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CHAPTER TWO:
**WHITE
HATE &
BLACK
RAGE**

HOW BITTER ROOT USES
THE JINOO AND INZONDO
AS REFLECTIONS OF THE
SAME FORCE

WORDS BY
LUCIUS ILLUMINUX

In Harlem in 1904, Burgess "Berg" Manigo picks up a battle axe and with his eyes full of tears declares, "I ain't afraid of the jinoo." The jinoo are monsters that have taken the life of his mother and would go on to take the life of his father and aunt, but Berg has never been afraid. The monster is only scary until we truly see them. That's why the maximum time we see the monster in *Cloverfield* is 22 seconds, because our eyes and perception adjust. Even if the monster is grotesque and intimidating, understanding and seeing its form takes some of the fear away. The more we see, the less it scares.

In *Bitter Root*, the Sangerye have been fighting jinoo long enough for the jinoo to not scare them anymore. 20 years after Berg made his declaration, we see him calmly sipping tea, as Cullen seems annoyed that he has to fight the monster alone. Blink shows up to chastise them for messing around and is eager to join the fight. A quick injection of fift'no juice and it is revealed that jinoo are white people who have given in to their racism and hatred. If the protagonists are calm, annoyed and eager at the sight of the jinoo - how does the series elicit horror from them?



NOW, DISPENSE
WITH THE **LOLLYGAGGING**
AND PAY ATTENTION TO THE
TASK AT HAND BEFORE YOU
DO GET KILLED--WHICH
WOULD BE MOST
INSALUBRIOUS.

In 1924, if you journey from Harlem to the southern tip of Manhattan, and cross the Brooklyn Bridge, you might find yourself in the neighborhood of H.P Lovecraft.

Lovecraft is considered the father of modern horror, with an entire sub-genre named after him. At the core of Lovecraftian horror is the belief that "the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown," an idea that Lovecraft says "few psychologists would debate."² Yet, *Bitter Root* challenges that notion and breaks apart Lovecraft's proclaimed human universal.

The Sangerye family has made a business out of fighting monsters that look like they could have come out of a Lovecraftian horror story. Large and red, with horns and claws that look ready-made for tearing into human flesh. Notably, throughout the book, the only people afraid of jinoo are the white people who are witnessing their peers take on the physical characteristics of monsters. Johnny-Ray Knox is terrified when Ford engaged his fellow Klansmen and it is revealed the jinoo are beneath the hoods. Officer Sullivan is shook when he reaches to tell his fellow officers to stop brutally beating citizens only to find them transformed. The horror for them does come from the unknown. "How could the people I call my peers be such monsters?" Yet the reader looks at the white robes and police baton and asks, "How could they not?"

Lovecraftian horror is also known as cosmic horror, due to its belief that man has profound insignificance when compared to the vastness of the universe. Perhaps it was this very idea that allowed Lovecraft to be at peace with his profound racism. If none of it matters, then there is no reason to reflect on his belief that the racial horrors experienced by Black people are "desperate and ingenious means to preserve their Caucasian integrity- resorting to extra-legal measures such as lynching and intimidation [because] the legal machinery does not sufficiently protect them."³ Zoom out the camera enough and it all looks the same. Zoom out far enough and the cries of Black people who are dying don't even register.



1. Bitter Root Red Summer Special "The Arsenal"
2. "Supernatural Horror in Literature" H.P Lovecraft
3. 000-0741 H. P. Lovecraft letter to Natalie H. Wooley 22-Nov-1934. Can be read in Lovecraft Letters.

It is under that view that cosmic horror painfully and clearly misses the cultural particulars that Black people exist in, and the humanist way in which they know horror. Black folk have been trying to let people know that the horrors existed since they were first inflicted upon them, but their cries fall deaf on white ears. Whether it's cosmicism, egoism, criminality, or eugenics, the white majority find a reason to look the other way, not experiencing terror until the transformation. However, the jinoo are horrific before they take on monstrous physical traits. In the face of appointed protectors who deny that their pain exists, Black people know what the jinoo really are - because survival necessitates that they know.

