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Race and Horror in HBO's *Lovecraft Country*

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ABSTRACT: This article is an analysis of the HBO series *Lovecraft Country* in terms of the elements of racism and traditional horror elements present in it, including elements typical of the prose of one of the genre's creators, H. P. Lovecraft. The purpose of the article is to explore typical horror elements that appear in the series and show how the authors of the series combine traditional horror with the horror of everyday life in the oppressed Black community in 1950s America. At the beginning of the article, the series and its main idea are described. The article then takes up the subject of the portrayal of racism in the series, specific examples of which are presented and discussed in terms of their compatibility with the realities of America at the time. The article also discusses elements related to the anti-racism movement – situations presented in the series that exemplify the character's struggle against racism are shown. Then the otherness depicted in the series is discussed – not only racial otherness, but also gender and sexual otherness; in this part of the article, otherness is given as a reason for oppression by society. The article also explores the use of traditional elements of horror genre in the series – it indicates which scenes in the series use the traditional concepts of the horror genre, and attempts to show which characters in the series function as monsters in the story. At the end of the article, it is explained how the series draws inspiration in the works of Lovecraft, whose name appears in the very title of the series.

KEYWORDS: horror, Lovecraft, racism, white supremacy, antiracism, otherness, monster, America in 1950s

About the Series

Lovecraft Country is a television series produced by HBO that premiered in 2020. What is initially just a story of a search for his missing father by a Black veteran of the Korean War turns into a tour of the 1950s America, where the

threat is not only a racist society but also monsters taken straight from the pages of H. P. Lovecraft's books.

Tic, the main character of the story, returns from the war and starts searching for his father Montrose, who disappeared some time ago, having sent his son a letter. He is initially aided in his search by his uncle George and Letitia, a childhood friend. The search for his father quickly turns into a battle with forces that the characters previously had no idea existed. The first episode makes the viewer realize that the racism of America at that time is one of the main themes of the show – the characters from the first minutes face racist treatment not only by the society as such but mainly by the police officers. However, it is not only the racism of society that is a threat here – the protagonists discover a world of magic, monsters, and supernatural powers. They meet a cult whose head is the father of Christina, the series' main antagonist. Throughout the story, the protagonists race with Christina in search of a lost book that grants immortality and can provide them with answers to their questions. During their adventures they meet ghosts, ancient creatures taken straight from the pages of Lovecraft's novels, as well as face the society and the police that continue to oppress them. The show is a mix of many elements typical of horror fiction, but it also uses elements from other film genres, such as science fiction. It is a multi-layered story with multiple storylines, but its entire backbone seems to be based on combining the horror genre with the horror of everyday life for the Black community in racist America.

The series is based on Matt Ruff's book of the same name and was directed and adapted for television by Misha Green. It premiered in 2020 – an important year not only for the Black community, but also for all people concerned with the issue of racism, due to the death of George Floyd and the increased activity of the Black Lives Matter movement, under whose banner protests against violence against Black people were held around the world. The series thus fits in with its anti-racist overtones at a time when the anti-racist movement was leading protests around the world.

The purpose of this article is to show how the series portrays the theme of racism and the real-life struggles of not only Black people, but also other minorities in 1950s America, and to connect them with elements typical of the horror genre. This article is also an exploration of how traditional genre assumptions are used by contemporary genre creators who combine these assumptions with current messages. Finally, it is also an attempt to analyze how conservative pop culture lore can be updated in more emancipated times.

Racism in the Series

Since the series is set in 1950s America and its main characters are Black, it is not surprising that the issue of racism is addressed from the very beginning of the series. The racism portrayed in the series is one of the main sources of horror and is not related to any supernatural forces; it is people, specifically the white part of society, who are responsible for creating terror and act as

“monsters” here, and the scenes of racism shown in the series seem to be taken out of the real life of Black people in the 1950s.

