Race, History, and Adaptation in the Era of Trump: *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country*

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"I gotta find a way to Trojan Horse this story into something where people have to see it."

-Damon Lindelof, on reading about the Tulsa Massacre for the first time

Three days prior to our annual meeting, Americans will vote on who will be our next president. To say that Donald Trump's tenure has elevated and revealed to a distressing level the presence of racism and xenophobia that was just barely under the surface is an understatement. Over the last four years, some artists have directly confronted these issues, while others have confronted the legacy of racism and violence in ways that move beyond direct criticisms of the president to reexamine the past itself. We've seen plenty of adaptations that have altered material--think of any Shakespeare adaptation from *West Side Story* to *My Own Private Idaho*. But these contemporary works, in tandem with the words on the page, adapted to and adapted history itself.

They have shown us that beyond the text on the page, filmmakers continue to look toward history in order to examine the connections between literature, film, and the present. Two standout examples of this type of adaptation are Damon Lindelof's *Watchmen*, and Misha Green's *Lovecraft Country*. Lindelof's adaptation or "remix" of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's seminal work from the 1980s, updated the narrative, throwing the timeline backward to the early 1920s while also examining the alternate present. Green's adaptation of Michael Ruff's text had the roadmap present in the novel--but the work is no less arresting, as it examines the legacy of racism through a reassessment of H.P. Lovecraft's horrors--both on the page and off.

Lindelof, creator of *Lost* and *The Leftovers*, was approached about adapting Alan Moore and

Dave Gibbons' graphic novel years before he finally accepted. He turned it down, not knowing how to transform the work, which had already been turned into a feature film, into a series. It was only after reading Ta Nehesi Coates' "The Case for Reparations," in the pages of *The Atlantic*, that he found his way into the material. Reading about the Tulsa Massacre and Black Wall Street led him to see "the world in an entirely different way." In a panel discussion after a press screening of the pilot, Lindelof said he was, "ashamed and confused, and embarrassed that [he] had never heard about it before." The events of 1921 became a central part of *Watchmen*, and race would become a central part of the narrative. He would adapt history, just as Moore had provided an alternate political timeline for the 1970s and 80s.

Lovecraft Country, based on Matt Ruff's novel of the same name, also reconfigures history, placing a Black family in the midst of a supernatural mystery akin to the world of H.P. Lovecraft. Ruff confronted the troubling legacy of Lovecraft's racism while placing his protagonist Atticus Turner in 1950s Jim Crow Chicago. In an interview, novelist Matt Ruff said, "I needed a thematic bridge between paranormal horror and the horrors of racism. And [H.P. Lovecraft], of course, is the best for that." Again, race became the central horror in American history, presented through a supernatural lens. Showrunner Misha Green spoke of the show as "reclaiming" the work of Lovecraft. Moving past the influences of genre and storytelling to tell a new story about Civil Rights.

These works are reconciliations. They adapt not just the text, but time and history itself. Arguably, they show us how texts can be preserved, remade, and remixed in order to confront and respond to the contemporary moment.