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‘Delicate ironies quite imperceptible on its surface’: Henry S. Whitehead's weird tales and American empire in the Caribbean

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Abstract

This article mounts an initial exploratory engagement with the weird fiction of Henry S. Whitehead, framed by American imperial expansion into the Caribbean in the interwar years. It situates Whitehead and his work within the wider historical context and shows how Whitehead himself used and played with history as part of his fiction. The article considers the role of light in Whitehead's fiction and imperial projects, as well as the way that Whitehead's work, as horror fiction, both shapes and seeks to dispel notions of the Caribbean as a space of horror. As well as offering some initial conclusions, the article seeks to open further lines for future investigation.

KEYWORDS

20th century & contemporary, American, cultural studies, empire, ghost story, Gothic literature, history, imperial, colonial and postcolonial history, popular culture

> *America has never been an empire… We may be the only great power in history that had the chance, and refused – preferring greatness to power, and justice to glory (Washington Post).*
>
> George W. Bush (1999)

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1 | INTRODUCTION

A certain strain of triumphalist American historical writing has overlooked, and continues to overlook, imperial elements in the nation's past (for instance, the 1776 Report, 2021). Such writing is not so much about the past as an idea of the past that the author is trying to retrospectively will into existence. The drive towards overlooking reality is as old as American empire itself, and can be seen in statements by eminent historian and politician, Henry Cabot Lodge, that 'I do not think there is any such thing as "imperialism"… But I am clearly of the opinion that there is such a thing as "expansion" and that the United States must control some distant dependencies', a tortured distinction that provides some insight into the processes of American 'expansion' in the 1890s (cited in Brands, 2002, p. 295). Mercifully, it is easy enough to find work that delineates American imperial history as both internal and external. Writing in the context of the final stages of the Vietnam War, Michael Paul Rogin famously remarks that the US is 'a society built on Indian graves' which no manner of comforting tales of 'expansion' into 'virgin territory' can expunge (Rogin, 1975, p. 5). BIPOC communities in North America are far from the only subjects of American imperial practices, however. Richard Hofstadter wrote of the shared postwar historical vision that 'Americans have recently found it more comfortable to see where they have been rather than to think of where they are going', and, while intended as a rebuttal to those who sought to dwell in a mythical past as an escape from Cold War anxieties, it was more about the movement of time, rather than movement through space (Hofstadter, 1948, p. xi). This article takes as its focus the weird fiction of Henry S. Whitehead and explores American pasts through considering specific practices of looking, thinking, and moving, in both the past and the present, with the two often blurred through eruptions of the former in the latter. It also critically engages with Mark Fisher's assertion that American history should be 'reclassified as horror', largely by seeking to claim American horror as history (Fisher, 2013, p. 51).

It is a very specific horror being claimed as history. It is also one that is, as part of its own process, deeply enmeshed in the history it dramatises. Under analysis here are a selection of Henry S. Whitehead's interwar stories of the US Virgin Islands, which are positioned within narratives and practices of Caribbean imperialism. Whitehead's stories are certainly horrifying in places, as is to be expected from a correspondent of the horror writer H.P. Lovecraft—but they also explicitly play with history, making pasts present in the original moment of writing and reception, and drawing new territorial additions into the wider web of an imagined American nation. In Whitehead's short stories, the (non-American) past often constitutes a source of horror, something enforced through Whitehead's use of light as a framing device for engaging with the past and present. This is both in terms of the brightness of the Caribbean sun and flora as in some way hostile to North American interlopers, and in the spread of electric light as a symbol of encroaching imperial power; as a light that is controlled, as an attempted act of containment of the space and people being colonised, by the new authorities. In this, Whitehead's work engages with light in ways related to established Gothic conventions, where light is 'instrumental in creating fear by making visible the threats that hover in a novel's darkened passages' (Stern, 1994, p. 27). Whitehead's work dramatises the ongoing Gothic tension between light, darkness, and the various states between, with the consequences of this for the bearer of the Gaze. As Stern notes, 'through the illusion of seeing oneself seeing… the subject—especially the male subject—aligns himself with the gaze and borrows its power', a process that, in Whitehead's work, both imbues his narrator with power (through the extension of electric light) and mounts challenges to that power (through the way the Caribbean sun is too much for the eyes of incoming Americans and the tenuous extension of electric light, mediating the tenuous extension of American power) (Stern, 1994, pp. 28–29). Through these approaches, Whitehead's work can be seen as a historiographical endeavour, as an act of attempting to write (American) history, to posit the horrifying (non-American) past as a problem that only American ingenuity can solve. In our fiction, we find history; in our history, we find fiction. Such are the ironies at play here.

The paper will first set out some of the complex historical background into which the stories emerged. It will then briefly set out the biography of Henry S. Whitehead before moving into a discussion of the stories in the context of both. The intention of the piece is exploratory; in this, it runs contrary to the stories, which often seek to organise, systematise, and codify the past and present in usable ways that benefit the US as it moved into a position of formal imperial power in the Caribbean. As a result, Whitehead's weird fiction strikes out on a different path to other definitions of 'the weird'. For instance, Roger Luckhurst draws our attention to:

> The difficulty and elusiveness of the weird, a genre that dissolves generic glue, a category that defies categorisation… The weird reveals the best iteratrions of itself in the way it *dis*orients any simple route map through the territory.
>
> (Luckhurst, 2017, p. 1042)

As it seeks to write the newly acquired US Virgin Islands into the American national imaginary, Whitehead's work makes clear a number of other pasts and people that occupy the same space. This makes present a multitude of other histories, both implicitly and explicitly, providing a platform for imperial interventions. A clear spatial 'route map through the territory' is offered—readers learn about the islands as a beneficial tourist destination—but even that map is troubled by the weird fiction/horror form adopted by Whitehead, which says both 'come here' and 'stay away'. Here, it is worth remembering Mark Fisher's idea of the weird as 'that which does not belong', as that which represents 'the conjoining of two or more things which do not belong together'; in this, Whitehead's choice of the weird form for fiction detailing an American imperial presence in a foreign place, and of a horror form to popularise somewhere as a tourist destination, showcases things that 'do not belong together' (Fisher, 2016, pp. 10–11). Returning to the epigraph that began this piece, we can also see how it is a clash of ideologies that 'do not belong together', with the stories narrating the imperialism of a stated anti-imperial power.

