

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

When I first read that HBO was going to adapt the 2016 novel Lovecraft Country into a show, I was really excited. The story imagines what if the demonic entities from H.P. Lovecraft's fiction were a manifestation of racism in the 1950s.

CLIP: TRAILER

The novel that the show is based on was written by a white author, Matt Ruff, but the creative team behind the show is mostly Black, including the executive producers Jordan Peele and Misha Green. And Lovecraft Country isn't the only work that re-imagines Lovecraft's world from the point of view of people of color.

AMC is developing a show based on the novella, The Ballad of Black Tom, where Victor LaValle reimagines a 1927 Lovecraft story with a Black protagonist. NK Jemison's most recent novel The City We Became uses Lovecraftian horror as a metaphor for white gentrification. There's even a role-playing game called Harlem Unbound by Darker Hue Studios, which takes the popular role-playing game, Call of Cthulhu, and re-imagines it with Black protagonists.

What's so interesting about this trend is that Lovecraft himself was exceptionally racist. So, why does his work feel so relevant now to the type of people that he feared and despised?

Before we get into that, let's back up in case, you don't know much about Howard P. Lovecraft. He was born in 1890. He came from an upper crust WASP-y family in Rhode Island. But they fell on hard times. He never got over that loss in social status. He was also very eccentric and suffered from massive anxiety and depression. His horror stories appeared in pulp magazines like Weird Tales. And within that community of writers, he was well respected, but hardly famous. When he died at the age of 46 in 1937, he could've been forgotten.

But his mythology is really compelling. His most famous creation is Cthulhu -- a gargantuan monster with the head of an octopus and wings like a bat that sleeps under the sea. Whenever this "elder god" rises to the surface, humanity will be doomed.

Lovecraft also did something unprecedented. He encouraged other writers to take his monsters and mythology and set their stories in his world. He didn't care about copyright infringement. He wanted a different kind of legacy.

Victor LaValle is the author of The Ballad of Black Tom.

VICTOR: He was like literally teaching or in conversation with this next generation of writers who are going to do some amazing things. He taught them his philosophies and he also let them write stories that were in his universe. And so it was not only that the universe was open source, but it was also that by chance, or by fate, whatever you want to call it, some truly great writers of the next generation were his essentially acolytes that influence in that power with mainlined into the work of people who were reaching millions of readers.

John Jennings is a Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at UC Riverside. He says even if you've never read Lovecraft, you've probably encountered him through these other writers.

JOHN: Stephen King has a lot of Lovecraft. He has a lot of Richard Matheson and I even, I even, I think Mathison might have some love craft influences, but, you know, I think by the time I got to watching film, you know, cause I think that's stuff like the John Carpenter's The Thing obviously, Re-animator is a Lovecraft story, obviously. One of the main artifacts that, um, connects all of this is like the Necronomicon, which was this, um, supposedly this ancient tome made of a pain and tortured. It actually opens up these gates and stuff. So, if you're seeing stuff like the Evil Dead, for instance, you know, Sam Raimi Evil Dead, you know, the book that calls the dead is Necronomicon.

And the Necronomicon comes directly from Lovecraft. But even if writers aren't borrowing directly from him, they can create original imagery that is still clearly Lovecraftian.

JOHN: When you say something as Lovecraftian, you're talking about this idea that the protagonist of Lovecraftian stories is him. You know, he's like, you know, a well-educated maybe like middle class, upper middle class, white male, who is a, what they call a secret character. Like he's trying to see, trying to find something. I try to seek something out. It has this kind of toe in like fantasy and mysticism, but also a sci-fi. So that's why it's weird fiction. It's all like mutable and stuff. A lot of times the Lovecraft mythos is like dealing with incomprehensible, giant ideas that, you know, that will squash us and not even care.

Premee Mohammad is a Canadian writer of Indian and South American heritage. Her work is also influenced by Lovecraft. She says what separates him from many of later disciples, is that Lovecraft used visuals sparingly.

