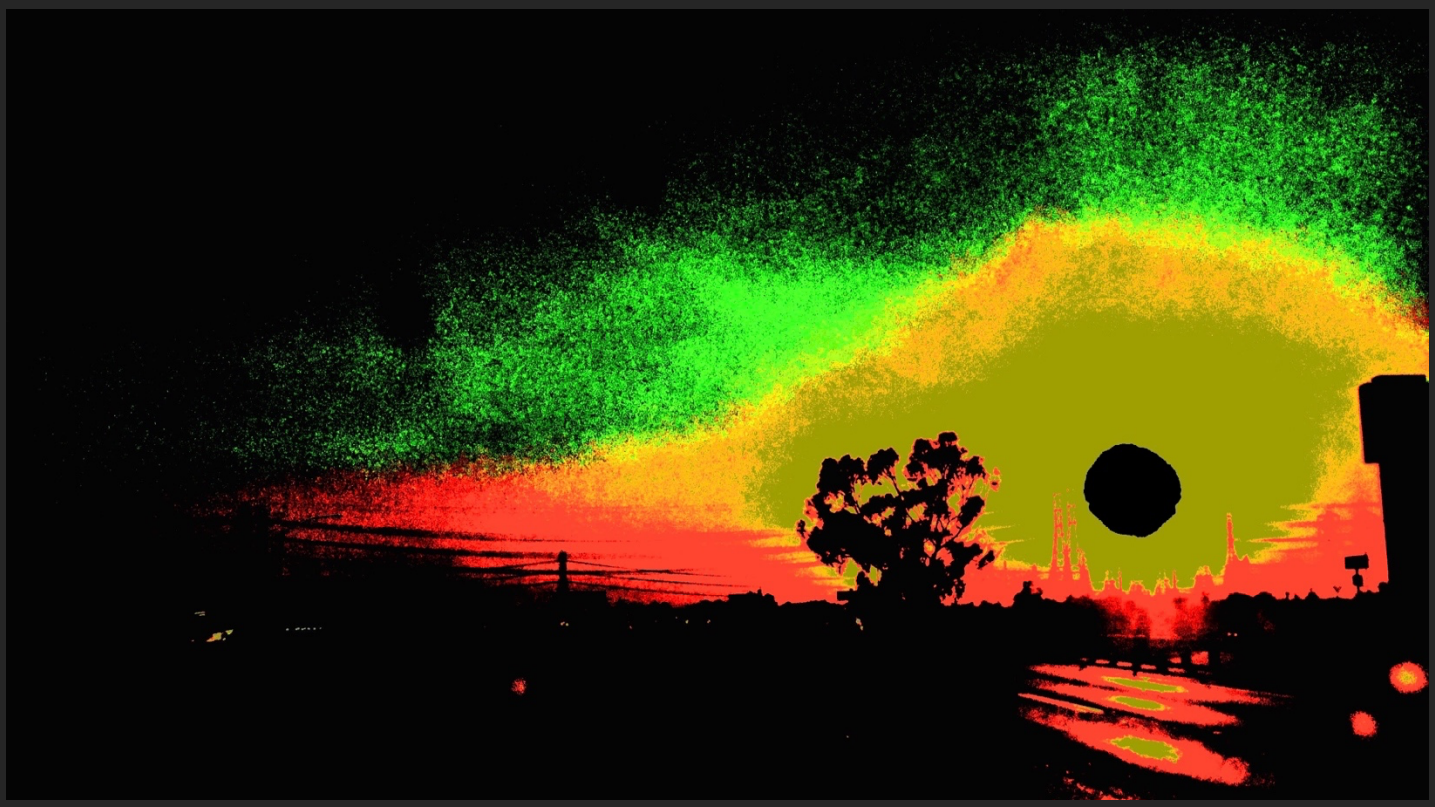
ALIENOCENE – THEORY/FICTION

KIN OF THE COSMOS



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"Dare not to delve into the world beyond humanity, the eldritch Truth touched upon long ago at Byrgenwerth."