In the spirit of the weird, this article is not so much an establishment of clear lines as a troubling of troubled waters; a testing of approaches to determine which might be beneficial for further work, but not in a directly extractive sense. Stories under analysis are considered in the light of earlier colonial Gothic narratives that may have informed Whitehead's approach to his own stories, another referral to the past in an attempt to make sense of the present. While distinct from 'the weird', the Gothic is immensely important to Whitehead's work, both as form and theory. As Luckhurst remarks, the weird 'is not reducible to the Gothic's economy of the uncanny or its compulsion to repeat… the monstrous breaches of the weird do not return us to something familiar but repressed', a definition that overlays the work of Whitehead uneasily, but profitably (Luckhurst, 2017, p. 1052). In transplanting some of the preoccupations of more recognisable Gothic fiction, such as hauntings rooted in a spectral past, to a Caribbean setting that engages a wider range of meanings and histories, Whitehead offers readers something that is familiar, but simultaneously is not. Narrative framings and approaches suggest familiar structures, but alternative religious approaches and little-known histories work against the comforting discomfort of the Gothic, changing it into something else—something weird. Judie Newman argues that postcolonial Gothic has 'at its heart… the unresolved conflict between imperial power and the former colony, which the mystery at the centre of the plot both figures and conceals. Its discourse therefore establishes a dynamic between the unspoken and the "spoken for,"' something that resonates through Whitehead's work (Newman, 1995, p. 70).

Whitehead's work, however, is far from postcolonial—it emerges at the moment of, and through the process of, American occupation of the American Virgin Islands, actions which his fiction (and wider writing) sought to normalise and popularise. However, the American occupation could only begin because the US Virgin Islands were no longer the territory of another imperial power. There is therefore a conflict between coloniser and colonised people (and environment), but also between current and former colonisers. Whitehead's stories therefore operate within the bounds of both postcolonial Gothic and what Patrick Brantlinger terms 'Imperial Gothic', which 'tends to express anxieties over the failure of religion through a fall from civilisation into barbarism and savagery' (cited in Procter & Smith, 2007, p. 96). Whitehead's fiction is driven by, rather than just expressing, a range of anxieties. These range from 'getting the region wrong', to the extractive value of the new colonies acquired for the US, to the nature of the inhabitants—but as an ordained minister, he has no doubts about the efficacy of organised religion to deal with the spectral issues arising there. However, blurred binaries of coloniser and colonised are multiplied through the introduction of different colonisers, different colonised peoples, and different colonial systems that operated with varying success across the region.

As so often with the Gothic, a process of doubling creates uncanny Others that lurk in the margins of the texts, with slippages between different categories. To return to Luckhurst, he argues that the weird 'is a fiction of strange zones and borderscapes, its monsters boundary-crawlers that slime all over generic quarantines, making borders less lines of separation than promiscuous contact zones' (Luckhurst, 2017, p. 1056). This approach works perfectly for Whitehead's work, which does indeed occupy a 'strange borderscape', a mobile and mutable landscape that Whitehead seeks to make sense of, for himself and his readers, through a fiction that is both weird and Gothic, an act that seeks to impose order and, as a result, acknowledges the difficulties of any such project. Whitehead also highlights empire as a global phenomenon, with continuities and discontinuities across its occurrences, and a clear hierarchisation of colonial powers (with the US at the top, capable of solving the mess created by past failures). Whitehead also draws our attention to a burgeoning Anglo-American culture, recognised as coming into being through the proliferation of new technologies (which are also a source of unease) and a coming together of interests, chiefly imperial/geostrategic, between the US and Britain. In his stories, Whitehead both reclaims and rejects elements of past and ongoing colonial projects of his time of writing in the 1920s, installing a hierarchy of colonial powers and colonised people in the process. It is important to distinguish here between colonialism—the formal act of possessing and administrating colonies—and coloniality, or the legacies of colonialism, the forms and hierarchies of power that constitute an ongoing lived experience of colonialism after the withdrawal or removal of the colonial power. Both factors play out in Whitehead's fiction, with contending legacies of coloniality mixing with newly imposed projects of US colonialism specifically, and the encroachment of 'modernity' in the form of technology and processes more generally.

2 | HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

American elites had long been interested in what were then the Danish West Indies, with their interests forcefully pressed over decades. While finally secured by the US in 1916, an attempt to buy the islands in 1902 had been rejected by Denmark. Even before that, an attempt was made by Secretary of State William H. Seward, who in 1867 offered $5,000,000 for the three islands, an insufficient sum to overcome Danish reluctance to sell. Although a sum of $7,500,000 was ultimately agreed for the two islands of St. John and St. Thomas between Seward and Danish representatives, Charles Sumner, Chair of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate, was opposed to the purchase, because he was opposed to the presidency of Andrew Johnson (1865–1869), and the treaty was therefore allowed to die in the Senate rather than go forward for ratification. Negotiations resumed in the 1890s, as part of that tumultuous decade of American imperial expansion and anxiety, which culminated in the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War of 1898 and the annexation of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, as well as the establishment of a protectorate over Cuba (and a naval base in Guantanamo Bay) and the linked, but separate, annexation of Hawai'i. As Donald D. Hoover wrote in 1926 of the purchase of the Danish West Indies, 'the purpose of our government, as high naval officers frankly admit, was to prevent Germany from obtaining the islands and establishing a base from which to threaten Porto Rico [sic] and the Panama Canal', marking a clear geostrategic rationale for the acquisition of the islands (Hoover, 1926, p. 503).