PREMEE: In most cases Lovecraft doesn't describe a ton about what these things are or look like you're left kind of to your own devices to imagine this thing, like, uh, Oh, we saw an alien and in the seconds before it crammed itself into the alien cube, we got a good look at it. And it was so horrifying, but all my friends went mad. Luckily, I didn't go mad, which is why I'm writing the story. And you're like, Oh really? What did it look like? And there's, Lovecraft like, well, it was just, it was, it's pretty bad. Okay. We all went mad. Did I not point that out? So if you've got a good imagination, you're not even just sort of visualizing what these things look like, but everything else about them.

She likes to call this genre “cosmic horror” because the most frightening thing in a Lovecraft story is learning how truly insignificant you truly are.

PREMEE: And I think for a lot of human history, a lot of people have felt like that without minding it too much, if you were a king maybe, or an emperor or nobleman than you could have some significance, but otherwise you kind of wouldn't. And I think with the advent of not just writing and the written word and the ability to spread your thoughts and opinions beyond yourself, uh, you know, and your friends and family and stuff, but also the rise of the internet. People started thinking, Hey, you know what? I might be significant again. I might be important. People might listen to me and maybe people should listen to me. And then the here comes these villains who are naturally evil. And the reason they are evil is because we are so insignificant to them that they're destroying us without even thinking about it.

Victor LaValle says that fear of insignificance is what made Lovecraft feel so relevant to him as a kid.

VICTOR: And I think 10, 11 years old is the time I think when you feel, or at least when I felt incredibly powerless and like everyone in everything in the world was, uh, in control of me. And all I wanted was to be in control of myself. And on some level, that is the essential story that Lovecraft tells again and again and again. Uh, and that really spoke to me as a kid.

As a Black kid growing up in a diverse neighborhood in New York, he didn't become aware of how the rest of white society saw him until he was a little older. By that point, the fear of irrelevance did not resonate with him anymore.

VICTOR: Much of the world, I would say certainly most women, many people of color, at least I'm going to just talk about it in the United States, the concept that you are not that important, that you are not central to the conversation that the culture is having is a given it's a given. And so the concept that I would be terrified that I was insignificant is almost laughable to me as a grownup, because to my mind, the sort of narrative that I feel like I live, you know, a good part of the day is that the world is actively hostile to me that it finds me a bother that it wishes I wasn't there at least in spaces that are not black or Brown. And that's very different from what Lovecraft is getting across.

When Victor was teenager, he realized the problem with Lovecraft was not that he unaware of his white privilege. It was much worse than that. At the time, Victor was re-reading a Lovecraft story that he had read before, called "The Rats in The Walls," and he got to the part where the main character has a cat and the cat's name has the n-word in it. It's the n-word plus the word "man."

VICTOR: It's like 12 times in the story that the cat, the cat name comes up to the point where it just starts to feel like you're just enjoying saying this. Uh, right. And then of course even more horrifying is when you learned that was the name of his actual cat. Well, she's just other levels of messed up. And so, at 15 or 16, I was much more conscious and able to see that. And somehow there like a stranger powerful moment to realize a feeling like how did I just not notice that before? Cause it really, it wasn't that a 10 or 11, I saw that, and I said, Hey, that's weird. And then I kept reading. It was genuinely like my mind just slipped past that 15 or 16. I see that. And I'm just basically like, fuck this dude. Uh, and I put him away and I didn't read him again through high school, through college. And I want to say maybe like, not until my thirties again, did I pick him up? And when I say pick him up, I mean, like I knew which stories had the stuff that I really hated, but I was sort of like, uh, you know, it was like I was missing a family member who I knew could be trouble. So I hung out with him when he wasn't drinking. And then it probably wasn't until my like late thirties, early forties that I said, no, you can't do this. You can't pretend you got to go back and you got to read it all. And when I read all of it again, I started to feel like, okay, I can see the ways much like with family or friends, I can see the ways that I have to call out what's bad and still be able to embrace what I love.

We live in the era of cancel culture. The term is applied on social media to anyone famous who says or does something offensive. In some cases, what's jarring is that the work of these creators was thought to be progressive until their offensive beliefs or actions are revealed. And then their fans struggle with whether they can still enjoy these people's work after knowing the truth about them.

And there's a backlash against cancel culture. Some fans argue this person may have said or done something offensive in the past, but they've apologized, that's not who they are now. Recently, JK Rowling, Margaret Atwood and dozens of others signed an open letter urging people to cancel "cancel culture" itself because they think its stifling free speech. That letter lead to a fierce debate.