At the very beginning of the series, Atticus Freeman – the protagonist – returns to his hometown after years of serving in the military and faces segregation on a bus in a specially designated area for people of color; that is how the series begins a journey through a world of monstrosities, not only supernatural, but also social. Besides segregation on public transportation, the series shows many other examples of racial segregation in the United States of the time: Black people enter public places through different entrances than white people; they use libraries specifically reserved for them; in stores they are served only by Black employees; and their presence on the street arouses distaste and indignation among other passers-by, giving the impression that Black people do not belong there, that they have no right to walk the same streets as white people. There is a tension among the white passers-by, hatred in their gaze, and embarrassment in the eyes of the Black people. It is only in their own neighborhoods, inhabited by the Black community exclusively, that they can feel comfortable and at ease, and going out into the streets does not involve hateful stares and the need to avoid eye contact with white people. The only obstacle standing in the way of well-being in the Black community is the police officers who are always there somewhere – watching, marking their presence and readiness, as if waiting for something to happen so they can step in and intervene.

Institutional racism is very marked in the series and we can see it in many of the situations the characters find themselves in. It is especially related to the activities of the police, which is one of the main sources of oppression in the series. Black people are observed by police officers not only in their neighborhoods, but especially in other parts of the city, inhabited by the white population. The police are always ready to react when a Black person does something they think is suspicious or when a conflict actually arises. The police's approach to Black people, similar to the approach in America today, is brilliantly illustrated in episode five when a Black woman, as a result of drinking a magic potion, transforms into a white woman and goes out into the city, exploring the world from a white woman's perspective. When she collides with a Black teenager who then wants to help her, the situation is immediately of interest to police officers, who drive up to the woman. Both the teenager and the woman automatically put their hands up – the teenager does it because he knows that in a collision with a white woman he will be charged with causing the incident; the woman does the same because her habits and experiences as a Black woman are stronger than a temporary change in appearance. Inevitably, it is the Black teenager who becomes the target of the police aggression – he is thrown to the ground and forced to admit to attacking or even molesting the woman. It is only the woman's defense that allows the boy to be released and the incident to end – although her attempts to defend the boy are met with disbelief from the police who try to force her to file a complaint because

“[t]here is no need to protect this animal” (Green, Sackheim 2020). The police’s hostility toward Black people is also evident as the protagonists travel to a place that its sheriff refers to as “sundown city” – after sunset, Black people are not allowed on the street there.

During their journey, the characters do not experience hostility only from police officers – another suspenseful scene plays out at the restaurant where they attempt to eat. When they enter the restaurant, the waiter and a client freeze in astonishment at the fact that Black people dare to cross the threshold of the establishment. The waiter is confused and frightened, the white customer ostentatiously leaves. Eventually, the waiter goes into the back room to notify the fire department, whose members arrive at the restaurant with guns and immediately open fire on the fleeing characters.

The scale of the problem of racism in America in the 1950s is also illustrated by the activities of the main character’s uncle, George Freeman, who is the author of a guidebook for Black people, aiming to describe safe places for Black people to visit and to warn them of places that they should avoid because of the dangers there. He travels across America and checks out various locations, assessing their safety for the Black community. During these trips, he often encounters hostile and aggressive behavior from white people, which he also includes in his guidebook as places to stay away from. All these examples show how successfully the series portrays the problems of the Black community in America at that time, and the dangerous situations in which the characters find themselves are a source of horror and cause tension in the audience.

Antiracism

The series problematizes the subject of racism both by including its rather drastic and vivid depictions and by featuring many elements related to the anti-racism movement, comments on the harm of racism, and suggestions for fighting racism.

During the scenes of the first episode, in which the three Black characters make their journey across America experiencing various types of discrimination from white society, one can hear a real-life speech by James Baldwin, an African-American writer and activist, who said these words during a debate about fulfilling the American Dream at the expense of Black people:

I find myself, not for the first time, in the position of a kind of Jeremiah. For example, I don’t disagree with Mr. Burford that the inequality suffered by the American Negro population of the United States has hindered the American dream. Indeed, it has. I quarrel with some other things he has to say. The other, deeper, element of a certain awkwardness I feel has to do with one’s point of view. I have to put it that way – one’s sense, one’s system of reality. It would seem to me the proposition before the House, and I would put it that way, is the American Dream at the expense of the American Negro, or the American Dream is at the ex-

pense of the American Negro. Is the question hideously loaded, and then one's response to that question – one's reaction to that question – has to depend on effect and, in effect, where you find yourself in the world, what your sense of reality is, what your system of reality is. That is, it depends on assumptions which we hold so deeply so as to be scarcely aware of them (Baldwin 1965).

