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Racial Terror and the Struggle for Freedom in the HBO Series *Lovecraft Country*

HBO's *Lovecraft Country* (2020-) is based on Matt Ruff's 2016 novel and explores the weird and horrifying world of H.P. Lovecraft and the very real Jim Crow-era racism that plagued the U.S. during that time. The series, developed by Misha Green and produced by Jordan Peele, places Black protagonists at the center of a Lovecraftian horror story. The Black characters have to face shoggoths, grand wizards, magic but they also have to deal with and escape very realistic horror, in the form of the racist police violence and white supremacy. They almost always respond to the terror brought upon them by whiteness, whether it is real or supernatural. By bringing the Black characters—who were often the metaphorical villains of Lovecraft's stories—into the center of representation, the series allows for a new layer of meaning to Lovecraft's fear of the other. Lovecraft's horror "was borne from white Americans' malignant, baseless fear of the other—of Black people, of Latinx people, of immigrants, of Jews" (Foussianes, 2020). *Lovecraft Country's* horror, however, is borne from a fear of the very real violence that results from racism and prejudice. Lovecraft's racist beliefs are well documented, and both Ruff's book and Peel's take on the show seek to invert his xenophobic preoccupations, using monsters inspired by him to highlight the darkness of the Jim Crow South. *Lovecraft Country* "reclaims horror and fantasy fiction as genres enjoyed by Black people" (N.B, 2020) and also

demonstrates how those genres can be improved when they focus on inclusion of ethnic minorities, racial diversity and non-white representation.

Lovecraft Country has been accurately described by several reviewers as a "supernatural allegory for racism" (Zonneveld, 2020; Romano, 2020). In the wake of nationwide protests over the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and most recently of the 20-year-old Dante Wright, the show's focus on the literal terror of racism could not be more timely or appropriate. By using supernatural terrors as metaphors for real racial and societal violence and discrimination, *Lovecraft Country* explores the terrifying realities of the contemporary Black American experience. The racial aspect of the supernatural symbolism of *Lovecraft Country* enhances its potency and deepens the meaning of its story and, at the same time educates the viewers about the many manifestations of American bigotry.

The series is a collage of influences that can be traced back through America's history of racial atrocities: In "Whitey's on the Moon," Tic compares the Aryan society Sons of Adam to KKK by noting dryly "seems the KKK isn't just calling themselves grand wizards anymore." In the next episode "Holy Ghost," we actually see a burning cross planted in the front yard of Leti's house. In the same episode, Emmett Till, also known as Bobo in the show, asks the spirits if his trip to the South will go well and the reply he gets is "No." Till was 14 years old when he was brutally lynched by two white men while visiting family in Mississippi in 1955. "Jig-a-Bobo" opens with Till's funeral, with Diana in line to view her friend's body, while the stench of death fills the humid Chicago air. In "A History of Violence," Montrose, Tic's father, looks at a fire and mutters, "Smells like Tulsa"—the scene of the horrific 1921

massacre. Four episodes later, "Rewind 1921" takes us straight into the heart of the Tulsa Race Massacre.

The first scene of the pilot episode "Sundown" opens on the protagonist, Atticus "Tic" Freeman, fighting in the trenches against an unseen enemy. An abrupt explosion transforms the visual from black and white to color, and the cameras zoom out to display the full scale of the battlefield and reveal the fantastical enemies: spaceships, UFOs and flying Chuthlu-like monsters. The visuals of the scene are a tribute to old-school pulp fiction, with red and green lasers lighting the battlefield and monsters at times taking up the full focus of the camera. By beginning with such a realistic, supernatural scene, it is immediately established that the show is set in an alternate America in which monsters are actually real. The combination of vivid imagery and the soundtrack background of this scene play an crucial role in mediating the message of the pilot by drawing a parallel between the brutality of the Lovecraftian monsters to that of the everyday racism the characters experience. The theme of police brutality and abuse of power in *Lovecraft Country* are more than present. Constant parallels are drawn between members of law enforcement and the deadly Lovecraftian monsters. While Tic, Uncle George and Leti travel through Devon County in search of Tic's father, they confront both hostile shoggoths and police officers. Lovecraft introduced the protoplasmic beasts shoggoths in his 1930's novels *At the Mountains of Madness* and *Funghi From Yoggoth* and the show's depiction of them is also quite terrifying. The show draws similarities between the local police and the brutal monsters that hide in the surrounding woods by closely linking the fight scenes with the monsters and the police. By making both

