

A weird modernist archive: Pulp fiction,
pseudobiblia, HP Lovecraft.

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A Weird Modernist Archive: Pulp Fiction, Pseudobiblia, H. P. Lovecraft

Leif Sorensen

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

A Weird Modernist Archive: Pulp Fiction, Pseudobiblia, H. P. Lovecraft

Leif Sorensen (bio)

Modernist studies has been deeply enriched by the archival impulse that has led critics to emphasize the material culture of modernism as a phenomenon that circulated in little magazines and limited editions, and then crossed over into mass and middlebrow mediums.¹ Pulp magazines, with the exception of the noir breeding ground *Black Mask*, have not been included as significant participants in the material culture of modernism. Indeed the pulps' open courting of a mass market, their status as cultural artifacts that seem specially marked out for ephemerality, and their emphasis on satisfying readers' demands all provide clearly marked grounds for drawing a stark distinction between the pulps and modernist little magazines. Following Mark Morrisson's suggestion that the "contamination anxiety" theory of the modernist response to mass culture oversimplifies a complex set of engagements, I propose viewing the "contaminated" medium of the pulps as an alternative site for working out concerns about cultural integrity, the politics of representation, and access to a literary tradition that also run through more recognized venues for modernist writing.²

In modernist studies, the adjective pulp has come to be synonymous with the hard-boiled noir, leading Paula Rabinowitz to theorize noir as America's pulp modernism.³ Studies of detective pulps have effectively bridged the "great divide" between modernism and mass culture.⁴ In the process, however, the broad range of pulp writing has been effaced. In the spirit of literary recovery championed by Cary Nelson in modernist poetry, I suggest broadening modernist studies' engagement with pulp fiction.⁵ Within the wide range of pulp styles, the blend of fantasy, **[End Page 501]** science fiction, and horror referred to by its practitioners as weird fiction and most associated with the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* during the years between 1923 and 1940 offers an especially useful contrast to the detective pulps. While I focus on H. P. Lovecraft, the most recognized of the writers from the *Weird Tales* group as evidenced by the publication of a collection of his work by the Library of America in 2005, I emphasize his participation in a network of writers that includes

lesser known names and his work as a ghostwriter for writers whose names have long been forgotten. In these pulp fictions of fantastic cultural contact some unexpected topics arise. My primary interest is to show how questions arising from the elaboration of the modernist culture concept in the rarified circles of academic communities and modernist aesthetic circles work their way into popular culture.⁶

Lovecraft's work sheds an especially strange light on the status of the archive, a crucial component of both new modernist studies and modernist cultural production.

My discussion has four major components. Firstly, I suggest that the temporality of the *Weird Tales* archive can enrich our understanding of what is at stake in the archival turn. Secondly, I show that Lovecraft uses techniques from ethnography and antiquarianism to produce both a model of culture and a fantastic universe that draws its claims to verisimilitude by means of a strategic practice of citation. Thirdly, I illustrate how Lovecraft's investment in two different modes of cultural collection (ethnography and antiquarianism) shapes his worldview. Lovecraft effectively negotiates between two different and opposed archives: an antiquarian trove of the familiar and reassuring and a pseudo-ethnographic one of the different and horrifying. Fourthly and finally, I read Lovecraft's "The Shadow Out of Time" as a textual site in which all of these concerns come together in a horrific tale of the archive. In Lovecraft's weird fiction I find a distorted "archive story" that both illustrates the crucial importance of cultural archives in the modernist moment and offers a cautionary tale for contemporary scholars working in the archive.⁷ The archive comes alive in this weird story, reaching forward in time to act on those who attempt to use it. Through this image of an archive possessed of disturbing agency, Lovecraft's work challenges the tendency of high modernist writers to present themselves as authorities who control the archive and its meanings.

Weird Tales of the Archive

One reason why modernist...



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Leif Sorensen is
Assistant Professor of
English at Colorado
State University. He
has published articles
on ethnic modernist
writing in *American
Literature*, *MLA*, and
Genre.



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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
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