Construction, and protection, of the Panama Canal was therefore of utmost importance to US interests in the Caribbean. In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt (someone who, like Lodge, could not see a distinction between imperialism and expansion) agreed a deal with Colombia to construct an isthmian canal (Brands, 2002, p. 295); Colombia, however, did not ratify the treaty. Roosevelt therefore switched tack and acknowledged Panamanian separatists, giving them weapons and political support in return for a canal deal, which led to Panamanian secession from Colombia in 1903. Construction of the canal began in 1904 and was completed in 1914. Much US activity in the Caribbean can be read in this light—as geostrategic powerplay intended to heighten American influence, safeguard the canal and its shipping, and cement the US as an imperial power (Marcilhacy, 2022). Migrant labour was attracted by American projects in the region, such as the canal, adding a cultural and economic pull to advancing imperial projects, reinforced by apparent British retreat. This was particularly evident when the Royal Navy's North America and West Indies Station, based in Bermuda since 1819, was replaced by the fourth Cruiser Squadron in 1907. Bermuda was downgraded by the British to a coaling station rather than a full base, with the new squadron being based in Britain instead. Under the Great Rapprochement, a period of strengthening diplomatic ties between Britain and the US running roughly from 1895 to 1915, a permanent naval squadron to counter the former threat from the US seemed like an expense that could no longer be justified. Germany and Britain were enmeshed in a naval arms race that began accelerating from around 1906, with a focus on dreadnought class ships; as a sign of overlapping interests, the US were increasingly anxious about German influence in Haiti and elsewhere. As a result of these fears, President Taft extended a large loan to Haiti in 1910 with the intention of reducing 'foreign', that is, German, influence. As Jeffrey Sommers notes, 'at the outbreak of World War I, the Germans were one of the most influential foreign powers in Haiti, and this could have arguably unnerved the Wilson administration', with the German presence perceived as both an ideological challenge to the Monroe Doctrine and a direct geopolitical threat to immediate American interests (Sommers, 2015, p. 63). In the wake of political and economic instability in Haiti, US forces moved in, occupying the nation from 1915 to 1934, with the whole of the island under US control during its parallel occupation of the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924. It is in this context that we must read the acquisition of the Danish West Indies, latterly the US Virgin Islands, in 1916. The treaty of 1916 guaranteed that the US would not object to the 'extension by Denmark of its political and economic interests to the whole of Greenland' (little did they know in doing so that they would raise the ire of another horror story, President Donald Trump, just over a century later) and that the Danish West Indies, consisting of the islands of St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix (Santa Cruz), were to be purchased by the US for $25,000,000 (Brown Scott, 1916, p. 854). So soon after the occupation of Haiti in 1915, this fleshed out a protective ring around the Caribbean Sea—Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands.

More generally, the Caribbean has been a site of political contestation since before the Haitian Revolution, though that event certainly marks a watershed of its international significance. Political radicalism is intimately associated with the Caribbean as a result, and the Caribbean diaspora was engaged in political and social agitation in the US at the time Whitehead was writing. Figures such as the Jamaican Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Harlem, New York; George Padmore (New York and Washington, DC), a Trinidadian journalist and Communist organiser; and CLR James (Britain), a preeminent intellectual and playwright who did pioneering work on the Haitian Revolution in the 1930s. Just as narratives of marginalisation had been deployed in the early 19th century to prevent Haiti from succeeding as an independent nation, Whitehead's horror stories formed part of a cultural backdrop that seemed to stress the danger of Western intervention, but also the need for it—lest the horror spread beyond its current area of containment (see Revauger, 2013).

3 | HENRY S. WHITEHEAD

Into this complex geopolitical situation comes Henry S. Whitehead (1882–1932), a deacon of the Episcopal Church and acting archdeacon of the US Virgin Islands from 1921 to 1929. As an indication of his social standing and connections, Whitehead had graduated from Harvard in the same class as Franklin Roosevelt (1904), after which he embarked on a 'busy professional life' that he left in 1909 to be ordained (Haining, 1985, p. 15). After his arrival in the Virgin Islands, Whitehead used them as the setting for a number of stories in the 'weird fiction' genre, leading to him becoming a correspondent of H.P. Lovecraft, an acknowledged pioneer of the 'cosmic horror' form, whose shadow lingers over it to this day (see, e.g., Ruff, 2016). In a widely reproduced quotation, Lovecraft remarks of Whitehead that: 'He has nothing of the musty cleric about him; but dresses in sports clothes, swears like a he-man on occasion, and is an utter stranger to bigotry or priggishness of any sort' (Davies, 2012, viii). As Lovecraft was notoriously racist, this statement requires some unpacking—but we have other destinations ahead of us, and many others have trodden that road already (Frye, 2006; Herrmann, 2019; Smith, 2011). Henry S. Whitehead died in 1932, at the age of 50; his obituary was written by H.P. Lovecraft and published in the March 1933 issue of *Weird Tales*.