The first time we see a Black man afraid in the pages of *Bitter Root*, he is surrounded by white people in hoods mere moments away from being lynched. Issue #3 of *Bitter Root* is littered with repeated imagery of Black people who were just going about their lives, terrified to find themselves on the ground with a police baton bearing down on them. Black people know what they are afraid of;

Becoming one of those strange fruit the south is known to bare.

Falling victim to a brutal policing system.

What might be scarier still are the lengths this country goes through to keep the horror alive.

In showing us the jinoo, *Bitter Root* challenges the way this country tells its story. Vagrancy laws and Jim Crow - which are seen as products of the South - are held up against the celebrated Harlem Renaissance, which was representative of Black prosperity in the North. The jinoo exist everywhere. In Tulsa, OK they were every day townspeople, in Louisiana they wore white robes, and in Harlem they wore police uniforms. The myth of regional racism serves to preserve the idea that the jinoo represent a few bad men in an otherwise aspirational order - *Bitter Root* works to unpack this.



The signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 evolved the myth from one of regional racism, to one to one of a 'post-racial society'. This idea was challenged less than two years later, when Black people across the nation rioted in what came to be known as the Long, Hot Summer of 1967. President Johnson created the Kerner commission to figure out why this happened. In less than a year, the commission - full of political moderates - found that, "White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which [had] been accumulating in our cities." For a brief moment it seemed that the nation had finally begun to listen. But when faced with the term 'white racism' in black and white, President Johnson looked away from the conclusion of the commission that he himself had formed.

The post-racial myth persisted and continued to evolve in the face of active denial. Instead of following the commission's recommendations for ending "abrasive" police behavior and fair reporting of grievances, police were given the right to unionize and use those unions to protect each other. Vagrancy laws evolved into the prison industrial complex that disproportionately incarcerates Black bodies, the Voting Rights Act has been dismantled brick by brick, and the wealth and opportunity gap is still huge.

The continued doubling-down allows the jinoos to thrive into the present. When jinoos marched on Charlottesville with torches chanting "you will not replace us", the country's commander-in-chief made a point to say that there were "very fine people on both sides". In the wake of two murders by police, Black Lives Matter activists launched Campaign Zero in 2015, with a list of specific policy reforms for police departments. Yet, white America didn't see it until a jinoos knelt on a man's neck for almost 9 minutes and slowly killed him. The United States cannot pass anti-lynching legislation in 2020 because a white senator believes lynching should have a "serious bodily injury" standard, lest it be wrongfully applied.

The monsters of *Bitter Root* were real in the time the series takes place, and they are still real today. The system empowers presidents, legislators, and law enforcement with the ability to enact change. It is by design that the people in these positions are jinoos themselves, or enabled by their counterparts who look the other way. We move through the present with the same problems as The Kerner Commission, unsure if "America has, or can generate, the will to solve its racial problems." What *Bitter Root* posits is that the jinoos are not an exception, but rather they are lurking there within anyone, just waiting to erupt. We cannot simply wish them away - instead, we have to face up to them within ourselves and deny them ability to appear.



August 2, 1924, while the Sangerye family is fighting jinoo, a baby is born somewhere in Harlem. That baby would grow up to be James Baldwin, one of the great American thinkers. Baldwin would later poignantly summarize what it feels like to grow up aware of this country's horrors. "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time. So that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won't destroy you."⁴ The fear of succumbing to the rage that comes with the awareness is, in fact, scarier than the jinoo.

From this fear comes *Bitter Root's* second class of monster, the inzondo.

The Sangerye are not afraid of the jinoo, but the inzondo - as Uncle Enoch describes them - are "something far worse." These characters bear some physical similarities to the jinoo but are different in nature, moving with more purpose, and sometimes able to speak. Yet those are not the things that make them worse than the jinoo. All of the inzondo are instead Black people transformed by their rage. They are able to speak and move with purpose because the affliction that has tainted their souls is not illogical, it's founded in a history and lifetime lived in an unjust system. So the Sangerye's are left to wonder how to stop a disease that is a reaction to something tangible.

Berg is the Sangerye that boasts the largest vocabulary. When he declared that he wasn't afraid of the jinoo, his father told him, "there's more than one kind of fight" and armed him with a library to battle the rage welling up inside of him. Knowledge is power, as the old adage goes. So it is profoundly unsettling when he finds himself becoming a monster. Conquering his own pain is not enough, because, like many Black men, he has more than his own pain to deal with. As James Baldwin explains, "It isn't only what is happening to you. But it's what's happening all around you and all of the time in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference, indifference of most white people in this country, and their ignorance."