Either way, it's hard to think of anyone more likely to be cancelled – anyone whose cancelling could not be less controversial -- than Howard P. Lovecraft. He was obsessed with racial purity, especially his fear that people of color and immigrants were going to pollute and corrupt American society until it collapsed. And it's not like he kept those beliefs private. It's in his fiction.

KINITRA: I think he wholeheartedly believed in white supremacy, but I also think that he like many others suspected and was aware that it was a crock of shit

Kinitra Brooks teaches literature at Michigan State University.

KINITRA: I think he has an overall anxiety about whiteness and the false nature of its supremacy. And he's anxious about when this will all fall down. So much has built, been built upon the falsity, the false foundation of white supremacy. There's no way that it can last, there's no way because it's untrue and it's false. But because of that falsity, I think that the power, the hold on the power has always been unsure. And I think Lovecraft's talent was that he keyed into that anxiety and that lack of surety about the hold of white supremacy on the culture, on the nation, on even its own peoples. And because of that, I think he was always writing towards that anxiety.

Part of the horror of Cthulhu and other god-like beings is that they see the entire human race – regardless of color – as being unworthy of existence. That idea terrified Lovecraft, even though it was a fantasy that he made up.

KINITRA: But also with the hierarchy, there's always someone higher, right? And there's always a bigger batter monster. And that those, that those gods are those bigger batter monsters. And there is this fascination with them, there's this fascination with, when will they come and do their own reckoning and will they make me as enslaved as they make these other people's right. Will they do, to me what I do to other people, because that's always been the anxiety of whiteness of one day, will folks treat us the way we have treated other folks? And I think that's where the anxiety of the gods come in. Will we now be those that are subjugated as we have subjugated others?

A lot of white Lovecraft fans have said we should be able to separate the art from the artist, but they couldn't help but venerate Lovecraft himself. From 1975 to 2015, The World Fantasy Award was a bust of Lovecraft's head. The award was known as The Howards -- until several authors of color voiced their opposition. Now the design of the award is more abstract, it's a tree wrapping around the moon. Of course, that decision led to a backlash against political correctness and cancel culture.

KINITRA: And I think we have to talk about the different levels of canceling. Are they totally ignored and shunned, or do we perhaps not revere them? Do we take down the statues as we're seeing, right? We accept that this is a part of our history, but what we're not going to do is have our greatest award be, have his face.

Again, Preme Mohammad.

PREMEE: Lovecraft the person. Yeah. Let's cancel him. Let's fire him out of a cannon into the sun. With that said, I think his sandbox, it doesn't necessarily deserve canceling. Particularly if there are people of color or women or gay people or poor people or any of the people he hated who can make a focus of why they were so, so bad and bigoted, uh, I've heard people use the term reclaim. And I don't think that's what people are trying to do, I think we're trying to invert it. We're not trying to recreate anything of his were trying to analyze it and see what it was that is interesting about it rather than what's appealing about it because we're all in that space where it's better if something's interesting than if it's likable.

So how do you walk that line of using the mythology of a racist author to talk about the experience of being a marginalized person? We'll find out after the break.

BREAK

John Jennings says for a person of color, subverting or repurposing the mythology of a writer who was steeped in racism can be empowering. In fact, he used Lovecraftian imagery in a graphic novel that he illustrated called "Box of Bones."

JOHN: like we have a seeker character who is a black lesbian, right and she's seeking this box that is filled with like, supposedly like black rage and pain. Right. And so there's these monsters that live in the box, you know? And so, so that by itself has already kind of a Lovecraftian like structure. Because here's the thing, I mean, there's things in his work that are useful for us as storytellers, you know? And I don't like cancel culture. I

think that that is, I don't like shutting someone down. I like having discourse. You know what I'm saying? I understand like if it's hurt someone, then we have to understand it. Unpack what is the system that made that thing happen, you know, instead of like shut it down. I think that is some, some ways, I mean, censorship, essentially, I don't believe in it as artists. I was like, nah, don't cancel it. Let's engage with and see what's going on. And also, one of the things that's a, that's a, I know this is really petty, but I know he'd hate it. He'd hate for people of color and for people who are not him till he messing with his work, you know, so, you know, and that's what that's, one of the things I dig about is like, yeah, he would hate this. I'm going to do this.

