

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

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Model IV, 2017

Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax
21 x 25 x 12 in.

Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller

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Michael Belcher

INTERVIEWS

Blood Quantum

Review and Exclusive Interview with Writer/Director Jeff Barnaby

(Prospector Films: Canada, 2020)

Tiffany Hearsey

'I don't do sad Indians; I do angry ones. I don't do defeated Indians; I do vengeful ones'.

'The earth is an animal' proclaims Jeff Barnaby. Speaking to me via video stream from his home in Montreal, this statement is terrifyingly apt. Our feral blue planet is at its breaking point as a dire climate crisis causes extreme weather changes,¹ rising sea levels,² and the disappearance of alarming volumes of insects.³ Retribution it seems has currently taken the form of the present pandemic, believed to be spread by a bat,⁴ served up with a suitably horrifying side of murder hornets⁵ and cannibalistic rats.⁶ It is therefore extremely fitting that the First Nation Mi'gmaq writer-director's film *Blood Quantum* (2020) is an earth-ravaged zombie-contagion fever dream. In Barnaby's plague nightmare, Indigenous peoples are immune to a virus that causes the rest of humanity to become flesh-eating walking dead. Hordes of ravenous zombies, their white skin stained with blood, decimate humans, flora, and fauna indiscriminately. With this turn of events, Native survivors have become sentinels in the newly scorched landscape, a patchwork of burned-out buildings and scattered body parts. '*Blood Quantum* in its essence is an environmental catastrophe film, a social protest film', Barnaby tells me. 'It's speaking about one incident in a long narrative of crazy shit involving every Native tribe in the Americas'.

¹ <https://news.stanford.edu/2020/03/18/climate-change-means-extreme-weather-predict>

² https://climate.nasa.gov/climate_resources/199/rising-tides-understanding-sea-level-rise/

³ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/study-shows-global-insect-populations-have-crashed-last-decade-180971474/>

⁴ <https://time.com/5834097/coronavirus-origin-bats-infect-cats-who/>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/02/us/asian-giant-hornet-washington.html>

⁶ <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/starving-angry-cannibalistic-america-s-rats-are-getting-desperate-amid-n1180611>

Blood Quantum opens in 1981 on the shores of the fictional Red Crow Reserve. A Mi'gmaq fisherman (played by Stonehorse Lone Goeman) is gutting his daily harvest of salmon, extracting a bouquet of intestines and blood. A chorus of dead fish suddenly whip their tails back and forth in a violent *Danse Macabre*, a portent of horrors to come. The scene then abruptly cuts to an animated interlude. Here, against a post-apocalyptic backdrop of fires, barren trees, and industrial factories spouting a dark haze, a woman sits atop a lush green hill. Long black hair flowing in the polluted air, she cradles her swollen belly. Her umbilical cord reaches down into the soil, a fetus floating in the womb of the earth. The expectant mother's vitality in this animated sequence contrasts vividly with the 'unnaturalness' in the film's opening scene. Contaminated zombie fish and factories polluting the land are symbiotic, connoting a history of Indigenous bodies, land and waterways exploited by capitalist enterprise. 'The image that you see at the beginning of *Blood Quantum* isn't some fuckin' British guy with a musket', Barnaby explains, 'it's a factory polluting the rivers and the people'.

The zombie contagion quickly jumps from nonhuman animals to humans—emphasising the closeness of the two—and the dead rise-up and attack the living in ritualistic bloodletting. Carnage plays on repeat as the walking dead feast on body parts. An infestation, they transform the terrain into a soiled nightmare. The members of the Red Crow Nation take up arms against the creeping flesh and their reserve becomes a fortified refuge for survivors. Among them are Traylor (Michael Greyeyes), his ex-wife Joss (Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers), and half-brothers Joseph (Forrest Goodluck) and Lysol (Kiowa Gordon), who navigate their way through buckets of blood and guts and family dynamics.

The battered reinforced walls of the compound are replete with dumpster fires and a legless chained-up zombie dressed in mocking military fatigue, bloody mouth snapping at the air. The scene looks like a macabre diorama of a world entirely made of heavy metal and flesh, a reflection of an industrialised and dying planet. Arriving at the entrance, two teenagers, Joseph and his pregnant white girlfriend Charlie (Olivia Scriven) are accompanied by two survivors they found, a white man and his child who is wrapped in a blanket. It quickly becomes apparent that the child is infected. Joseph's half-brother Lysol, who is standing guard at the gates, chastises his younger

half-brother. ‘How do you know that this fucking townie didn’t come here with this refugee Pollyanna act and plant this infected bitch right on our doorstep?’ He speaks to past historical traumas; the land they’re standing on holds the bones of ancestors infected by ghosts-of-contagions-past.

The earth has unleashed virulent diseases for millions of years,⁷ but in the eighteenth century European colonisers to the Americas weaponised viruses. During this time, Indigenous peoples lacked immunity to foreign diseases, most notably smallpox. British colonisers wrapped the speckled monster in blankets, gifting them to Indigenous peoples in order to ‘reduce’ their populations.⁸ Prior to these acts of genocide by biological warfare, it is estimated that after the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century, foreign diseases killed off up to 90% of Natives in the Americas,⁹ allowing for European invaders to loot and exploit the land. ‘The story of viruses in North America and South America is the story of capitalism’, Barnaby elucidates.