~ Kin Coldblood description, *Bloodborne*, FROM Software

0. Copernicus

In many ways, it always comes back to the sun. Our closest star, the eponymous center of our solar system, and the closest and most obvious sign of a larger cosmos just above our heads, the sun imposes in a way more distant stars do not. Modern cosmology, or rather, the modern cosmological argument, begins with the sun claiming the position of heliocenter – the Copernican Revolution, which decentered the Earth and therefore humanity in favor of the sun. The later revelation of an even wider universe without any definite center merely further developed the same theme of heliocentrism – we are not the center, and we are definitely not the center, and there is no center. From a geocentric cosmos to one without any bearings,

we've ended up dislocated; without an ordering principle, the scientific cosmology became homogenous and total, banal – or horrific. A cosmos, an ordering of the material universe on principles and formations comprehensible to human life, is a way of making sense of our place in that universe, and establishing its center. There is something unsettling about a universe without a center, something fundamentally alienating about a universe where we do not have a privileged position to speak of the alien, yet the alien remains. Not only that, but the alien predominates – the world beyond humanity is infinitely larger than the planet we inhabit. The vast majority of that inhuman region is cold, empty, and utterly inhospitable. We shrink from the starry expanse. Within it lurks the possibility of something which does not exist for us, or against us, but totally without regard for us, which is neither angel nor devil, something which cannot exist within the pre-Copernican cosmology. The alien does not exist on a cosmological gradient between virtue and sin, or as an enemy or ally of humanity by nature, but solely as something from the outside. This is both literal and figurative; the xenobiological, extraterrestrial alien is an other so fully divorced from our own context as to be composed entirely of Otherness, constructed from our imagination of the Other. After all, we have never made contact, except in fiction, with any life from the grand Outside, from off-planet.

The alien matters, because the alien is the representation of the Other that may or not exist in the planetary Outside. The alien matters, because it is through the

alien that we can perhaps justify a cosmos, not merely a cosmology – an orientation to the structure of our universe. And the alien matters because it is the final Other which cannot be dissolved into any planetary (read: currently existing) framework of kinship or mutuality. The alien necessarily brings with it the vast Outside, the loss of human proportion – and inspires a vertiginous terror. What contact can be made with something entirely Other? By embracing the cosmic, the distance between ourselves and the alien, we can perhaps find a principle by which community or at least mutual recognition can occur. In the end, it comes back to the stars.

1. Arachnid Nomenclature

In "Staying With the Trouble," theorist Donna J. Haraway proposes a cosmos and temporal framework predicated on the Other, the Chthulucene. In conversation with temporalities marked by mass plantation agriculture, climate change, or the predominance of capital, the Chthulucene is a mythical, Gaian approach to a modern cosmos. The Chthulucene draws together, in a cluster of tendrils and pseudopodia, the chthonic lifeforms and processes of the Earth which have not (yet) succumbed to catastrophe and which can never be rendered knowable to human thought; the name inspired by the spider *Pimoa chthulhu*, which Haraway calls her "demon familiar" in

the task of reworlding, of producing a new cosmos. The 'chth-' stands for the chthonic, the earthy, the tentacular, composed of slime molds and octopuses as well as canines and humans, among whom Haraway stresses the idea of 'making kin.' There is, after all, a familial nature to coexistence on this planet – there is no Other which we did not, in a sense, grow up with in the same household, live within the same ecosystem, dwell within the same gravity well. To make kin is to recognize the "worlding and reworlding" of Earth in its unknowable complexity, to orient towards the Other as family and coinhabitants. The alienness of this Gaia, this Earth, is stressed, as the 'chthonic ones' are figured as flying, tentacled, buzzing, chitinous, slimy, totally physically other yet rooted in the same physical world. They are distant cousins of humanity, and the Chthulucene is their story as well as ours.

This kinship, however, runs aground at the edge of its cosmos. As a Gaian framework, one which brings forward the planet as a totality, a living thing, it has no border with the Outside. The alienness is our own and our cousins' – literal kin, however distant, from abiogenesis to zoonotic. We share the crucial points of the present and the origin, the Chthulucene and Gaia. In a literal sense, the chthonic focuses our attention on the geocenter, the planet itself as the core of our cosmos, and the cosmos stops more or less at the surface of the world. The Outside is outside the atmosphere, outside our ecological systems, and irrelevant to the Other which

she greets as kin. The planet becomes self-contained, if tentacled and throbbing with life; the sky is more or less ignored.