4 | SHED A LITTLE LIGHT ON THE STORIES

> Light produces space, objects in space, and our perception of them; it produces the notion of distance and a sense of our bodies' position with respect to others; it generates the possibility of experiencing, simultaneously in time, otherness in space.
>
> (Llenin-Figueroa, 2014, pp. 174–175)

Henry S. Whitehead's fiction explores a number of cultural and racialised oppositions and tensions: knowing/not knowing, self/other, light/dark, Christianity/obeah. While these may appear to be binary, they are, rather, different positions on a spectrum, forcibly being brought into contact with one another through the imperial presence of the US in the Caribbean. In this, they draw on both Whitehead's experience of life in the US and the structures of power embedded in Caribbean culture through European, and in the case of the US Virgin Islands, specifically Danish colonialism. Whitehead's stories were also being framed for a specific audience, with the bulk of them appearing in the developing 'weird fiction' periodical press, predominantly *Weird Tales*. This was a leading magazine for horror and fantasy throughout the 1920s and 1930s that was associated with Lovecraft, who published in it, and who also refused the editorship of the magazine when it was offered to him. Whitehead's intended audience was therefore very specific; as a correspondent of Lovecraft, it may also have been that Lovecraft was on occasion his first reader, offering comments on stories prior to them being sent for publication—indeed, Lovecraft notes the 'charm and erudition of the writing' in Whitehead's work (Davies, 2012, p. viii). We know the closeness of the relationship between the two men because they co-authored two stories, 'The Trap' (from 1931, another story about people being fascinated by history) and 'Bothon' (written 1930, published 1946, about someone who experiences dreams of a past life in Atlantis, a civilisation lost under the Caribbean Sea). Whitehead had already begun writing before his arrival in the Caribbean—indeed, his first story, written in 1910, has a fully-formed Gerald Canevin as its narrator—and he left a significant body of work: the Wordsworth Editions collection of his work runs to 691 pages. To deal with all of this is far outside the scope of such a short piece as this. As such, what follows is an initial exploration into the territory carved out, both in weird fiction and as a coloniser entering a colonised space, by Henry S. Whitehead. The prevailing themes to be addressed are light, its importance indicated by the title of Whitehead's second (posthumous) collection of stories, *West India Lights* (1946), and the uses of History by a colonising agent seeking to bring order to a space perceived as unruly in terms of the islands' social, economic, racial, cultural, linguistic, and religious structures.

First published in 1927, 'West India Lights' is a story predominantly about themes of light, representation, and history, and was the title story of the book in which it was collected. In it, Whitehead's frequent narrator, Gerald Canevin, takes centre stage. Canevin is in the mould of other occult/psychic detectives such as Carnacki, the Ghost Finder, created by William Hope Hodgson (with a collection of stories first appearing in 1913); Dr Silence, created by Algernon Blackwood (first appearing in 1908); and Flaxman Low, created by Hesketh Prichard and Kate Prichard, who first appeared in 1898 and is often credited as the first psychic/occult detective (see Ashley, 2022; Leslie-McCarthy, 2008). Canevin, according to E.F. Bleiler, is 'a mask for the author, whose ancestral name was Caernavon', though Davies also states that Whitehead 'took great pleasure in pointing out that the name was made up of "cane" and "vin," which is cane wine, in other words rum, the typical product of the West Indies' (Davies, 2012, p. ix). Canevin is therefore a product of and representation of the author, Whitehead, and the stories are, like rum, a product of the Caribbean created for both internal and external audiences. Like the story itself, the name is also embedded in history through the question of the author's 'ancestral name'. This awareness of the layering of meanings is crucial to understanding the stories in which Canevin operates. In 'West India Lights', Canevin engages 'a fine old mansion on the hill back of Fredericksted on the West India Island of Santa Cruz'. There, he finds in his rooms a painting depicting the hanging of a pirate, Captain Fawcett, who had been executed on the island in 1824. While Fawcett is fictional, pirates did raid St. Thomas, in the Danish West Indies, in 1824, as part of the final stages of West Indian piracy; Roberto Cofresi, the last 'successful' West Indian pirate, who raided Danish shipping in 1824, was executed in Puerto Rico in 1825, and has since been co-opted as an icon of Puerto Rican nationalism. This is one such example of the interplay of history and fiction in Whitehead's work; an additional layer is that the US Virgin Islands were, according to the contemporary commentator Donald Hoover, ardently opposed to an 'administrative union' with Puerto Rico, which had been acquired by the US in 1898 (Hoover, 1926, p. 503). Unlike Cofresi, though, the pirate in the story is of European origins—a coloniser, not someone subsequently co-opted as an icon of resistance to it.

Although he immediately positions it as a piece of folk art, rather than that of a professional artist, Canevin is impressed by the portrait of Fawcett and sets about cleaning it:

> High as the colors were pitched, stilted as were the many characters, there was something convincingly lifelike about the thing… The colors too, on reflection, were not so much exaggerated. Did not one do well here to wear smoked glasses in the middle of the day? Was not the glowing indigo of the Caribbean incredible – the scarlet of the hibiscus painful to the unaccustomed eye?
>
> (Davies [ed.] 2012, p. 16)

Canevin's actions in cleaning the painting are therefore akin to Whitehead's actions in writing the story—both present a history regarded as in need of being cleaned up to render it 'usable' in the present. After cleaning the painting, Canevin tacks it up to dry, noticing as he does so that a tack has pierced the arm of one of the three pirates being hanged. Pleased with his work and his artistic discovery, he discusses it with the Maclane family, who are planters on the island; when they come to see the picture, the teenage daughter, Gertrude, is struck by the horribly realistic look of pain on the face of the pirate pierced by the tack—an expression that had not been present on the previous day. Canevin later extracts the tack; when he reviews it the next day, he finds 'in this clear, raw, morning light there remained only that look of apprehension which the artist had painted… no agony. Certainly no reproach. Queer tricks, strange illusions, those begotten of our tropical sun!' (Davies [ed.] 2012, p. 18) Canevin continues to investigate and finds that the picture had been painted by the aunt of the elderly female owner of the house he is renting; it was this aunt who had been jilted by the agonised pirate in the painting. ''twas more than paint, belike, went into the composition of that picture', intones Mrs Desmond, suggesting that her aunt had immersed herself in the voodoo of the island's Black inhabitants. This degree of 'otherness' is reinforced through her use of dialect in contrast to Canevin's perfect English, suggesting that even the white islanders are rendered 'exotic' through their immersion in Caribbean culture, as *creoles* to Canevin's *peninsulares*, as it were.[1] Canevin and Gertrude proceed to question the pirate through the means of getting the figure to blink—a process disrupted, and troubled, by the failing of the natural light and the need to turn to electric light.

