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Reflections of a Broken Mirror : An Analysis of the Mirror Motif in The Famished Road, Mama Day, and Us

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Abstract

According to Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory, the mirror is one device in which infants begin to develop an ego through self-identification. The mirror works as a double tool; it serves as a being's introduction into selfhood but also creates a false interpretation of being. Lacan argues that paradoxically, the mirror helps people discover who they are while also creating feelings of self-alienation (as the infant does not recognize the being in the mirror as themselves). Furthermore, Lacan's study of psychoanalysis suggests that when people see visions of themselves, through dreams or hallucinations, it further helps reveal aspects of the unconscious. It is all about vision; how one sees themselves in a reflection and what one dreams about themselves when they are asleep. Either way, it is through this "other" version of self that people can unlock aspects of their own personality and reveal an inner truth that has been inaccessible until now.

Shannon Winnubst contends that the only deficit in Lacan's mirror theory is that he does not acknowledge race and its impact on how human beings start to develop a sense of self. Winnubst argues that Lacan's mirror theory (which suggest an inherent blank slate of identity prior to recognizing the being in the mirror) is only appropriate for White children. For children of color, Winnubst argues that socialization occurs well before seeing one's image in the mirror. Children of color are born into a socialized environment which targets their bodies as sites of inferiority. When Black children confront the mirror, they must fight not to see society's depiction of who they are within the glass. Winnubst's concept supports W. E. B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness, which argues the belief that there is an internal warring occurring in the psyche of children of color. They are constantly struggling to see who they are against what society tells them that they must be.

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, and Jordan Peele's *Us* all use the mirror, reflections, and doubling in order to challenge the belief that truth and identity are fixed. In each subject, mirrors and reflections are used to create a depiction of self that can be a means of identification, but frequently serve as antagonists or alienating figures for the characters. The reflective image carries the weight of the oppressive environment each of the characters live in. Instead of offering a neutral canvas, the doubled persona carries all the hostility, insecurity, and futile rage of living in a racist and classist society. For the marginalized, the mirror is a place that not only reveals the truth of the person, but also the truth of their environment. In each example of Black art, the mirror is used as a means of exposing the pervading outside forces that influence the development of self.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Reflections of a Broken Mirror:

An Analysis of the Mirror Motif in *The Famished Road*, *Mama Day*, and *Us*

by

SAMIRA PIGFORD

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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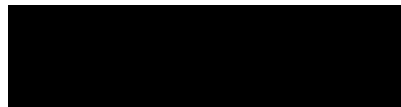
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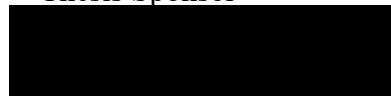
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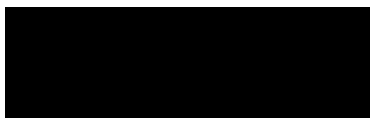
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REFLECTIONS OF A BROKEN MIRROR:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE MIRROR MOTIF IN *THE FAMISHED ROAD*, *MAMA DAY*, AND
US

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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1. Introduction

“They only understand the language of violence, you were saying? Of course; at first the only violence they understand is the colonist’s, and then their own, reflecting back at us like our reflection bouncing back at us from a mirror. Don’t be mistaken; it is through this mad rage, this bile and venom, their constant desire to kill us, and the permanent contraction of powerful muscles, afraid to relax, that they become men.”

-Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

The mirror has always fascinated popular culture for its ability to depict human form as it seemingly appears to be. However, a mirror can never offer the exact truth. It is contradictory in nature; offering a truth that is not quite true, a reality that is at the same time, an opposite. It is an illusion, a practice mimicry that still contains an essence of the original. The image to be found in the mirror can reveal aspects of a person’s identity, while at the same time, the image in the mirror can be tainted by the subject’s perception. As a Black man, Frantz Fanon oftentimes struggled with the image he found while gazing upon the mirror. While he could see himself, he could also always see the way his colonizer saw him. When placed into the world of the colonized, the marginalized body does not have the privilege to discover self without first learning violence and self-hatred. Fanon discusses a feeling of permanent tension and inner turmoil through the life of a colonized being. It is this warring of self that the dispossessed must grow accustomed; it is this inner combat which blemishes the image to be found within the mirror.