Pimoa chthulhu, however, is not the original name of the spider here. That would be *Pimoa cthulhu*, named for "sf writer H. P. Lovecraft's misogynist racial nightmare monster Cthulhu (note spelling difference)" – which Haraway edits and restates as chthulhu, "the diverse earthwide tentacular powers and forces and collected things" (31). Her tentacularity rejects Cthulhu as sign only of Lovecraft's xenophobic neuroses, but in doing so, turns the eye of her Chthulucene inwards, cutting off the extraplanetary for an 'earthwide' framework. The alien we can make kin with, for Haraway, is not really alien in origin, not extraterrestial. The extraplanetary outside is not peopled in her framework, and Cthulhu is figured not as an Other but as a 'nightmare' - a psychological phenomenon that is not the result of interaction with the real but solely a construct of pure bigotry. The 'xeno' underlying Lovecraft's xenophobia is missing from the equation, as it is only his (undoubted, indeed constitutive) misogyny and racism that produces the monster. Cthulhu, in short, stands in for other people, and the tentacular qualities of Lovecraft's famous creation, borrowed from oceanic life, merely serve to humanize coral and octopuses by the association. Haraway is not, in one sense, wrong: Cthulhu is a collection of elements of Earth life recombined to attempt a figure of the Other, and Lovecraft's xenophobia is constitutive of that xeno-entity – but we can, perhaps, find something

else lurking within the figure of Cthulhu, some alienation that is outside the planet. Within the story, though the alien high priest has dwelled on Earth longer than humanity, and emerges from the sea, Cthulhu is not of Earthly origin. Cthulhu has come from the stars, and in the end, we can use him to go back there.

2. Acosmic Horror

Howard Phillip Lovecraft (1890-1937) was perhaps science fiction and fantasy's most prominent xenophobe. Arguably, he is literature's most prominent xenophobe. By this, we do not merely mean that he was racist, antisemitic, sexist, classist, and agoraphobic, though these facets of his xenophobia dominated his life and work. Rather, Lovecraft's work epitomizes xenophobia as a reaction to the post-Copernican cosmos. His work was heavily influenced by the science of his day; the discovery of Pluto, a planet utterly unknown and immensely distant, inspired his story "The Whisperer in Darkness" in which that small, icy planet served as a staging ground for a sinister alien civilization. The modern cosmology that decentered Earth and incorporated a vast and alien universe was the core of his fiction – an atheist, Lovecraft was struck deeply by the image of an uncaring universe in which the entirety of his own world and culture were neither important nor even of interest to

the forces which governed reality. His work described a world in which immense tentacular beings moved and acted, worshiped by humans but without concern for them, including the eponymous figure in his novella "The Call of Cthulhu." With notoriously purple prose, Lovecraft attempted to describe his creations as indescribable, motivate them with incomprehensible motives, and form them into truly unearthly shapes. One of his most successful moments, in terms of prose, is the description of the sheer immensity of Cthulhu, rising from the ocean: "A mountain walked or stumbled." Scale is a crucial medium of horror for Lovecraft; his invented creatures are rarely if ever smaller or finer than the human form, even when their threat is not physical but intellectual or psychic. Architecture cut to a size greater than the human appears constantly within his work, often ruined, literally depicting a greater civilization now tumbled in cyclopean ruins. This scale is an intimation of the cosmic, in which the planet Earth is merely one among many, humanity holding no centered place. This is the genre of cosmic horror, Lovecraft's literary invention.

This is not to say, of course, that Lovecraft's cosmos was only defined by scale. Other horrors intrude often, most notably a horror of kinship. Lovecraft's protagonists find themselves related by blood to the monsters, or susceptible to their influence, more often than not – human interbreeding with the alien is of course a figure in his work for miscegenation, of which he had an acute horror. This literal xenophobia, though morally repugnant, furthered his intimation of a world in which his kind of

human was not set apart from a natural order spinning in chaos. Haraway's project directly opposes Lovecraft's deepest-held literary stakes by insisting on making kin as a positive ethical project; his racist nightmares are repelled.

But what of Cthulhu, then? Haraway rejects a kinship with Cthulhu, but we can see that there is more to the big green stumbler than just Earthly reflections of Earthly prejudice; there is also a fear of something Outside, of the Other that is not yet included in the Gaian project of kinship. Cthulhu's origins, both fictional and conceptual, lie off-planet, and Lovecraft's xenophobia stripped down to its core speaks of the incomprehensible, unnameable Other that dwells there: The alien, uncontacted and utterly un-kin. We would share nothing with them but the brute fact of material existence; perhaps some chemistry, perhaps not. The planetary Other, which is tentacular only because tentacles are as alien as life on Earth seems to get, lurks behind the pulp adventure of Cthulhu and in the writings of HPL. His xenophobia is absolute and principled, and through it we can see an approach to something that comes from the stars. Lovecraft was fundamentally a pessimistic materialist, but in that materialism he imagined the possibility of the extraterrestrial and its total alienation from us, in a universe that does not center us or elevate us. Humanity is alienated, and the cosmos does not care; entropy, galactic scale, all the immensities that Cthulhu's star-spawn figure are the horror of a post-Copernican self-image, of the incredible smallness of our planetary Inside in a cosmos that is nearly all Outside.