It is under the electric light, still run by Danish agents well into the 1920s, and powering what Canevin describes as an 'unstable lighting system', that Canevin and Gertrude Maclane (daughter of 'Old Scottish Gentry-Planters') strike their bargain with the pirate, for whom Gertrude expresses tremendous sympathy (Davies [ed.] 2012, p. 24; 17]. Electric light generating a kind of artificial life—in this, perhaps, we see a nod by Whitehead to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, albeit with concerns about the place of electricity in Shelley's original text (Houe, 2016). Any question of queerness in the creation of life in *Frankenstein*, however, is disavowed through the constant presence of Gertrude and the promise of heteronormative narrative closure. Through their questioning, Canevin and Gertrude discover the pirate's buried hoard—on the condition that the painting is destroyed, setting the pirate free from his imprisonment the painting. Canevin keeps his part of the bargain: he recovers the hoard, destroys the painting, and the story ends with the marriage of Canevin and Gertrude, who promise to donate a significant sum to the (Christian) church to lessen the burden on the pirate's soul. The exorcism of the painting acts as an engagement with and disavowal of imperial pasts—given that Cofresi has been claimed as an icon of anticolonial resistance by some in the region, as a kind of Robin Hood figure, replacing him with a White European pirate drawn from the colonisers themselves disavows anticolonial resistance and allows Canevin to position himself as a more effective and responsible colonial extractor of resources. The abundant historical wealth being unlocked by the incoming American also provides tacit support for this new phase of colonialism (and of donations to Whitehead's church). Success suggests a greater degree of insight on the part of the Americans, of their ability to manage the colonies more effectively than the Danish (and, by extension, the multi-ethnic islanders), who had wealth taken away by piracy, rather than given to them. The 'real' history, however, remains embedded in the narrative, directing attention to it as well as deflecting from it.

An interest in piracy is, given the region and the subject matter's potential for horror stories, understandable. However, the return to this subject raises other points around the discourse of H/history in the Caribbean. Sir Derek Walcott, a Saint Lucian poet, interrogates History as 'a discourse of Western civilisation that establishes patrimonial claims of inheritance, that aligns cultural figures and geographical areas in relationships of centre and margin, authority and dependence, by means of affiliation and chronology', and these themes clearly play out in Whitehead's narrative (Llenin-Figueroa, 2014, p. 180). It is not under the glare of modern, industrial light that the magic of the painting plays out most effectively, but rather by the 'north light' coming through Canevin's window in the Caribbean afternoon (Davies [ed.] 2012, p. 16]. Light and history entwine in very specific ways—not just in the racist notion of the Caribbean as a 'dark space' of 'black magic' used to limit the success of the Haitian Revolution spreading to other colonial slave societies, but also in the very fact of light as a means of knowing, as a surveillance technology intended to extend power through knowledge and visibility. This is allied with its directionality, with the light of knowledge coming from 'the north', connecting projects of knowing with incursion from the north. This is connected to a point Llenin-Figueroa makes, namely that 'the changing technologies of artificial lighting also nurtured the increasing desire within certain scientific and political quarters to suppress shadows altogether', to render all things visible, subject them to the disciplinary gaze of science and order, and to therefore contain the things and people that can now be 'seen' (Llenin-Figueroa, 2014, p. 176). She goes on to say that '"the tropics" will never quite be able to be "seen" under the imperial, perpendicular, homogenising vision' of Western imperial projects, here symbolised by electric light—with tensions in the ability of the US and other colonising powers to successfully exert that power indicated by Canevin's assertion that the electric light sometimes fails on Santa Cruz (Llenin-Figueroa, 2014, p. 179). Fawcett continues to attempt to evade the imperial gaze, via his initial resistance to electric light, even while trapped in a painting at the perpetual moment of near death, only to ultimately reveal the location of his buried treasure once it becomes clear that he has willing colonial conspirators. Imperial projects around the extension of knowledge might be coming in from the north with the Americans, but the light that symbolises that both facilitates and problematises it as a project.

The treasure found by Canevin is at the heart of the story, though. After a cursory attempt to return it to its former (White) owners, indicating a continuing dividend of imperial prominence, the bulk of the treasure remains with Canevin, facilitating the marriage that Fawcett had been denied through the practice of its accrual. Regardless of theories as to whom, precisely, is represented by Canevin, a White, male, American body entering the Caribbean and extracting abundant resources from it, so soon after the purchase of the Danish West Indies and during the US occupation of Haiti, clearly activates an imperial structure. That those resources are prominently coded as the results of piracy confirms this line of thinking. While Canevin is unsettled by the business with the portrait, he is not hurt by it—far from it. He acquires a fortune and a beautiful young wife that aligns him with existing White elites on the islands. The light of the Caribbean hurts his eyes and possesses a kind of magic alien to the industrial Western world, but he is able to overcome it. In fact, it is the combination of his vision and the Caribbean light that allows him to end the 'unseen' suffering of the pirate in the portrait. It is worth noting that Whitehead returned to this story in 'Seven Turns in a Hangman's Rope' in 1932, filling out the action by returning to 1825 (as it is in this version) and the back story of Fawcett (or, in this story, Macartney) and Camilla, the aunt mentioned above. This story shows none of the same fascination with light, though a much deeper engagement with the history.