John's thinking around this issue was influenced by a non-fiction sociological book called Racecraft, which looked at race as a social construction. The similarity between the term, Racecraft, and Lovecraft's name is a coincidence, but John thinks Racecraft could be a good term to describe this subgenre of fiction.

JOHN: This idea of like Racecraft and you mix it with a Lovecraft in, you know, analysis, then you can actually utilize some of the elements from his work and their theoretical underpinnings to create what I call Racecraftian Horror. Well, you're actually like looking at, uh, the arcane nature of like how race is constructed and how it gets deployed through narratives, and then utilize like the idea of cosmic awe or like you lost the idea of the grotesque or different things that Lovecraft is dealing with, but filter it through a critical race studies lens.

Premee Mohammad took a Racecraftian approach to her novel "Beneath the Rising." Like Premee herself, the main character's family comes from Guyana (Guy-ANNA), which began as a British colony in South America. The British brought over thousands of Indians as indentured servants, including her ancestors. And she imagines white imperialism acting like a Lovecraftian monster.

PREMEE: To the indigenous peoples with the continent, it's very likely, the settler seems like cosmic horror. They couldn't be reasoned with, they showed up. All they did was kill. Uh, all they did was takeover. All they did was try to run you off the land, you know, kill your food sources, try to control you, take your children, kill your elders, that kind of thing. So that you couldn't pass on your heritage or whatever, because your heritage had been, uh, glanced at once quickly and determined to be worthy of extinction. And just see the elder gods going. Yeah, good could do that. That's what we want to do to humanity.

But she didn't want to write a hopeless story.

PREMEE: The problem with having a villain you can't defeat is that you don't have a story then because you have to have something that you can fight against and Lovecraft himself did this all the time. His stories didn't have a satisfying kind of narrative resolution.

You mean going insane is not a satisfying narrative resolution?

PREMEE: I saw the thing and I went insane and that's the end of the story. Or my friend saw the thing, he went insane and now he's in an asylum or he's dead or something, or all these people in the swamp saw the thing. And they all went insane. There are a couple stories, I guess, for people try to do things like, uh, like, like rebury the artifact or something, or the one I'm thinking of in the Dunwich Horror where those guys go up to the Hill with the rain of standing stones. And they've developed that powder that lets them see the Chagas and they make their chance. And that to me seems like the only story where humanity was able to fight back against something that we had never really been able to fight back against before. That was actually the story I was thinking of for my own book, which was okay, well maybe this enemy has been here repeatedly has noticed earth repeatedly has been here before. And in the past, there were people that somehow to some extent, even if not completely fought back. And so hopefully they wrote something down, they left a post it note or something. So that, that actually turned out to be kind of a gist of the book, is that hope. And then following that hope until all the clues were assembled.

Victor LaValle also used Racecraftian horror in his 2016 novella, “The Ballad of Black Tom,” which is based on a 1927 Lovecraft short story called, “The Horror of Red Hook.”

Victor says he felt compelled to write this book after the murders of Black people at the hands of the police in 2014 and 2015.

VICTOR: And I felt like I need to find a way to get to this question of like police brutality, who pays all this kind of stuff. But I don't want to talk about it in the present moment. Like now, like as if I was telling one of those stories, it also felt like to sort of ghoulish to try to sort of inhabit one of those stories and tell it in the moment. And then I would almost say like instinctively or with intuition, I started pulling books off the shelf, like who could I riff off of who's here that, uh, I might sort of be in conversation with and Lovecraft sort of, it was the one that stayed with me the most.

The only problem is that most of Lovecraft's stories take place in New England, where Victor has hardly been. But “The Horror of Red Hook” takes place in Brooklyn.

VICTOR: And I thought like, okay, this is a place I could inhabit. Cause I damn sure know New York better than HP Lovecraft.

Victor incorporated some of the characters from the original story, like a policeman called Malone, who uncovers a cult tied to The Elder Gods, which are classic Lovecraft monsters. But Victor saw the character of Malone very differently.