Earth is a rounding error, and Lovecraft's Great Old Ones are larger, older, more real than our own experience – that is the core of Lovecraft's writing, made manifest in octopus-faced monsters.

In short: Lovecraft's fear is of a universe without structure, in which Earth and even the heliocentric solar system are accidents and irrelevancies. His cosmic horror is acosmic, or rather, his xenophobia is the fear of an acosmos which has no place in it for humanity, because it does not have place, merely extension. Merely space, empty and undifferentiated. The inside is just a part of the outside, and the world is empty of meaning. Why not a giant squid-faced monster that will, someday, destroy humanity without noticing? A supernova in our galactic vicinity would be much the same, without the cold comfort of a recognizable body. Cthulhu is star-spawn, in the sense that Cthulhu is a figuration for a formless materiality threatened by the stars.

3. Sympathetic in Spirit

Lovecraft has many imitators and admirers, few of which have really improved upon Cthulhu. This is not because Cthulhu is not in dire need of improvement, but rather a general failing in the thoughtless replication of Lovecraft's particular fixation on infection and the tentacular entities as representation of the meaningless and

acosmic void. Cthulhu is demonized, or rather, the alien is made into an enemy. This would appear to be true of FROM Software's 2015 action role-playing game for the PlayStation 4, *Bloodborne*, as well. Nearly all living things in the world of *Bloodborne* can only be interacted with through violence; the player takes on the role of a hunter of monsters, slaughtering the innocent and guilty alike as they trudge through blood-drenched streets and nightmarish otherworlds. Lovecraft's influence is worn on *Bloodborne*'s sleeve, with creature designs and locations clearly directly inspired by the author (and even a coded message in the in-game item Milkweed Rune, which spells out 'HPL'). But *Bloodborne*, though it formulates a universe utterly uncaring and unkind and populated by 'Great Ones' and infected humans, does not replicate Lovecraft's acosmic revulsion as such, but rather depicts it. Xenophobia and xenophilia form the axis of *Bloodborne*'s cosmos, the ordering principles by which humans and Great Ones alike can orient themselves in a nightmarish universe.

First, to broadly explain the plot and world construction of *Bloodborne*, which needs must be a significant simplification of a robust and detailed world (the genre of game expects the player to be an active reader, piecing together short descriptions and offhand references to understand the world they embark in): In a city much like Prague, the player is employed to hunt lycanthropes. This city, Yharnam, is known for miraculously curative blood transfusions, and also for a plague which turns humans into brutal, mindless beasts. Over the course of the night of the hunt, the player

slaughters transformed human after transformed human, and is slowly directed into discovering the history of Yharnam and its peculiar blood. At about the halfway mark of the game, the tentacular begins to make itself known, as the player discovers the source of the blood: Ancient alien beings entombed deep below Yharnam, whose blood promises to 'evolve' humanity to a similar degree of power and comprehension of the cosmos. Beasthood, however, is not unrelated; when the human subject violently rejects these alien transfusions, they become lycanthropic and violently xenophobic, attacking everything but other beasts.

Here we have all the trappings of cosmic horror, but a different orientation – the xenophobia is a fundamental human reaction, but not the only human reaction. Moreover, it is the human, not the alien, that harbors beasthood, which is framed as regression to a primordial state (a theme in Lovecraft) triggered not by some degradation of infection but by the rejection of the liquid Other infused into the subject. But this only begins the underlying project of *Bloodborne*'s cosmic horror construction; the flip side is the aspect of xenophilia, which coexists with xenophobia. This is represented in the faction known as the choir, or the 'Choir of the Cosmos,' whose mantra is that "the cosmos are very near, only just above our heads." Amoral scientists and cultists, the Choir are not protagonists nor innately heroic – they seek blood infusions to become more than human, and end up losing themselves to become alien beings, enacting a rejection of their own humanity for the Other and a