As an inzondo, Berg feels exactly what Baldwin describes. The horror of Berg Sangerye comes from the knowledge that all the intelligence in the world may not be enough to keep the rage - and grief - inside himself in control, turning him into a creature not unlike the ones he has spent his life fighting against.

The only point of view explored outside of the Sangerye family is that of Dr. Sylvester, who heads to Harlem in the wake of the Tulsa massacre. He is saved by Miss Eliza Knightsdale, who - despite her kindness - allows her rage to turn her into an inzondo, and the two connect and become travel companions. Knightsdale hopes the Sangeryes can remove that rage.

On the other hand, Dr. Sylvester hopes that their curse will be lifted when the Sangeyres cure the racism that afflicts society. In issue #3 he sees that the Sangerye's answer to racism is purification, which, in his experience, leads to failure. His existence is living proof, and the memory of his dead family is a constant reminder. As an inzondo, he feels fear and hatred in Harlem that is not so different from what he felt in Tulsa, and worries the cycle will repeat itself in this new place. The Sangerye's pacification was not able to help Tulsa, but an inzondo was. This causes him to give into the fever and the rage. He proclaims that inzondo "are the cure," angels of retribution sent by God.

His inzondo rampage results in the death of Miss Knightsdale, and so he finds himself in pain and loss all over again. The reality that he had just formed shattered around him. He is no angel, and it was not God but the devil of hatred that made him that way. Sylvester's fall into the rage shows him a deeply embedded fear. What if he wants to give into rage, allow it to become hatred, and become a monster that causes the same pain and loss that haunts him?



The Barzakh lies between the world of the jinoo and hell. At the center of it lies a tree that sprung from the same Bitter Roots that birthed a nation. There the Sangerye, and other warriors of color long thought to be dead, are trapped in an endless battle of monstrous proportions. Those who find themselves in the Barzakh have become so devoted to the fight that they lost themselves in it. The Barzakh then is the manifestation of ultimate fear. “What if there’s no way out?”

Cullen Sangerye looked for aid from his family at every turn. When he arrives at the Barzakh, he tells his trapped family that he doesn’t plan on dying there, because he sees that there is more to life than the fight. Cullen’s dad lost hope for a way out when his mom died looking for one. His inability to move forward was represented physically by the legs he lost. His Aunt Nora has a daughter, though. She asks Cullen repeatedly to share stories about Blink, and in those stories sees a way out of the trap. She is able to move beyond generational cycles of hate and anger and fear through narratives of joy and hope and life.

As it turns out, comics is the perfect medium to express *Bitter Root’s* historical horror. A reader lured in by the monsters on the cover may be unsettled when they do not see the version of horror they were expecting. The heightened reality that comics are able to portray allow *Bitter Root* to fuse real historical instances of white hatred with the physical characteristics of a classic monster. The result is a reading experience that feels very real - because it is. The brilliance of the series comes in its use of real events to reclaim a racist US history, and its ability to expand by giving it form. In a country where Black people have not been progenitors of their own history, a comic book allows the creative team to tell it

in a way that is eerily true to form.

The most horrific truth in the jinoo is that the hatred white people hold is a choice. There is no imminent threat posed by people different from them. The jinoo embrace and encourage racism while the white people around them choose to let them thrive. They can’t be stopped with knowledge or kindness, because there’s nothing logical about the deep rooted spite.

As long as jinoo remain the arbiters of society, Black people are forced to react in order to survive. It is both horrific to be forced to endure systemic violence, and infuriating that the violence keeps us from leading more carefree lives. When that fury turns to rage it seems justified and there’s horror in the idea that the rage may consume us. The inzondo are not the physical manifestation of a choice, but a reaction to being backed into a corner by a cycle of white hatred.

Bitter Root speaks to the horrors that Black people have known for generations and that we continue to profess to this day. The state of this nation is profoundly influenced its choice to empower white hatred and it has yet to make a concerted effort to move beyond it.

THE JINOO
WILL NOT HEAL
ITSELF.