police and monsters fight only at night—the monsters due to their light sensitivity, and the police because they enforce the laws of a "sundown county," which is also hinted by the title of the episode, a place that Black travelers must leave before sunset in order to avoid racist violence—the show further establishes the connection between its villains. Later in the episode, the two threats symbolically merge as the local Sheriff Hunt transforms into a shoggoth and proceeds to attack his own men, completely dissolving the separation between the two horrors and merging them into one terrifying, monstrous entity. By closely comparing monstrous violence to racially motivated violence, the show explores themes of hatred, discrimination, police brutality, and racial bias and comments upon how police violence is deeply rooted in America's anti-Black racism. As Jonathan Majors, who plays Tic Freeman in the series, explained in an interview with *Texas Monthly*, "to be a Black man in America, you are born into the horror genre. You are not safe." In the show, that statement even applies to Black children, as in "Jig-A-Bobo," viewers witness first hand Emmett Till's funeral and several minutes later they see Diana becoming a victim of a violent encounter with two racist white police officers who ambush and question her about her mother, as one of them casts a curse on her.

Another theme that *Lovecraft Country* also tries to touch upon is the struggle for freedom of Black people. From the emancipation to present day, African-Americans seem to be in a constant struggle to attain equal treatment and freedom. The show addresses how Black people are living in a space between freedom and unfreedom—free from slavery but unfree from racial violence and societal bias; and how racial stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination reflect on how Black people

conceptualize and value their own selves. In "I Am" episode, after experiencing freedom and sexual liberation of Josephine Baker's world in France, Hippolyta is furious that she had to shrink her own personality in America to be likable to white people. "They found a smart way to lynch me without me ever noticing a noose," she says of the white people who boxed her into her limited life.

"I Am" episode, shifts the focus particularly to the Black female figure and delivers a greatly symbolic and powerful scene when Hippolyta travels to what initially looks like an African village. The village later appears to be located in the American Southwest sometime in the 1800s. Hippolyta is trained by Black warrior women to become a fierce warrior herself, like her namesake, who is Queen of the Amazons. Nawi tries to strip away any fear left in her and the rest of the warrior women. "I cannot tell you what true freedom is," Nawi says. "You have to find out yourself, but right now, you are too afraid to go looking." Hippolyta rises to the occasion, learning to fight back, leading her fellow Black warrior women into battle against Confederate soldiers. She beheads a man and gives her all-woman army an impassioned and uplifting speech explaining to them that they have every right to fight for their freedom:

We are here because we didn't believe them when they told us our rage was not lady-like. We didn't believe when they said our violence goes too far. We didn't believe when they said that the hatred we feel for our enemies is not god-like. They say that to women like us because they know what happens when we are free. Free to hate when we must, free to kill when we must, free to bring destruction when we must. That is our freedom, that is our

prayer, no matter what they think of us when we grind them into the dust.

That is our love!

In this way, Hippolyta is finally able to act against white oppression, not only as a Black person but also as a strong independent woman. By freeing herself from the shackles of both racial and gender discrimination, she can be her true self—"Hippolyta, [the] discoverer." Stripped of any form of prejudice and coercion white society forced upon her, she is finally free. Her struggle for freedom resembles the struggle of Black women not only against racial discrimination but also against patriarchal norms, women's oppression and male dominance. *Lovecraft Country's* provides really powerful representations of Black women and fosters a deeper understanding on female empowerment and what their life looks like without having limitations placed on them because of who they are. *Women Of The Lens* notes that *Lovecraft Country* "allow[s] Black [female] bodies to inhabit their characters in believable ways" and focuses on the "importance of Black women behind and in front of the lens." Leti's powerful line "My name's not Girl. My name is Letitia Fucking Lewis" in the pilot episode, "screams that Black women have a voice, are talented, are not faceless and are certainly not nameless" (ibid.).

The show's portrayal of the struggle of the Black characters can be seen as a reflection of the actual struggle of the Black people today, who are trying to liberate themselves from the shackles of oppression and kill the big ugly monster of systemic racism and discrimination once and for all, so all people regardless of the color of their skin, sexual orientation, religion, race, ethnicity and any other personal characteristics can finally be free. Jurnee Smollett, who portrays Leti, in an interview

with *Harper's Bazaar* described the show "essentially, [as] protest art" and notes that "more than that, we're just telling the truth." *Lovecraft Country* can clearly be read as a symbolic yet crucial contemporary cultural representation of this struggle for freedom. The series was created before George Floyd's, Breonna Taylor's, and Daunte Wright's murders, but it came after the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, and Sandra Bland. The racial terror in *Lovecraft Country* is an ever-present reality in the U.S. Once the viewers search deeper and look past the dark mansions, the wicked wizards and the shoggoth monsters, they can understand that the supernatural and fictional land of *Lovecraft Country* is not a distant place after all. The struggle for real freedom will not end until all the others can be truly free. In the words of Angela Davis, "freedom is a process of becoming, of being able to see and understand difference within unity, and resisting the tendency to reproduce the hierarchies embedded in the world we want to change" (2012, p. 14).

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