VICTOR: In the story itself, Lovecraft goes to great lengths to talk about like the poetic soul of Malone. And then he goes to these warrens of immigrants and dusky people and they're all savages by comparison. But he's not the, he's not like the head cracking policemen, right? He's not the explicit racist was what was how I read it. And I thought like, I can use that.

So, he gave Malone a partner named Howard, who is outwardly racist in contrast to Malone's passive racism.

The main character in Victor's story is a musician from Harlem named Tommy Tester. He is a character that Victor created, and at one point, he's hired to play at a party for the nefarious Robert Suydam, who is from the 1927 Lovecraft's story that the *Ballad of Black Tom* is based on.

Here is the actor Varick Boyd reading from *The Ballad of Black Tom*.

Suydam turned to the tall windows. Night out now and the lights of the bright library turned the panes into a screen just as they had before.

"When the Sleeping King awakes, he will reward us with dominion of this world. We will live in the shadow of his grace. And all your enemies will be crushed into dust. He will reward us!" the old man repeated, shouting now. "And your enemies will be crushed!"

They clapped each other on the shoulders. Founding fathers of a new nation, or even better, a world now theirs to administer and control.

"I will guide you in this new world!" Suydam called, standing and raising his hands. "And in me you will finally find a righteous ruler!"

They stamped and knocked over their chairs. They toasted Robert Suydam's reign.

But Tommy Tester couldn't celebrate such a thing. Maybe yesterday the promise of a reward in this new world could've tempted Tommy, but today such a thing seemed worthless. Destroy it all, then hand what was left over to Robert Suydam and these

gathered goons? What would they do differently? Mankind didn't make messes; mankind was the mess. Exhaustion washed over Tommy and threatened to drown him. Thinking this way caused Tester to play a series of sour keys.

Suydam noticed even if others didn't. He looked up at Tester sharply, but quickly his expression changed. His annoyance shifted to surprise as he saw Tester raise the expensive guitar and bring the body down against the floor. Shattered.

Kinitra Brooks teaches “The Ballad of Black Tom” at Michigan State. She thinks it’s empowering for her students of color to see that you can reclaim a work by an author whose views are reprehensible.

KINITRA: And having that spectrum in which students can choose to engage or not engage with his work, gives them more agency, gives them the ability to see themselves, but also allows them to see that literature can better itself, that the work can better itself, that it can reckon with these uncomfortable things.

But some of her white students have struggled with the story.

KINITRA: As a reader, you are doing work. But what we are pushing for is for white folks to now do the work, the identifying work that everyone else has had to do, um, when they've always been the protagonist.

She was hoping they’d be able to empathize with the Black protagonist, but:

KINITRA: So many of them identified with Malone

Really?

KINITRA: Yes! And I’m always surprised because he’s the enemy! He’s the largest enemy because he does nothing. Or why do they identify with that? I think they identify with Malone because he’s quiet. He’s he seems to be an innocent figure. He has this veneer, a false veneer of innocence. And I always say to my students, I’m like, he’s the classic white liberal who thinks he’s a good guy, but he’s actually just allowing a lot of bad shit to happen around him and not really doing anything about it.

In Victor’s story, Black Tom is the vigilante name of Tommy Tester, after he’s been empowered by Cthulhu. But Cthulhu never has humanity’s best interests at heart, and Tommy’s quest for justice becomes corrupted.

VICTOR: And it's only toward the end of the story when all has been lost, that that gets sort of curdled and that he begins like his true ballad, uh, which is a song of violence and death and destruction that in a way, is him leaning into the worst stereotypes.

Black Tom forced Malone down to his knees. They were ten feet from the portal. The great wind that blew through smelled not of the ocean but of deep corruption. It howled and Malone's senses reeled, pummeled by a repulsive wisdom.

"Words and music," Black Tom said, speaking right into Malone's ear. "That's what's required for this song. You can hear the music above you, but the words are not all done. One more letter needs writing, but I could use a little more blood. Would you like to help me with that?"

Through the portal, amid the ruins of the sunken city, Malone perceived the figure's enormous features—a face, or the perversion of one. The upper portions of its visage smooth like the dome of a man's skull, but below the eyes the face pulsed and curled, tentacles, tendrils. Eyelids the size of unfurled sails remained, blessedly, shut, but they quivered as if to open.

