's last scene, Marina, in accordance with her name, floats in the water in solitude while thinking about everything that happened. We as readers are not told whether she is about to let herself go in the sea (maybe accidentally killing herself), or is on the brink of satisfying closure:

[106] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 382.
[107] Yvonne Liebermann, 'The Return of the "Real" in Ali Smith's *Artful* (2012) and *How to Be Both* (2014)', *European Journal of English Studies*, 23 (2019), pp. 136-51 (p. 137).
[108] Liebermann, 'The Return of the "Real"', p. 137.

> Still, it was peaceful in the ocean, a hundred yards or more past the breakers, and I might have floated there for a long time if two things hadn't happened more or less simultaneously: my leg brushed a jellyfish and lit up with pain; and I saw someone on the beach, waving his arms, shouting in a familiar voice, calling my name.[109]

In Lovecraft's fiction, the jellyfish invokes the image of the frightening Cthulhu and alludes to a dark past and a meaningless existence.[110] However, for Marina, the jellyfish's sting, like her family's company, anchors her to the knowable present. The use of the second-person 'his' and the adjective 'familiar' to describe the man's voice suggests a strong possibility that this is Charlie, and the two are finally united. Cliffhangers usually signify suspense and uncertainty, but in this case, the moment is hopeful and offers a chance of redemption and recuperation after an extraordinary trial.

Several contemporary scholars, among them being Irmtraud Huber and Nicoline Timmer, posit that, following postmodernism's deconstruction, there would be an 'increasing desire to escape from postmodernist subversion and rebellion'.[111] For Timmer, 'it is not unthinkable that after endless proposals for *de*constructions, a desire to *construct* will break through'.[112] In this vein, I have argued how a metamodern reading, as opposed to a postmodern one, is more suited to *The Night Ocean*. Through the structure of the essay, I have demonstrated the progression of a nihilist understanding of history (represented by Lovecraft), to a postmodern suspicion of a seemingly reliable history (represented by Spinks), showing its detrimental effects on Charlie, who Spinks deceives. Finally, Marina represents a reconstructive history that allows for renewal and optimism. La Farge thus also succeeds in developing the gothic genre away from its usual and expected constraints, and illustrates that through a metamodern incarnation, the genre simultaneously remains 'trapped' in the past but can still look forward to the future.

[109] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 385.
[110] Earlier in the novel, La Farge presents us with 'a snooty European nihilist' inspired by Lovecraft biographer Michel Houellebecq, who famously drew a likeness between jellyfish and the posthuman. See Keeley, 'The Depths', n. p.
[111] Irmtraud Huber, Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 4.
[112] Nicoline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (Rodopi, 2010), p. 21, emphasis in original.