Baldwin's words (which we can hear spoken by Baldwin himself in the series) address the problem of the American Dream and the fact that there are two Americas – one seen through the eyes of the white man who can find opportunity, fulfillment, and take advantage of all the opportunities this country offers; the other is seen through the eyes of the Black man whose identity is not part of the identity of the country as a whole, and the opportunities of living in America are not available to him. These two realities are illustrated in the series by the scenes we see during Baldwin's speech – we see three Black people using a separate line, a woman working with a baby in her arms, fights, and other images that show that not everyone is treated in the same way in America. These words show that the American Dream is not for everyone, and that the perception of America as the Promised Land is nothing like how Black people feel about the country.

Another subtle commentary on white supremacy and what the world ruled by white people looks like in the eyes of Black people can be heard in the second episode of the series, in which the protagonists become guests at the residence of a member of a cult founded centuries ago in an attempt to discover the secret of immortality. During the ceremony in which the main character, recognized as a descendant of the cult's founder, is used to open the gate to Eden, a spoken word poem by Gill Scott-Heron can be heard:

A rat done bit my sister Nell. (with Whitey on the moon) Her face and arms began to swell. (and Whitey's on the moon) I can't pay no doctor bill. (but Whitey's on the moon) Ten years from now I'll be payin' still. (while Whitey's on the moon) The man jus' upped my rent las' night. ('cause Whitey's on the moon) No hot water, no toilets, no lights. (but Whitey's on the moon) I wonder why he's uppi'me? ('cause Whitey's on the moon?) I was already payin' 'im fifty a week. (with Whitey on the moon) Taxes takin' my whole damn check, Junkies makin' me a nervous wreck, The price of food is goin' up, An' as if all that shit wasn't enough. A rat done bit my sister Nell. (with Whitey on the moon) Her face an' arm began to swell. (but Whitey's on the moon) Was all that money I made las' year (for Whitey on the moon?) How come there ain't no money here? (Hm! Whitey's on the moon) Y'know I jus' 'bout had my fill (of Whitey on the moon) I think I'll sen' these doctor bills, Airmail special (to Whitey on the moon) (Scott-Heron 1970).

Although it appears in the series at a rather supernatural moment, the poem is a perfect commentary on both the scene and the reality and priorities of America at that time. The poem depicts in a rather brutal and moving manner the situation of not only the Black people, but the poor part of the American society in general, as they have to deal with their financial problems, the continuously rising prices of food products, the lack of access to basic household items or to a doctor, while American national funds are spent on space travel and boosting the humanity's ego by conquering the cosmos. The poem shows frustration with the situation the society finds itself in and the fact that the lives of individuals seem unimportant compared to the grand plans and dreams of humanity. This poem perfectly fits the scene in the series where the white people, with the help of a Black man, try to open the gateway to Eden, the new dream land, the role of which is played by the moon in the poem. In both the poem and the series, Black people are relegated to the role of a tool, an insignificant element that is used to achieve white people's goal; a goal that is perhaps beyond human ability and should not be a priority, but becomes one due to human hubris and the desire to prove their greatness. In both the poem and the series, white society ignores the small individual, deeming them worth sacrificing for achieving their goals.

The comments about white supremacy or the plight of Black people, however, are not limited to the songs and speeches that occur during scenes; they come just as often from the mouths of characters who are completely aware of their situation and of how society treats them. The characters, despite the supernatural situations they find themselves in, are still real people with real problems; they are often smiling and cheerful, but just as often frustrated and powerless to go on facing the world and the evil that befalls them, not only from fantastic monsters, but mainly from other people. It seems even more challenging to be a Black woman in a white society, which is often emphasized by the characters in the series. When Ruby drinks the potion that turns her into a white woman and spends her entire day carelessly wandering around the town and enjoying simple everyday activities, she later admits that she "enjoyed my entire day using the only currency that I needed: whiteness" (Green, Kidd, Winton, Dunye 2020). The theme of the woman's changing body provides an interesting and highly contrasting portrayal of the differences between the lives of white and Black people; while Black people encounter only hateful stares and contempt from passers-by and constant surveillance on the streets, and many public places are simply closed to them, Ruby, as a white woman, experiences something surreal for her – on the street she is met with smiles, kindness, and treatment worthy of a lady. Being white, she is treated not only as a woman, but simply as a human being, as the following dialogue confirms:

- It scared the shit out of me to wake up white. Then... When I was stumbling down the street, crazed and disheveled and screaming at

everybody around me, they weren't scared of me. They were scared for me. They all treated me like...

– A human being (Green, Kidd, Winton, Dunye 2020).

As Ruby continues to discover the world in her new white skin, she is hired at an exclusive department store where she has long dreamed of working. Although the woman was denied employment before, she comes in with the same qualifications but a different body and skin color and is then easily hired as manager of the entire store. When she notices that the Black woman who was hired before her and who is the only employee with skin color other than white is not doing well with the tasks given to her, she emotionally teaches her a lesson about how much harder she has to try as a Black woman:

Your best isn't good enough. You want to be a credit to your race? You have to be better than mediocre, and do you want to know why? Because white folks are more fucked up than you think (Green, Kidd, Winton, Dunye 2020).

This statement shows another huge contrast between the realities of the Black world and the white world: a Black person cannot simply be good at something, they have to rise above the average level and be better than everyone else to at least be noticed. Moreover, it also shows how Black people are deprived of the right to individuality: while every white person is considered unique and responsible for themselves, Black people must not only prove their worth, but the worth of their entire "race".

As this discussion shows, *Lovecraft Country* is a very anti-racist series – due to its portrayal of racism coming from the perspective of Black people, who are still oppressed by the white society. Watching the scenes showing the treatment of Black people, it is impossible not to reflect on the extremely poor condition of the society where the color of the skin determines the attitude towards another human being. *Lovecraft Country*, by combining racism with horror, proves how great a threat to the world and humanity such behavior is and how terrible the reality of an oppressed group is.

Otherness

The theme of being different, misunderstood and not fitting in with the rest of society is an important part of the series. The obvious candidates for being the Other in this case are the Black people who are resented and misunderstood by the white part of the society, but the series does not limit itself to the representation of the otherness of the Black people; the show presents the otherness of race, gender, sexuality, and the otherness related to supernatural powers that people do not understand.

It is clear that Black people are treated as the Other by the rest of society; they are considered outsiders who have no right to be there. Black people face

hostility and hatred, and they are assigned a host of stereotypical, negative traits that they have nothing in common with as individuals. This is undoubtedly related to the realities in America at the time and the real history of Black people in the New Continent – as well as the still vivid memory in the white community of Black people as slaves whose lives may be sacrificed for their profits since they are not treated as humans. With this conviction, the white community separates itself from Black people – the former avoid the latter on the streets, designate for them separate entrances to public places, and design special neighborhoods in which they can live. When Letitia, one of the main characters in the series, manages to buy an old house in a white neighborhood, it results in strong opposition from her neighbors. A sign at the entrance to the neighborhood announces: “We are a white community – undesirables must go”, and cars are parked in front of the house inhabited by Black people, honking their horns to frighten the residents and force them to leave the neighborhood. The conflict turns into a confrontation, violence is exchanged, and eventually a couple of white men enter the house, which ends in their violent deaths due to the evil powers inhabiting this old building. Throughout the series, one can see how Black people are treated as outsiders; even leaving out the racism, which is an obvious aspect and problem addressed by the series, Black people are simply pushed to the side of society because they are misunderstood in their otherness, and the fact that the rest of the people are used to the reality they have lived in for years and do not want to change it.

Another example of otherness portrayed in the series is gender otherness, often represented in conjunction with racial otherness. It is not only Black people who face different treatment in 1950s America – the problem also affects women in general and Black women in particular. Discussing her transformation into a white woman, being aware of the inferior treatment she has experienced throughout her life both for being a woman and for being Black, Ruby states: “I don’t know what is more difficult, being colored or being a woman. Most days, I’m happy to be both, but... the world keeps interrupting, and I am sick of being interrupted” (Green, Kidd, Winton, Dunye 2020). This statement clearly shows the frustration with how women and Black people are treated by society and how it is a hindrance to everyday life; Black women are simply not treated in the same way as white women.

