

Them: Another entry in the lucrative racist genre

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Amazon's *Them: Covenant*, a 10-episode streaming series created by Little Marvin and executive produced by Lena Waithe (*Queen & Slim*, 2019), has almost nothing to recommend it. It is a racist harangue, whose approach borrows something from the *New York Times*' discredited 1619 Project.

The program presents the recent history of the US as nothing but a war of whites against blacks. All the complications of the historical process and social life are thrown out the window. This sort of project may tickle the fancy of the affluent middle class, the identity politics crowd, but probably not too many others. Predictably, billionaire Jeff Bezos' Amazon Studios has renewed it for another season.

Them belongs to a lucrative genre, that now includes Barry Jenkins' *The Underground Railroad* (2021), the HBO series *Lovecraft Country* (2020), *Dear White People* (2017), *Get Out* (2017) and other similar, debased efforts, all promoting a racist narrative and interpretation of reality. Tens of millions of dollars are being poured into these projects, enriching a layer of writers, directors, producers and others, and further polluting the cultural atmosphere in the service of the ruling elite.

The new series begins straightforwardly enough by informing the viewer that "between 1916 and 1970, roughly 6 million African Americans relocated from the rural Southern United States to the Northeast, Midwest and West. Widely known as the Great Migration, many black families were drawn to California by the promise of industrial jobs and the chance to leave Jim Crow behind."

In 1953, Henry (Ashley Thomas) and Livia "Lucky" Emory (Deborah Ayorinde), along with their two daughters, Ruby (Shahadi Wright Joseph) and Gracie (Melody Hurd), move from Chatham County, North

Carolina, to Compton, California (in southern Los Angeles County). Henry is a college-graduate engineer starting a new job with a defense contractor. He also suffers from PTSD, having served in the military, where he and other soldiers were used as guinea pigs in mustard-gas experiments. Lucky is a former teacher.

Without informing his wife, Henry signed an agreement (or covenant) when purchasing the Compton house that stipulated: "No person of Negro blood or heritage shall occupy the premises, notwithstanding domestic servants actually employed by persons of the Caucasian race." The realtor (Brooke Smith)—who later reveals, and is party to, the exploitive practices against black home buyers—dismisses the clause.

No sooner does the family start to unpack their belongings than they are greeted by a horde of bigoted white neighbors, led by Betty Wendell (Alison Pill), who plot to drive the Emorys out. Black dolls hung from nooses are strung across the Emorys' porch, "N----- Heaven" is burned into their lawn, and eventually Henry is nearly lynched in the family's basement.

Prior to this, Henry, the only black man at his firm, faces patronizing condescension and an unmerited demotion, while teenage daughter Ruby is viciously taunted at school, among many other injustices. Flashbacks show Lucky's gang-rape and the brutal murder of the Emorys' infant son at the hands of a group of backward and deranged whites in North Carolina.

The series argues that this extreme torment pushes the Emorys into madness, albeit temporary, in which each family member is haunted by racist spirits, in the form of minstrels and other grotesqueries. Ruby is driven to dousing herself with white paint, while Lucky ends up in an asylum. The latter's particular nightmare involves

a German “holy man” who long ago founded a Christian settlement that ends up torching alive an itinerant black man and his pregnant wife.

Racist crimes committed against black families moving into white neighborhoods are a shameful part of American history, along with lynchings and other horrors. It is entirely legitimate to document and dramatize these realities. But the crimes are part of a larger system of oppression and violence, capitalism. The manipulation and incitement of racial and ethnic prejudice by the American ruling class is one of the principal means by which it has maintained power.

Them is not an honest or insightful response to the injustice and brutality of the existing order, past and present. In fact, the series creators and their ilk adopt the racial prism from the powers that be, hoping to use it for their own economic and social advantage. Producer Waithe asserts, “The first season will speak to how frightening it was to be black in 1953. It will also remind us that being black in 2018 is just as horrifying.” One has to be reminded that this is a millionaire speaking, or someone on her way to becoming a millionaire.

It is worth noting that, with few exceptions, the fraternity of critics are approving of this racialism, with a few extraneous objections to the series thrown in. “Amazon’s *Them* Captures the Horror of American Racism With Frightful Suspense,” is the headline at *Entertainment Voice*, which calls the series “a testament to how more mainstream popular entertainment is looking at the history of racism and racist attitudes head-on.”

“Racism is terrorism, and it’s everywhere; in our entertainment, schools, workspaces, churches, homes,” claims NPR. *Variety*, the trade publication that is largely the mouthpiece of giant entertainment conglomerates, insists that “[T]he fissures racism has carved into American life, and American lives, are so surreally deep that to convey them, artists must use the tools of exaggeration that genre provides,” i.e., one has to make things up because presenting history accurately would not satisfy the identity politics industry’s objectives or verify its claims.

“The series also succeeds in its depiction of white flock, a kind of spectatorship of Blackness, that precedes white flight. White people who gather in crowds to peer at the curiosity of Blackness through

windows. Through bars. It also accurately captures Black rage as a direct result of white violence,” writes *avclub*. The site goes on: “*Them* is certainly a welcome addition to the Black horror cadre that doesn’t seek to sanitize what is truly terrifying to Black people: racists and the past traumas that can literally haunt.”

Them is not concerned with challenging a global economic system that exploits and oppresses the working class of every ethnicity but argues implicitly for a separate (and well-financed) African American “space,” that is, black capitalism.

On the contrary, the self-obsessed filmmakers are indifferent to the distress of others, including the earlier Japanese residents of Compton, many of whom were forcibly removed and interned in early 1942 for the duration of World War II. Not a word about those victims of the Roosevelt administration here!

The series’ creators hold the reactionary view that America’s DNA is racist (or find it convenient to advocate such a notion), and therefore must present every white character as irredeemably and monstrously prejudiced. As one critic frothed: “At many points during *Them*, I felt like the accelerating, visceral violence was intended to nudge at white audiences, asking how much Black pain they could take until they finally condemned it and owned their role in it. As far as I can tell, the limit doesn’t exist.” Again, not the capitalist ruling class, *it* is entirely let off the hook, but “white audiences” need “to own their role.”

In depicting the experiences of a black family during the Great Migration in a thoroughly ahistorical light—as nothing more than a succession of attacks by whites against blacks—the makers of *Them* deliberately obscure and confuse the historical record and the present political climate.



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