Whitehead also played with accuracy in history and fiction in the story, 'Mrs Lorriquer' (1932). The story begins with Whitehead taking to task the British author, Ronald Firbank (1886–1926), by skewering his decision to place three 'lady heroines' in the Virgin Islands in grass skirts, meaning that 'Mr Firbank was only 12,000 miles out of the way, although that is not bad for anybody who writes about the West Indies—almost conservative, in fact' (Davies [ed.] 2012, p. 565). Whitehead has Canevin go on to say that he had 'more than once reassured timid female enquirers, who had heard of our climate, but were apprehensive of living among "those savages and cannibals!,"' making it clear that the US Virgin Islands are in fact a prime destination for tourists (Davies [ed.] 2012, p. 565).[2] Canevin then narrates the tourist trade in grass skirts that has resulted from such inaccuracies, ironically attesting to the influence of economic imperialism and strategies by residents to manipulate it to their own advantage. The titular Mrs Lorriquer arrives by boat and meets Canevin by chance at the docks, telling him that 'it was because of some things of yours we had read' that she and her family decided to spend the winter on St. Thomas (Davies [ed.] 2012, p. 566). Canevin (and, by extension, Whitehead) therefore acts as a cheerleader for the region, something akin to the 'booster' so memorably skewered in Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* (1922). The narrative then unfolds through showing how Mrs Lorriquer is a 'different person' when she plays cards, a pastime she had never taken up until her husband's work on the aborted isthmian canal in Guatemala. While in Guatemala, Mrs Lorriquer and her husband lived in a former casino allegedly haunted by the ghost of the proprietor, Simon Legrand, who had been shot and killed there. Mrs Lorriquer, it transpires, is wearing a piece of his jewellery they found in the house, which binds Legrand to Lorriquer 'like those pouring grains of attenuated plasma described in *Dracula*'. This reference situates the story within other contemporary Gothic narratives—the Broadway play of *Dracula* debuted in 1927 and the film was released in 1931—though there was also *Nosferatu* in 1922 (Davies [ed.], p. 538). At the conclusion of the narrative, Canevin severs the spirit connection between Legrand and Lorriquer with a blade imbued with Holy water, ending the possession. In doing so, he also removes the decadent and corrupt French imperial presence, leaving only upright Americans—Mrs Lorriquer knows nothing of cards (at least, of gambling with them) by the story's conclusion, positioning Canevin's act of heroism as a masculine defence of honourable American womanhood. In cutting through the umbilical cord connecting Legrand to Lorriquer, the spectre of miscegenation is laid to rest—Mrs Lorriquer is returned to 'pure Americanism' and the degeneracy of French imperial failure is laid to rest. In combination with Whitehead's rejection of Firbank in the narrative's opening, this story operates as a powerful containment piece around norms of gender, sexuality, and imperial behaviours.

While the opening of 'Mrs Lorriquer' seeks to bring greater accuracy to narratives of the region through fiction, and to make it more desirable as a tourist location, Whitehead continues to position the Caribbean as a space of horror—somewhere haunted by its History, as practice, and its history, as in lived events and their continuing influence over the present. In our former story, Macartney/Fawcett is simultaneously a pirate in 1824 and a painting in the 1920s, able to bestow his hoard on Canevin in return for his final death—symbolised by the closing of his eyes in the painting, yet again showing the importance of vision. With 'Mrs Lorriquer', Firbank and others' fictional construction of the region and its inhabitants suggests a homogenisation, a flattening of Otherness by the imperial gaze, which attests to processes of Orientalism, a simplistic binary division between West/Self and East/Other. This is reproduced within the stories because of the bearer and nature of the Gaze—Canevin, a White American man, is our usual narrator, and his role is invariably 'to look into things' both literally (to bring his gaze to bear upon them) and figuratively (to investigate something, to make sense of it). Canevin therefore exists as part of an imperial project of the extension of knowledge, of the rendering safe of the hostile territory now being incorporated into the American imperial sphere. The penetrative aspect of American empire is reinforced in 'Mrs Lorriquer' through her husband, Colonel Lorriquer, who had 'a hand in many pieces of engineering, in various parts of the known world, and had spent several years on that vast American enterprise, the construction of the Panama Canal', showing someone who has both extended American control over other spaces through engineering projects that facilitate wider American projects of empire—of disciplining and 'knowing' the 'known world' (Davies [ed.] 2012, p. 567). This stands in contrast to the French presence in the region, which within the narrative only results in corruption and failed imperial projects. Both of these themes haunt the present through Legrand's 'occupation' of Mrs Lorriquer as a cautionary tale against 'decadence', another major fear of the 1890s into the early twentieth century among White racists and eugenicists, with women usually being positioned as more susceptible to its influence than men.

Legrand's ghost in 'Mrs Lorriquer' activates another contemporary narrative structure—the ghost story. The modern ghost story achieved a form of critical mass in the period when Whitehead was writing, with outstanding work being done by M.R. James, Edith Wharton, E. Nesbit, E.F. Benson, and others. Darryl Jones, writing of M.R. James' work, describes the form as a:

> Highly conventional, formalized, conservative form, governed by strict generic codes, which often themselves … reflect and articulate an ingrained social conservatism, an attempt to repulse the

> contemporary world, or to show the dire consequences of a lack of understanding of, and due reverence for the past, its knowledge and tradition.
>
> (Jones, 2013, p. xvii)