This established world order, which places the white male at the top of the hierarchy and all others as subordinate to him, seems to be the main reason why those others are oppressed and not allowed to speak. In the scene when Christina introduces Tic to her father, Samuel Braithwhite, the head of the organization, he refers to Tic with apparent reserve and superiority. Braithwhite does not treat Tic as an equal, but, rather, as an object that he does not pay much attention to – as “something” he may need to achieve his goal, yet he does not seem entirely convinced of “its” usefulness. When Tic and Christina appear in the room, Braithwhite asks them about a passage in the Bible in which Adam is given by God the task of naming things:

And out of the ground, the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air and brought them unto Adam, to see what he would call them. And whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof (King James Bible 1769/2017, Genesis 2: 19).

With this passage, the leader of the Sons of Adam immediately establishes a hierarchy among the people in the room, placing himself in the position of Adam, who takes an active part in creating the order of the world and assigns to each creature its rightful, subordinate place, which is confirmed by what he says later:

- This act of naming is more than a simple picking of labels. Adam is sharing in creation, assigning each creature its final form and its station in the hierarchy of nature.
- He put everything in its place (Green, Sackheim 2020).

Adam, who may be the symbol of the white man, not only names things – he creates reality, establishes the hierarchy of the world, but also defines the final forms of each creature, which allows him to decide what they are. Thus, he becomes the silent standard by which the world should be organized – he can decide on how the world is perceived, who occupies what place in it, and how creatures should behave. According to this logic, Adam was appointed by God as the leader of the world, and all creatures should obey him. This can be seen both in the attitude of the white community in the reality of the series and in our reality and history, in the fact that slaves were used for centuries to achieve the white man's goals and that slavery is still echoed in society's treatment of Black people.

This established world order with a white male at its top is something that is considered ideal and the way things should be, but it was destroyed by a woman, which is emphasized quite explicitly in the subsequent conversation:

- At the dawn of time, just for a moment, everything was where and as it should be. From God, to man, to woman, down to the lowliest wriggling creature. It was Nirvana. – Then that stupid, meddling, troublemaking bitch Eve brought entropy and death. What was an elegant hierarchy became a mess of tribes and nations (Green, Sackheim 2020).

In this passage, Eve may act as a symbol of all those who are supposed to be subordinate to Adam in this hierarchy, the white male, and who threaten his supremacy by demanding equal rights and equal treatment. This group may include all representatives of various kinds of Otherness who no longer wish to be on the margins of society and hide in the shadows, masking their needs and their true identity. Rebellion against the established world order is equated here with chaos, proving that those at the top fear for their position – the

world in its current form is Nirvana for them, and any disobedience threatens their well-being. Rebellion is equated with death, but this death does not concern everyone – what for “Adam” is death, the end of Nirvana and the beginning of chaos, for “Eve” can be liberation and rescue.

The last kind of otherness worth mentioning here is sexual Otherness, which is also present in the HBO series. The most prominent example is Montrose Freeman, Tic’s father, who does not have the best relationship with his son. This may be due to the fact that his own father was not a perfect example of a parent – he beat both Montrose and his brother, George. The father’s violence toward Montrose, however, may have stemmed from something slightly different than the man’s aggressive nature – Montrose was “different” because he was gay, and his father sensed this and could neither understand nor endure it. Montrose’s marriage to Tic’s mother seems to be just a facade created for a society in which being gay is a crime – Montrose admits to his son that his now-deceased wife knew her husband was gay. Montrose seems to be uncomfortable in his own skin, which is undoubtedly a result of society’s attitude toward people like him. In the series, we also meet his love interest, Sammy, who is the complete opposite of Montrose when it comes to representing the gay part of society. Indeed, Sammy is a drag queen and performs at a club in front of dozens of people like him, and seems to enjoy every second of the life he leads. Sammy is comfortable in his own skin and has no problem with his otherness, while Tic’s father seems ashamed of who he is, even in front of himself. What is interesting, Montrose’s attitude towards his otherness changes depending on the environment he finds himself in. On a day-to-day basis, he is ashamed, repressed, and afraid of his feelings toward another man. When the two of them go to a gay club and Sammy performs in his drag queen costume, new life seems to be breathed into Montrose – he goes out on the dance floor with his lover, which eventually leads to their first kiss in public. Montrose is an example of how other people’s treatment of otherness is capable of affecting the very representative of that otherness – it is not easy to accept oneself when one is not accepted by everyone else. This moment in the club between two men in love seems to be a point of awakening and release of emotions that were long hidden and repressed for the sake of society and the struggle with oneself.