desire to attain the Outside which results in their total replacement of themselves. And yet, they are not unsuccessful, but have in fact made common cause with one of the Great Ones, and not only that but a Great One closely resembling the infamous Cthulhu. Called Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos, this character is incomprehensible – her design is far less humanoid than most depictions of Cthulhu, and there is no way to communicate with her in-game, nor do the Choir appear to have had much success in speaking with her. Nonetheless, she is uniquely interesting as a Cthulhoid creature because she is a mute, incomprehensible alien monster and also fully sympathetic – the player finds her silently bent over the corpse of another alien being, and with investigation can discover that she is known as the 'Left Behind' Great One, as the rest abandoned their bodies to enter other realms, and she appears unable to. Her yearning is palpable (an effective piece of art direction by the game designers) and her alliance with the Choir comprehensible, in that both seek access to the 'cosmos' of the Great Ones. This is, to stress again, without any communication between Choir and Great One other than mutual presence and mutual sympathy; there is no sign that humans can understand her thoughts in anything like a verbal way. The closest one can come is a gesture which the Great Ones recognize, a vague motion of the arms, which is called merely 'making contact.'

(I should note that I, personally, have a great affection for the Choir – they are strictly speaking incorrect about the world in which they exist, in a variety of ways, and morally atrocious, but their higher ideals of contact with the alien appeal. Well, more than appeal. I habitually wear their symbol, a pewter badge in the shape of an eye; the pupil is a glass bead backed by an image of nebulous and starry space. In this way, it approximates the object within the fiction, which, being only a two-dimensional visual, might be set with a black and green stone, or open onto the cosmos itself, or be a similar tromp l'oeil. It gives me a certain comfort to hold, and even carries a certain romance. After all, the Choir's ambition is romantic, in the sense of seeking out contact with the sublime and cosmic; it is also romantic in the more colloquial sense. It seems to me, at least, that contact with the Other, in sympathy and attempting to understand them without reducing their difference to a variation on yourself, is the essence of romance – to come to terms with the internal cosmos of another person, which will never be like our own. In that sense, the grand framework of the Choir's xenocontact is the macroversal reflection of the miniature contact between two people, and a reminder of the ethical dangers and grand hopes in any universalism. When I feel against my solar plexus the weight of a small pewter bauble, it serves as a reminder that the people around me share an inescapable world with me, no matter how incommensurable we are to each other. In this sense, I approximate an axis mundi, the sun of my small cosmos, sharing a larger space with other stars. This is, I freely admit, a self-aggrandizing frame of mind, but I hope my reader will afford me that indulgence when it comes to what I wear around my neck.)

Nonetheless, this star-spawn is sympathetic, even tragic – and indeed, so are all the Great Ones. This is the thematic core of *Bloodborne*, the underlying secret: The Great Ones, for the most part, are driven by sorrow. Drawing on a somewhat glib understanding of evolutionary biology's r/K selection theory (according to interviews with the primary director and writer, Hidetaka Miyazaki), the Great Ones cannot reproduce, and "every Great One loses their child, and seeks a surrogate." R/K selection theory suggests that species whose infants can fend for themselves and involve fewer resources to (re)produce will have many more offspring, and many of them will not survive, which is the 'r' strategy; conversely, species whose offspring are resource-intensive, such as whales and humans, are 'k' strategists and can produce only a few offspring which they need to survive. In *Bloodborne* this relationship is related directly to the complexity and 'degree of evolution' of the organism, with more 'advanced' organisms producing fewer offspring in their lifetimes; the Great Ones, being incredibly advanced, are doomed to miscarry, as each produces less than one child. This and the circumstances of Ebrietas combine to outline *Bloodborne*'s position on the Lovecraftian: Cthulhu inhabits the same universe we do, and thus faces tragedies not dissimilar to our own. The same material laws of nature that define human existence must define alien existence, in an acosmos empty of external meaning; the Great Ones are "sympathetic in spirit"

because they will, inevitably, know loss the same way humans do. The condition of material existence is the condition of being subject to material contingency, and thus, transience and loss are inevitable no matter how 'evolved' something is held to be. *Bloodborne*, beneath all the gore and monster-hunting, is a story of a certain universal equality of tragedy, a common ground between immense tentacular god-beings and humanity. This is the grounds for a kinship not predicated on biological or ecological entanglement; shared physical laws do not imply membership in any system of resources other than the sum total entropy of the universe (which is hardly a pressing concern). But shared physical laws, shared materiality – the empty flatness of an acosmic universe – ensures that the Other and humanity share the same basic conditions of loss and vulnerability to tragedy. The fanatical xenophilia of the Choir and the xenophobic rejection of beasthood together frame a set of meanings imparted on the Great Ones, but their true meaning is a kind of tragic kinship, bound together by our mutual subjection to an uncaring universe.