Whitehead's ghost serves a different function to a Jamesian spirit. Rather than a reverence for the past and a fear of the present, Legrand's ghost suggests the haunting of current imperial projects by the failures of those in the past, undertaken by other nations. Mrs Lorriquer brings those fears to the island physically (Legrand's spirit body is inside her), but also figuratively—what is the impact of these 'Othered' spaces on American women, and what is the impact of American women on the masculine thrust of imperialism? It is the resolutely White, heterosexual, all-American hero, Gerald Canevin, who is able to master the terrain and contain the threat both to and from American women to the American imperial project; while the story offers containment as a narrative conclusion, it also stresses the need for containment—a need that seems to bleed out of the story, even as Canevin seeks to reassure us that everything is fine. If everything is fine, why are there so many Canevin stories? It is also worth reflecting on the nature of Canevin's exorcism—Legrand has 'penetrated' Mrs Lorriquer through the 'giving' of jewellery; Canevin, with a thrust of his phallic sword imbued with Holy water, is able to save Mrs Lorriquer from her degradation at the hand of Legrand, whose race is represented by Whitehead in coded language, such as 'it would be hard to guess at his nationality' (Davies [ed.] 2012, p. 579). Such language again links the story back to ideas of eugenics and the fear of miscegenation. The presence of other European powers in the region, in explicit connection with the Panama Canal, also activates other American anxieties around control of the waterways in the region and the need to expel the potential threat, as with the American occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 and anxieties around German influence over it. While tourists could go to the US Virgin Islands, American imperial ventures generally raised fears of a reverse journey of the colonised—that imperial possessions represented an entry point into the American body politic. Owen Davies describes a house as being like 'an expression of the human body with its entrances open to spiritual and physical pollution, assault, and intrusion', with 'thresholds, both physical and symbolic [as] weak points' (Davies, 2016, p. 116). The US Virgin Islands operate in similar terms, albeit on a larger scale. While a symbolic strengthening of the US through expansion and geostrategic control of the waterways around the Panama Canal, the islands also represent a potential opening for 'pollution, assault, and intrusion', a structural weak point in the American national fabric. Similar concerns around a potential influx of people from the Philippines into the US were activated after the islands had been annexed by the US in 1898. As Colin Dickey says of ghosts, they are 'a means of coping with the unfamiliar', a narrative framework that can be imposed over history (and over other spaces) to put it in order, even as the slippery nature of ghosts acknowledges the difficulties inherent in that challenge (Dickey, 2016, p. 285).

Whitehead's fiction resists the flattening of the Caribbean into a general 'Orientalised' space but reinforces long-standing racist narratives about it, even as it questions them. This is the irony of Whitehead's fiction—it reinforces as it resists, lampoons tourists even as the islands were being offered up to them, and centres White experience through its constructions and reconstructions of Black Caribbean life. Whitehead undertakes similar work in his 1932 article for *American Speech*, 'Negro Dialect of the Virgin Islands', which sets out features of the English speech of the residents through detailing the imperial history of the islands, down to the point that Whitehead claims the 'Crucian and St Thomian Creole' as a:

> lingua franca invented by the early Moravian missionaries to meet the requirements of plantation slaves who combined the language of their European masters' families with their own African dialects, and who needed the common tongue to serve them when they passed by purchase or otherwise from one estate to another where a different European language was spoken.
>
> (Whitehead, 1932, p. 175)

In Whitehead's construction, even the language used by islanders is imposed on them from outside, structuring the way they interact with each other and their environment. Such an approach is indicative of a patronising paternalistic attitude to the islanders, even as Whitehead is more positive about some individuals. The one thing that cannot be claimed by White colonisers, and which actively seems to resist them, however, is the light. If considered in the terms of individual and collective engagement with the external world, light and language, key processes in our construction of and engagement with the world, constitute a significant barrier to experiencing the Caribbean outside Western frameworks. The language used to shape the world was allegedly brought to the islands as an imperial project, just like those using it were brought as enslaved people—in the beginning was the word, and the word was with the lords and masters. Such a suggestion is hugely condescending and removes all agency from the Black inhabitants of the islands in the construction of their language. Whitehead's work attempts to contain language, positioning it as a thing based in imperialism and understood through an extension and codification of imperial knowledge projects. Light, however, resists such projects of containment, both attracting and repelling American visitors, who come for the sun but find it difficult to withstand its glare.

Part of this project of resisting the flattening of the region aligns with Eugene Thacker's idea of the supernatural as 'existing immanently in relation to the natural', which is to say that the 'supernatural is revealed to co-exist with the natural. While this flattens the hierarchy between natural and supernatural, it also remains committed to a minimal distinction between them' (Thacker, 2015, p. 114). Thacker continues this by arguing that the governing principle of supernatural horror under the governing logic of the Enlightenment is 'knowing/believing, or alternately, of reason/faith', where 'the presence or absence of the object of horror is secondary to the possibility or impossibility of knowing "what" it is at all', something that plays out in Whitehead's work (Thacker, 2015, p. 129). Moving into the era of the weird, Thacker considers the division at the core of the form to be of 'thinking/being', where something exists that cannot be comprehended or something is thought but cannot exist (Thacker, 2015, p. 129). Whitehead's fiction explores this by combining the imperial act of extending knowledge over the US Virgin Islands with Canevin's act of extending knowledge over the occult forces at work there, subjecting the unknown/unknowable to the 'light of reason'. Other roughly contemporary authors consider similar themes; for instance, Roger Luckhurst remarks of Kipling's imperial Gothic story, 'The Mark of the Beast' (collected for English publication in 1889), that 'well beyond the centres of imperial administration… the magical or supernatural were frequently the means by which coloniser and colonised (mis)understood each other… at the frontier, it proves impossible to distinguish between knowledge and superstition, or even East and West' (Luckhurst, 2005, p. xxiv). The supernatural is apparent to those in the liminal spaces on the fringes of American empire; it can be wielded by islanders from a range of national and racial backgrounds. However, it is only the White American 'occult investigator by default', Gerald Canevin, who is able to both observe and resolve issues arising from the supernatural in ways that acknowledge differences (of space, of light, of religion) but seek to make those complex objects and approaches usable in a contemporary context. Not to reduce difference to indissoluble binaries, but to contain difference within knowable, usable, boundaries.