"No more!" Malone wailed, closing his eyes. "I don't want to see!"

Black Tom brought one arm around Malone's neck and squeezed tightly.

"My daddy's name was Otis Tester," Black Tom whispered. "My mother's name was Irene Tester. Let me sing you their favorite song."

Ever since *Get Out* became a cultural phenomenon, I've heard a lot of Black writers and filmmakers discuss the fact that horror – historically speaking – has always been very white, but the genre has a lot of Black fans because horror can be a powerful metaphor for the African American experience.

VICTOR: You could move into the wrong house and find yourself a victim of something terrible. Uh, in the case of a horror movie, it might be moving to the wrong house and you discover that like, um, uh, an evil spirit lives there and it's going to do harm to your family in the real world. You might say, uh, certainly in an earlier era, but even still today, uh, say as a black person, you might move into the wrong neighborhood in the suburbs and you might wake up one day and discover, Oh, all your white neighbors don't want you here and they burned across in front of your house. Or they left a threatening letter that if you don't leave, they're going to kill you. That's a horror novel.

John Jennings says the emotion that resonates with him the most in horror is the feeling of dread.

JOHN: Having a police car pull up behind you and you're black, the level of dread I can feel, I can, even thinking about it. I can feel a pit in my stomach about it, you know, and also like a Lovecraftian story is infected our country. You know, think about the slave ships as the meteorite. Right? And you think about like the infection being racism and like oppressive behaviors and stuff that happened as the infection, because you can

see someone who's like totally churchgoing, you know, white person from a particular, you know, class or whatever, become evil mutant. To me, that's a Racecraftian horror story because it's talking about race as this monster, this infection and this monstrous thing.

KINITRA: If you're seen as monstrous yourself, that literally changes the reality that you experience. And I think the thing so long has been like, you know, do we believe black people when they're saying this and it's now, we have video proof. Um, and now we have video proof for multiple angles, right? So, it's like more and more, you're starting to see the monsters that black people encounter from their point of view. And I think that is what is politically significant at this moment.

But Victor knows there's more work to be done when it comes to representation. He was once giving a talk at City College in New York. He thought it was going well until a student raised her hand.

VICTOR: And she said, I'm just wondering, like there's only one woman really in this whole book. Uh, and she just gets kind of shuffled off. I'm wondering why he did that. And I really was like in the moment, my first reaction was just like, what'd you say I was doing this? Don't you tell me about my book? Well, you know, all the very natural feelings of being defensive. And then I had to think about it for a minute in the moment. And I had to acknowledge, I said like, you know, the funny thing is like I wrote Ballad of Black Tom to critique Lovecraft on his white view. And now you've pointed out a very fair note, which is that I've written a book that has a male, a black male centered view. And so the best case scenario, if I'm infinitely lucky, there will be a book in 10 or 20 years that pokes that all the holes that black Tom overlooked, all the women who are in this world let's say, or the Chinese immigrants all there's all these other places. And again, to go back to Lovecraft and the open source, I feel like the best-case version is you're right. I didn't see that. And I really, really hope you'll write that book. Maybe it was a book I can't write. Maybe I don't have the, I didn't have the ability, the talent, the vision to see it. But I think there's room for that book too. And I would devour it.

The question of how to separate the art from the artist is an issue we've been grappling with a lot recently. As a fan, it's hard to fall out of love with an artist's work, especially if that work meant a lot to you when you were younger, and it helped you find your own voice.

That's another reason why I find this approach so inspiring. I've always thought the history of the arts is like a long conversation between the living and dead. And Lovecraft wanted his mythology to grow beyond him – that's why he gave it

away for free -- but he never imagined the people he feared and despised would use his imagery to respond to him. And this conversation these creators are having with Lovecraft shows that if a work of art or literature is truly great, it can better itself – as Kinitra Brooks said. And it can become better than the people who created it.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Premee Mohammad, John Jennings, Kinitra Brooks, Victor LaValle and John Jennings, who did the readings.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. If you really like the show, please do a shout out on social media. That always helps people discover the show. I also put a slideshow of Doug Jones' most memorable roles on the Imaginary Worlds Instagram page.

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