

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

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COVER CREDIT:

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

Fabrication: Chicago Crucible

WEB DESIGNER:

Michael Belcher

**Black Radical Impulse, Self-Reflexivity, and Gothic Landscapes of Nature
and Difference in Jordan Peele's *Us***

(United States: Universal Pictures, 2019)

Kim D. Hester Williams

Jordan Peele's film *Us* (2019) begins by informing the audience that there are 'thousands of miles of tunnels beneath the continental United States'. It is the year 1986, signified by the image of a vintage television console that is playing a local news broadcast warning of a storm that is headed directly toward the Santa Cruz, California (United States) area, 'a storm causing all kinds of trouble around the Bay' [a reference to the greater Bay Area in Northern California]. The voiceover of the 'Cal 11' (California) News reporter announces: 'we'll show you what would happen to the Bay if some scientists' predictions come true'. Peele inserts this trope of warnings about climate change as a foreshadowing of the ecohorror and Gothic landscapes in *Us*.

The advertisement that follows the weather warning displays a disconcerting cluster of squares containing different shades of fragmented faces and eyes that are both closed and open simultaneously. Next, we see more clusters of squares with different colored noses, lips, and more fragmented body parts. Finally, a collection of various sets of white teeth populates, all smiling as the ebullient narrator asks:

'What has 12 million eyes, 192 million teeth, and stretches from the Golden Gate Bridge all the way to the Twin Towers? It's Hands Across America. A 4000-mile long chain of good Samaritans standing hand in hand [...] This summer 6 million people will tether themselves together to fight hunger in the United States'.

While the voiceover continues, images of 'different' people with notably no faces showing are coupled together—tethered—reaching out to hold hands in a demonstration of the aspiration to stretch their diverse bodies, in unity, across the contiguous United States. The disembodied hands and arms are superimposed on pristine natural landscapes of fruit trees, oceans, grain fields, a herd of buffalo, and notably, Mount Rushmore in South Dakota which is carved with the likeness of

past American Presidents, as well as images of the coastal landscapes of San Francisco and New York.

To emphasise the dissonance Peele is setting up, one of the final images we glimpse is the sight of a singular homeless male figure presumably digging in the garbage for food, wearing tattered clothing with his back toward the camera. Below the surface, simultaneously mirroring the red cut-out of human figures that is the 'Hands Across America' logo and the homeless man, are the unknown, tethered doppelgängers who are harnessing a different purpose. They are waiting to unleash the self-reflexive haunting that will disrupt the imposed harmonious union between humans staged on the natural landscape. Instead, what will be revealed is the American gothic landscapes of difference.

What is distinctive about the ecohorror of *Us* is Peele's centering of the Black female maternal figure in relation to gothic natural and unnatural landscapes which further represent difference and its self-reflexive disaffection. We discover at the beginning of the film that the invisible viewer watching television in the first scene is a young Black girl named Adelaide (Madison Curry). When we meet her, Adelaide is spending the evening with her parents visiting the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk—the same Santa Cruz referenced in the television weather report. In her mother's absence, and against the insistence that she 'stay close' to her preoccupied father, Adelaide wanders from the arcade space. She ends up in the natural landscape of the beach—below—where she stares into the ocean with seemingly deep curiosity. After a few intense moments of watching the waves and listening to thunder roll, Adelaide turns and walks away from the sight and sounds of the ocean waves toward a fun house of mirrors where she eventually gets lost and meets Red (also played by Madison Curry)—her tethered doppelgänger.

The premise of *Us* is that each person has a doppelgänger living below ground in the tunnels who is unwillingly connected to someone above. The doppelgängers, however, lack the material benefits and luxuries of the people living above them. While the audience is not aware of this until the end of the film, Red manages to grab Adelaide through the mirror and switches places with her. Red therefore grows up as Adelaide while Adelaide remains entrapped with the 'Other' doppelgängers in the tunnels. In a Gothic twist of fate, the disaffected doubles, including the

entrapped Adelaide, eventually manage to make their way above ground to wreak havoc on their privileged doubles.

In the initial beach scene, before Adelaide is captured and forced to switch places with her double Red, Peele emphasises the anxiety represented by the otherwise desirable coastal space of the beaches of Santa Cruz. Adelaide seems confused by a space that, in the dark, is both mysterious and potentially ominous. This is certainly the case if we consider the historical relationship African Americans have to the sea as a space of both capture and erasure. In her poem, ‘Beaches. Why I Don’t Care for Them’, Wanda Coleman (2009) laments, ‘the only time / i like the beach is when it’s cold hostile and gray. / i feel kin to it then. / or at night. / when it speaks a somber tongue / only the enlightened perceive’” (p. 303). Both Red and Adelaide are ‘kin to’ the ocean which reflects their enlightened perception of and relationship to difference. The uncertainty and power of the ocean is also analogous to Red’s ability to escape the tunnels and inhabit Adelaide’s privileged status above ground.

Peele uses Black female radical impulses and ecohorror—the perceived and real dangers of nature—to animate the Gothicism of U.S. historical memory. The racial, economic, and ecological trauma which is disproportionately and violently displaced onto the unsuspecting Black female body is signified most forcefully by Adelaide and Red’s tethering. We might think here of the BlackLivesMatter movement and, as one example, the horrific murder of Breonna Taylor—in her sleep. In ‘saying her name’, a common BlackLivesMatter rallying cry during the ‘defund the police’ and social justice protests, many of *us* (the pun here shouldn’t be ignored) have been confronted with the realities of what has been ‘hidden in plain sight’, that is, the horrors of antiblackness and the intersection of racial, gender, and ecological violence.

Perhaps the most conspicuous and anxiety-producing marker of difference being made undeniably visible by the current global public health crisis is homelessness—a salient issue that directly speaks to the presence and representation of precarious populations living literally underground in Jordan Peele’s film, *Us*. To use Eve Shockley’s (2006) term, Peele evokes a ‘gothic homelessness’ wherein ‘the frightening uncertainty of the domestic boundaries that are supposed to safeguard those within its walls’ (444) or aboveground in the safely distanced vacation homes

superimposed on the natural landscapes in *Us* and in many other American Gothic tales, instead become sites of horror and psychological terror. In other words, nowhere is safe, especially for Black women.

The shocking and unnerving ending of *Us* gestures toward this idea when we discover that Red is the one who has survived the death battle and has emerged, alive and triumphant, yet a second time, from the sewers. When Red subtly and warily looks at and smiles to her son, Jason (Evan Alex), as they drive on their inverse road trip back to the presumed safety of 'home' and away from the terror of their failed Santa Cruz family beach trip, he realises that his mother has perhaps all along been the 'Other' mother, Red. Peele uses the signifying, dual function of Adelaide/Red as, in Toni Morrison's (1992) words, 'evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self' (p. 59).

In Jordan Peele's Gothic landscapes of difference, each and every individual has a doppelgänger lying in wait. Peele's discursive landscapes of horror inculcate black radical impulses in order to carve a space for the disinherited to resist and to rise up from beneath the depths of invisibility. Their presence is not only felt in *Us*. It is inescapable. Adelaide/Red's erasure becomes no longer tenable. We will always be tethered to and by the 'other' and by the natural and unnatural landscapes of our Gothic past and present. We are inextricably linked. Like the ocean, we are 'kin to it'. No matter how many of our sympathetic hands reach out to clasp and stretch across the landscapes of difference, we will not unloose this tethering until we end the horrors of the oppressive violence of erasure. They are coming for us.

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