This is by no means limited to universes containing mutagenic blood and tentacular god-beings. Cthulhu would, assuming our general portrait of the universe in material terms to be correct or at least not wildly incorrect, be subject to many of the limitations within time and space that humans face; be subject to the same existential dilemmas we endure; be fundamentally a being within materiality, and within a material universe. The Choir of the Cosmos seek to become 'kin of the

cosmos' by self-modification, by attaining blood ties that effectively remove them from the sphere of their Earth's biology and kinship networks, and in doing so self-destruct – nearly none survive the night of the hunt, and none of them remain capable of rational thought, even without the player character's violent involvement. Yet, they already possessed a kinship more meaningful than blood, in mutual constraint within material contingency – mutual finitude. They, and the Great Ones, and even beasts, were already kin within the acosmos.

4. The Tentacular Void

Of course, this an abstract point. The alien of science fiction is a purely speculative object; the *Pimoa cthulhu* is a concrete and material entity in the world. There is, in a sense, no pressing need to account for the planetary Outside as a location to find Others to reconcile with or make contact with. We simply don't see any aliens out there, in a very literal and material sense. So an account of approaching the extraplanetary Other that relies on the existence of that Other in material fact is left waiting indefinitely for first contact before it can crystallize.

However, we might consider what an ethical stance of kinship can do to our acosmic material reality. We do not want to be left like the antagonist in *Ad Astra*,

searching obsessively for alien life in order to justify a meaning for outer space, in order to construct a cosmos. Instead, there must be a way to understand this kinship, extended beyond Gaian geocentrism, in the absence of actual tentacled beings to recognize as kin. Not engaging in the odd edge cases of object-oriented ontology, one can instead perhaps consider that peopling (or rather, monstering or aliening) the void helps us consider a more general orientation towards the Other, perhaps including the terrestrial Other. Even if there are no aliens, any aliens that could exist would exist within the same conditions of materiality that we enjoy. Any Other that can be framed within acosmic materiality must share a certain tragedy, a certainty of loss and decay that is fundamental to material conditions. This shared basis is not yet a cosmos, because it is only establishing a quality of the acosmic conditions that might allow for more mutual reconciliation.

This should also not be mistaken for any guarantee of mutual recognition or friendship. Kin are not always kind; sympathy in spirit does not ensure good relations. (This is of course present in *Bloodborne*, via the constraint of game mechanics to violence as fundamental mode of engagement). The aliens which do not necessarily exist should not be loaded down with all the qualities we value, simply because we have a fundamental kinship to them. Instead, it should simply act against the misanthropy of Lovecraft, the reflexive xenophobia of cosmic pessimism. Any Other that can exist shares the conditions of the material with us, and therefore suffers loss

and transience; though they orbit other stars, they experience the acosmos and its horrors as well. There could, perhaps, be a form of community in that; perhaps a cosmos could be constructed around the Other, which has both planetary Outside and reconcilable Inside.

Regardless, even in the absence of the alien, we might benefit from considering how the alien operates as an Other, in order to affirm that it is not biology nor specific contingent relationship that creates otherness nor kinship, but a relationship of each to the universe; while two humans are far less alien to each other than hypothetical tentacular beings (or literal, Earthbound tentacular beings like the octopus) they are still in some small sense alien and kin in a way that does not rely on shared evolutionary history.

5. Kin of the Cosmos

To return to heliocentrism, any community figured around this acosmic cosmos could do much worse than to figure their 'inside' around their home star. The sun organizes our material reality as much as the planet Earth; if we have an inside, it is planetary but also solar. But, instead of a single axis of distinction from Planet to

Outer Space, inside to out, human to alien, we might consider the framework of Giordano Bruno.

Bruno, burned at the stake in 1600 C.E., was one of the earliest European thinkers to propose that the sun might be a star – or rather, that every other star was a sun as well. This vision of the universe might be called 'centerless' and thus acosmic, but that would be incorrect. Instead, he imagined a world of infinite centers, each sun orbited by its own worlds with their own histories and inhabitants. This can serve as a solution – a cosmos that is ordered by many centers, rather than just one, with every star a sun. In the conditions of a material universe, i.e. finitude and acosmic regularity, a cosmos can be mapped outwards from our own relation to the other: each other, within humanity, and also inhuman others within the planetary sphere, and also alien others that might inhabit that vast Outside. An acosmos relies on emptiness, lack of texture, so that distinctions cannot be made; a community of kin, even kin who are in no way closely related or even mutually comprehensible, allows for the construction of a cosmos within and by the medium of the same finitude and blank materiality that created Lovecraftian despair.