Blood Quantum is not a retelling of historical *Grand Guignols*. The film bridges a history of violent assaults on the land and Indigenous peoples with the present day. ‘It’s all cyclical’, Barnaby explains, ‘I don’t really look at the film *Blood Quantum* as being prescient because it’s all talking about stuff that has happened before and continues to happen. And I think when you’re talking about colonialism, you’re not talking about something that’s ancient history’. He goes on to say, ‘You’re talking about something that’s continuous and on-going. When you’re talking about the North Dakota pipelines¹⁰ or the Keystone pipeline,¹¹ you’re talking about an extension of that very same idea of earth is here for our personal gain and the people that have been here before are here for our exploitation’. The film explores a kaleidoscope of post-colonial experiences from Native perspectives, from defending the reserve by hunting down white meat-puppets, to internalising prejudice and hatred.

⁷ <https://www.livescience.com/16015-oldest-viruses-insects.html>

⁸ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/jeffery-amherst-history-complex-1.4089019>

⁹ <https://www.pbs.org/gunsgermssteel/variables/smallpox.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/appeals-court-allows-dakota-access-pipeline-to-continue-operating-11596662661>

¹¹ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/07/keystone-xl-stalls-again-along-with-other-pipelines/>

As the contagion nightmare spreads, Lysol's anger and distrust, witnessed at the gates of the reserve, intensifies into murderous acts committed against Native and non-Native survivors. He carries a makeshift scythe, but instead of reaping the land for sustenance, he sows the earth with blood. He cuts down a fellow Mi'gmaq who stands in his way of harming the living. 'And then there was one', he says mockingly, extracting the long blade from the man's body. It's a macabre reference alluding to a nineteenth-century American children's rhyme *Ten Little Indians*¹² which, in counting order, jauntily describes the deaths of Native children. Lysol, Barnaby explains, is a 'post-colonial assimilated Native person who's been taught anger' and 'who accentuates differences'. Lysol becomes a caricature of colonial and neo-liberal dominance, trying to control the land and people through violence and exploitation.

Barnaby's characters personalise the Native experience whilst pushing back against static representations. 'I don't do sad Indians; I do angry ones. I don't do defeated Indians; I do vengeful ones. I don't do victimised Indians; I do, typically, the ones victimising themselves or somebody else'. He goes on to say, 'you can't just show these sugary light takes on what this culture is and call it like "oh look they survived so well" without showing what it is they survived in the first place'.

Growing up on the blue-collar Listuguj Reserve in Quebec, the same year *Blood Quantum* takes place, Barnaby experienced an invasion not of walking dead, but militarised police. It was a government-sanctioned bloodletting of waterways and the sustenance that existed within it. The Mi'gmaq's were fighting for their ancestral fishing rights, a food source as well as income for the Nation.¹³ In full riot gear, the Quebec Provincial Police raided the tiny reserve, shooting off rubber bullets as helicopters circled above. Barnaby, a child at the time of the incident, recalls wearing his superman pajamas with an iron burn mark on one sleeve as a police officer hit him in the face with a gun barrel—either by accident or deliberately—as they were chasing down his uncle. He recalls of that day, 'All these guys came there to do was to bust up some Indians'. The raid was depicted in the 1983 documentary *Incident at Restigouche*.¹⁴ 40 years later, Barnaby would film

¹² <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/the-history-of-ten-little-indians-q1WdVbswNEu5Hat3KCQoAA>

¹³ <https://www.csmonitor.com/1981/0803/080366.html>

¹⁴ https://www.nfb.ca/film/incident_at_restigouche/

Blood Quantum on the reserve, deliberately paralleling scenes of resistance in the film with the documentary.

This resistance is explored in Barnaby's characters who have endured struggle way before the dead came back to life. In Barnaby's post-apocalyptic vision, five hundred years' worth of ecocide and genocide horror-shows have literally erupted into flesh eating ghouls. Indigenous survivors wear the scars of violent acts inflicted by the walking dead. A seminal scene in the film shows the aftermath of battle, one amongst countless others. Traylor is seated inside the reserve infirmary after an encounter with the infected. His ex-wife Joss is applying stiches to a wound on his shoulder. As the camera pans across his back and chest, we see skin punctured with multiple bite mark scars. It's a modern-day Columbian exchange; a pound of flesh for a machete chop to the brain of the dead-eyed zombie. Joss and Traylor look over at their son Joseph who is seated across the room with his pregnant girlfriend. Joss says of him, 'he's loyal and he's smart. He's a fighter'. She pauses and speaks softly to Traylor in their Indigenous tongue, 'You're your father's son, so is Joseph'.

Blood Quantum is a tale that encapsulates the horrors of a world broken apart by corporeal and environmental massacre. At its core, it's a story about Indigenous people's legacy of survival against outside forces hellbent on destroying their land and obliterating them from the face of the Earth. Transcending the celluloid curtain, Barnaby's film in many ways mirrors our current pandemic and abuse of mother nature. It shows us that if the Mi'gmaq peoples of the Red Crow Reserve can survive the worst the world has to offer whilst slicing and dicing their way through a zombie apocalypse, then perhaps there's a bit of hope for our battered animal-earth.

Blood Quantum is available to stream on Shudder in the UK, Ireland, and US.

BIOGRAPHY

Tiffany Hearsey is a Freelance Journalist. She covers death, health, and murdered and missing cases. She has a background in human rights work that is reflected in her stories spanning across the United States and Europe. Her work has been featured in *The Atlantic*, *Salon*, and *LA Review*

of Books. She holds an MPhil in Race, Ethnicity, Conflict from Trinity College, Dublin. Her site can be found at: www.tiffanyhearsey.com.