Horror Elements in the Series

Lovecraft Country works not only as a successful representation of the realities of America in the 1950s, when racism and racial segregation were the order of the day to an even greater extent than today, and as a representation of the treatment of various forms of otherness, whether racial, gender or sexual; at the same time, the series combines all these aspects and real world problems with the classic themes of the horror genre. The series contains a number of well-known, classic motifs from various stages in the history of the horror genre; it incorporates different types of horror in its structure, starting with classic gothic, moving through psychological horror, and ending with exploi-

tation horror, which focuses on the depiction of drastic torture or behaviour. The series seems to tick off all the most popular horror elements, such as ghosts, hauntings and zombies, without forgetting the seriousness of real human problems.

The first episode of the series, in which the protagonists begin a journey to find Tic's father, seems to be an example of classic psychological horror, where it is not the monsters or drastic scenes that are the main source of terror – it is rather the elusive threat of danger hanging over the protagonists and the inevitable pursuit of the climactic moment when the protagonists collide with the threat. The role of danger in this case is played by policemen, whose presence at every turn signals a potential threat to the protagonists. Indeed, throughout the characters' journey across racist America, the viewer senses the threat hanging over Black people both from the policemen and the rest of society. However, this is not the only moment when the series becomes a psychological horror – throughout the episodes we also follow the protagonists' journey, not only physical, but also the one into themselves. As the story continues, the viewer sees what fears, anxieties and painful memories accompany the protagonists, as well as the side characters; for instance, in the second episode, three protagonists find themselves in the cult's mansion. With the help of mysterious magic, they are trapped in their rooms and experience visions related to their desires and fears – Tic is attacked by a woman resembling a member of the military, thus not letting him forget the war he participated in and the specter of which still hangs over him; Uncle George is visited by the love of his youth, but after some time he realizes that it is only an illusion; Letitia, on the other hand, is haunted by a creature that looks like Tic, with whom, after an honest conversation about her family and its problems, she begins to exchange confessions of feelings that end in violence. Family problems, frustration with one's status, and inability to change are also evident in Ruby's plotline – in this case, delving into the character's emotional states is all the more related to horror, as the situations and emotions Ruby experiences lead to horrific actions, such as the brutal, bloody mutilation of her employer; at this point, the viewer watches as this seemingly nice, harmless woman turns into a "monster" capable of cruelty and violence. Ruby's transformation into a white woman, who is still her but does not look like her at all, unleashes desires and lusts that as a Black woman she had to suppress and repress; however, when she changes her body and the woman in the mirror no longer resembles the old Ruby, she does things she would never normally do.

The third episode of the series, in which Letitia rents an old mansion that turns out to be haunted, is a classic ghost story. There is a popular theme utilized here, whereby the young protagonist decides to start their life in a new place, but it does not turn out to be what it should be – the inhabitants are haunted by nightmares, strange things happen to the apartment and there are strange noises from everywhere. In this case, the same thing happens – Letitia is haunted by strange dreams, strange sounds come from the basement, and

creepy figures of massacred Black people seem to hide in the shadows. As it turns out later in the episode, the building previously belonged to a scientist who experimented on and killed Black people kidnapped by a police officer, and the terrifying figures appearing in the house are the very ghosts of those dead people.