5 | GOTHIC/WEIRD CONTEXTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Both Whitehead and Gothic tales of imperial anxiety have clearly delineated paths from the past into their present. Stephen D. Arata famously writes of *Dracula* and other 'modern' Gothic narratives of the late Victorian era as 'stories which the culture tells itself not only to articulate and account for its troubles, but also to defend against and even assuage the anxiety attendant upon cultural decay', which Arata positions most persuasively as an anxiety around reverse colonisation (Arata, 1990, pp. 622–623). These fictions are both 'products of geopolitical fear' and 'responses to cultural guilt', offering both critiques of imperial practice and simultaneously 'justified punishment' of the threat to imperial power by those under it. In Bithia Mary Croker's work (collected for publication in 1893), for example, settings and events 'invest the narrative with considerable disquiet about the consequences of colonial possession', dramatising ideas that run throughout iterations of Imperial Gothic (Luckhurst, 2005, p. xxv). Luckhurst makes the point that 'communication systems developed ghostly doubles', or that the very structures and practices heralded as the progressive elements of empire were simultaneously, and uncannily, doubled by 'native' ingenuity

(Luckhurst, 2005, p. xxv). Whitehead explores these tensions, most notably through ideas of the extension of or failure of light, and in the competing representations of history the stories make present. The painting of Fawcett, the pirate, frames the past as perpetual, unusable, pain; Canevin's intervention lays that ghost to rest and, in the process, unlocks material wealth. Practices of representation are foregrounded, with islanders able to draw on processes outside those known to the Western mind, rendering them and the space as Other, even as Whitehead/Canevin seeks to position representation of that Otherness as a means of popularising and ordering the new colonial space. Rather than the irreducible Otherness of the islanders, Whitehead packages his narratives within the recognisable form of weird fiction that both dramatises and, crucially, resolves issues and renders the unfamiliar as, while not familiar, perhaps un/familiar. A divide remains, but it seems that the divide is more capable of being overcome.

In Whitehead's work, anxieties attendant on the expansion of imperial structures are clearly evident, most notably in the faltering provision of electric light with all of its connotations of the imperial gaze. Crucial to representation, and building on ideas discussed in the last paragraph, language is both claimed as a long-standing imperial imposition and further documented, by Whitehead, as a new extension of the imperial gaze of knowledge. However, language also slips away from the coloniser and can be seen to distort them when the 'wrong' words are in the 'wrong' place; this is evident in 'Mrs Lorriquer' when she uses archaic creole curses while possessed by the spirit of a murdered French gambler. This comes as such a surprise to onlookers in the marketplace that a Black islander shouts 'Ooh, me Gahd! Whoite missy tahlk to they in Cha-Cha!' (Davies [ed.] 2012, p. 575). Her outburst sparks fear in the women she had so recently abused and shows the increasing grip of the ghost of Legrand over her. Mrs Lorriquer's possession is also intended to spark fear in its imagined audience outside the text—White American readers in the 1920s and 1930s. As with many other narratives in the Gothic or weird traditions, tensions emerge from the slippages between states; Mrs Lorriquer is trapped in a game of Jekyll and hide-and-seek, simultaneously an upstanding middle class American woman and a gambler cursing in archaic creole slang, both in the private sphere of the card table and the public sphere of the marketplace. As her figurative 'decline', or her visible and audible Otherness, becomes increasingly apparent outside the home, a space where excesses can be more readily concealed, concerns around degeneration begin, like Legrand, to manifest themselves with increasing vigour. It is easy to read here the anxieties of colonial exposure in the Philippines outlined in Paul Kramer's work on the Philippine-American War (1899–1902) and the ensuing anthropology that sought to justify American treatment of Filipinos—this is indicative of broader concerns around race and eugenics at the time (Kramer, 2006).

Whitehead's work therefore emerges from, and contributes to, existing discourses in weird fiction, the Gothic, and American imperial history. It exists as part of the trend of 'modern Gothic', preferring contemporary settings to the remote past, but also trades on older Gothic tropes and disruptive elements of the weird through its engagement with history, as in 'Seven Turns in a Hangman's Rope'. It is steeped in the eugenic anxieties evident in the work of Lovecraft yet seems to try to take a different line—Whitehead seems to genuinely value *some* of the islanders, and island life itself, whereas Lovecraft's racism overwhelmed many other considerations. As a missionary to the island, Whitehead had to be invested in the ability of the inhabitants to come to God on equal terms with White people; Canevin's first appearance, in 1910 in Whitehead's first completed story, the hugely unsatisfying 'Williamson', trades on these fears of degeneration, but twists them in unexpected ways (other commentators regard this story more favourably than me). Whitehead's fiction is therefore more successful in many ways than that of Lovecraft—racist ideas remain in play, most notably around ideas of paternalism, but, contra Lovecraft, difference alone is not taken as sufficient to spark fear in the reader. Whitehead's desire to 'set the record straight' on the Caribbean also runs counter to many of the contemporary fears around race and immigration (Ngai, 1999). This, however, cannot be disentangled from the need to make the newly acquired islands in the Caribbean 'usable'—to set their future straight, rather than their past. Whitehead's stories, like the history in which they intervene, are complex and require careful attention to draw out the 'delicate ironies, quite imperceptible on their surface'.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The story also states that Mrs Desmond was a 'faded lady of the Old Irish Gentry', so it is possible that, despite the family having been in the West Indies since 'early in the 18th century', Mrs Desmond is depicted with an Irish accent.

[2] Whitehead may also have been opposed to Firbank as he was something of a scandal in terms of his sexuality; Firbank was openly gay and inspired by the Aesthetic Movement of the 1890s, particularly Oscar Wilde.

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