Ghosts are not the only beings typical of horror fiction to appear in the series. Other creatures known from horror fiction appear in various, sometimes unobvious forms. Letitia, for example, can be considered a zombie – she is killed in the second episode during the protagonists' unsuccessful escape from the cult's mansion, and then brought back to life so that Tic would agree to take part in the opening ceremony of the Gate to Eden. Although the woman does not behave like a classic zombie, the death and return from the afterlife seems to affect her emotions and feelings, as well as her attitude towards reality. Furthermore, the series incorporates many monsters familiar from Lovecraft's prose, such as the shoggoths – amoeba-like creatures that appear in Lovecraft's prose and also in the first episode of the series, as the main monsters that the characters escape from. Lovecraft's prose and the characters he created may not be the main antagonists of the series, but they are mentioned at many points in the show; for example, in the first few minutes of the series we see Cthulhu – and although this is only part of Tic's dream, it is an example of how Lovecraft's "spirit" is present in the series, and his legacy is an inspiration for the entire story; in this way Lovecraft's racism is confronted and his stories are rewritten.

What seems to be the most explicit feature of *Lovecraft Country* as a horror story, however, are the feelings and reactions that accompany viewers as they watch the series. Horror films in general are characterized by inducing feelings of fear, revulsion, and horror in the audience, and the HBO series definitely does all of these things. After all, the story has no shortage of terrifying creatures, bloody crimes, and massacred human bodies, the sight of which can cause revulsion in viewers. During Ruby's transformation into a white woman and back into her real body, the series shows in detail the process by which this happens – her body bends, her bones seem to move inside her, her skin flakes off revealing flesh and blood. The series seems to intentionally show these scenes in such detail, making viewers not only horrified by the sight, but also able to imagine the pain involved, and understand the frustration and fierceness of a character who knowingly brings such pain upon herself in order to try another life, at least for a while. The creators of the series often show scenes and elements that cause feelings of the uncanny and the abject in their viewers by showing numerous dead, mangled bodies, monsters that sometimes resemble people but are not people, or by surprising their viewers with transformations of people who turn out not to be who we thought they were. Furthermore, the series focuses on psychological fear, portraying the hardships of the Black community in America and depicting in a horrific way how they are treated by the white part of society. *Lovecraft Country* is thus an ideal rep-

representative of horror fiction, in which the classic elements accompanying this genre are intertwined with the horror of real life, making its viewers terrified not only by macabre sights or monsters jumping out from around corners, but also by human drama and the terrifying nature of human beings.

Who Is a Monster?

In a story where traditional horror is intertwined with real-life horror, and where both monsters and monstrous human behavior are the source of fear, the important question seems to be who is really the monster in this series. Jeffrey Cohen's theses presented in his article *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*, in which he explores how we can define a monster in fiction, are useful in answering the question.

According to the first thesis, each monster represents something more than it is, and this is true in the context of the series – monsters are not simply an element that inspires temporary fear with their appearance or behavior, and they often represent the fears and anxieties of both the characters in the series and their viewers. The ghosts in the episode about Letitia's haunted house may represent Black people who die because of oppression and inhumane treatment from society, and the specters that haunt the characters locked in their rooms in the cult mansion represent the desires and fears of the characters. Moreover, in these contexts, the "human" characters may also function here as monsters representing certain fears and anxieties – for example, the individual police officers who appear in the series may symbolize the officers in general and the threat they pose to Black people, and the residents of the neighborhood where Letitia buys the house, by their aggressive behavior, represent a segment of society that exhibits extreme racist behavior that is often a source of danger and fear for Black people. The second thesis that speaks of a kind of immortality of monsters and their ability to escape also works in the series, as Lovecraftian shoggoths appear many times throughout the show, regardless of how much they are hurt by the characters. In this case, we also have the situation of monsters returning from the pages of another story, as they come from Lovecraft's prose – however, here they are presented in a slightly different context and reality, as they are used in a story that is a kind of re-writing of Lovecraft's racism. Although the shoggoths are a threat to all humans who find themselves in the woods at the wrong time, the protagonists avoid death by the hand of police officers thanks to these monsters, and the monsters themselves only kill the police officers. Also, human monstrosity in the form of a racist society runs throughout the series and seems to be a constant threat to the protagonists, no matter how hard they fight for their equality and acceptance. The series also features monsters that harbor a category crisis, that is, monsters that represent something that is not easy to fit into existing frameworks. In one episode, there is a young woman possessed by a spirit called kumiho, which her mother summoned in order to kill her husband who was committing rape on his daughter. The girl became a stranger to her mother – although she resembled the girl in

body, her mind was taken over by a ghost who was lost and did not know what to do with her new life. The mother is unable to accept her daughter's new form, which she herself helped to create, and the daughter herself, possessed by the spirit, is unable to fully accept who she is and the fact that she has to kill men to restore her previous incarnation. In this way, the girl is a monster who escapes the reality of the familiar mother and considers her a monster, despite the fact that she is still in some way her daughter. Similarly, Black people are also treated as monsters by white society in the series – white people do not understand Black people and their culture. Black people escape the framework of the reality white people have lived in so far, so white people are unable to treat Black people like human beings. In this sense, white people's treatment of Black people is also related to Cohen's next thesis: that monsters are the embodiment of otherness. Differences between one group and another are constantly emphasized, allowing white people to treat Black people differently and strip them of their humanity, but also questioning the difference between white and Black people. Another thesis about monsters guarding the boundary of what is possible is also reflected in the series – especially in the form of shoggoths, which in the episode stand between white and Black people and prevent them from confronting each other, and an encounter with them can result in turning into one of them. The series also features certain kinds of desires that the monsters represent – they are a source of jealousy and freedom, as in the case of the white people for Ruby, who temporarily tries to live their lives in their skin and uses their freedom to do the things she desires that she cannot do in her own skin. Ultimately, the monsters in the series also act as reflections of our reality and bring knowledge about our world. In particular, the monstrosity of white people makes the viewer want to “reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression” (Cohen 1996: 3–21).

Monsters in the series take many forms and are represented both by supernatural creatures that are a threat to the protagonists and side characters of the series, and humans whose monstrous behavior brings about horror and danger. The treatment of the other creature as a monster here is also dependent on perspective – for white people, Black people are monsters because of their behavior and the danger they pose, while Black people treat white people as a threat by being unable to understand them and representing a kind of otherness that has no place in their reality. Somewhere in between the monstrous human behavior there are also supernatural monsters, but it is the human ones that seem to be the main threat in the series to both the characters and themselves.

Lovecraft's Legacy in the Series

Lovecraft Country in its very title references one of horror's most famous writers, so it is no surprise that his legacy is evident throughout the series, and the monsters he created appear from time to time in the path of the characters.

The obvious connection between Lovecraft's work and the series is the very fact that Lovecraft exists in the series' reality as the author of the stories he wrote in real life. The characters in the show know all those monsters they meet on their journey from the pages of Lovecraft's novels, and his work itself is among the favorites of Tic and his uncle. However, Lovecraft's presence is not limited to the use of the legends and monsters he created, or to the feeling of cosmic horror that accompanies the characters as they discover new mysteries of the world. It seems that the series is a sort of factual representation of "Lovecraft's country" – a place where Black people are not treated equally with the rest of society, as Lovecraft's racist views are well-known. Despite the fact that the series is a kind of tribute to Lovecraft and his works, it does not forget about what is controversial and problematic; it does not pass over the racism occurring in his works, that is, it does what Kathleen Hudson suggests – it rewrites Lovecraft's racism and translates it into a new story.

The ghost of Lovecraft is evoked in the first episode, when the characters quote one of his poems:

When, long ago, the gods created Earth / In Jove's fair image Man was shap'd at birth. / The beasts for lesser parts were next design'd; / Yet were they too remote from humankind. / To fill the gap, and join the rest to man, / Th'Olympian host conceiv'd a clever plan. / A beast they wrought, in semi-human figure, / Fill'd it with vice, and call'd the thing a NIGGER (Lovecraft 1912).

The poem, then, perfectly illustrates Lovecraft's views, which may be abhorrent for the contemporary reader. The series, however, does not attempt to cover up the reality of Lovecraft's racism or avoid the issue; instead, it uses the author's legacy, both glorious and shameful, and creates a story that is both a great horror and an anti-racist tale that shows the terrors of racism and allows us to look at Black people as people.

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