The image in the mirror, or our perception of self, is crucial to our development. Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage theory suggests that the mirror is the primary method in which children develop their identities. Through his study of infant interaction, Lacan fully believed that the mirror contributed significantly to ego formation. Similarly, Lacan’s study of the unconscious and psychoanalysis made him realize that the subject not only gained consciousness of themselves through what they saw reflected back at them, but the subject’s dreams and

hallucinations of their doubled selves revealed aspects of their unconscious. Subjects who hallucinated or dreamed of the doubled version of themselves could learn more about their daily behaviors and their identities by analyzing how they viewed themselves. The biggest flaw of Lacan's argument is that it assumes an inherent neutrality when the infant is greeted to their first recognizable vision of self, an argument which directly contradicts Fanon's perception of what Black bodies see reflected in the mirror and what shapes their development into adulthood. Shannon Winnubst, in her essay "Is the Mirror Racist?" contends that Lacan's theory ignores race and its impact on the development of psyche in people of color.

Within the scope of Black film and literature, the motif of mirroring, reflections, and doubling throughout a character's life and within their dreams and hallucinations is consistently explored. While there are moments in which these various versions of self can appear supportive, there are many times when the reflection is combative and antagonizing to the protagonist. Combining Lacan and Winnubst's theories, it becomes very clear that the image in the mirror is often used to not only guide the character into a journey of self but also to reveal the societal and political systems that are inherent dangers to the characters.

Throughout Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, and Jordan Peele's *Us*, each medium uses the mirror motif, reflections, or "doubling" as means to help the main characters navigate their journey towards self-discovery. In each piece, mirrors and reflections are used to create a depiction of self that can be a means of identification but also to frequently serve as alienating figures for the characters. In each source, race, gender, and social class play dominant roles in the characters' development. Through each author, mirrors and reflections are used within Black media as a means of exposing the pervading outside forces that

influence the development of self, oftentimes blurring the lines of truth and illusion, and forcing the characters to confront their current reality.

2. The Mirror Stage Theory

Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory appropriately suggest that a mirror is one of the first ways a being can realize that they are in fact, a being. By seeing themselves for the first time, an infant realizes that they look like other human beings, and therefore, must be human. In this manner, the similarities in appearance to others creates a way of establishing identity. However, the mirror presents a dilemma; the image is neither an exact replication, nor is it the truth of the being. It is an image of the subject, and yet not the subject itself. Lacan argues paradoxically that the mirror helps people discover who they are while also it also creates feelings of self-alienation. It serves as a being's introduction into selfhood but also creates a false interpretation of being. By both accepting the image as a truth but rejecting it as the sole truth, the infant both assimilates to the figure and develops feelings of estrangement from it. The subject identifies with the image but because the infant does not realize the reflection is oneself, the infant feels alienation towards. Lacan refers to this other body as the "Ideal-I;" (76) it is both what the infant may aspire to become, but also reject. Either way, identity is formed through the interaction with the mirror.

The discovery of one's identity is inherently linked to images. Barring those who are born without vision, it is through the sense of sight that one becomes a person. To Lacan, "[t]he function of the mirror stage thus turns out . . . to be a particular case of the function of *imagos*, which is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality" (Lacan 78). By focusing on the image presented, the subject becomes the image and constructs their reality based upon it. Through the mirror, the "ideal-I" is thus created, which is a moment of apperception in which children assimilate to their idea of being based from the image they perceive in the mirror. Lacan

notes the formation of ego occurs “prior to its social determination” through the mirror which forever creates a discord between what the subject perceives and who they truly are (Lacan 76).

Lacan creates a world where truth is relative, and reality is not fixed.

For Lacan, illusion versus truth is not a matter that needs to be resolved. On the contrary, perception is a sort of truth that cannot be verified through typical scientific methodology. When speaking of the purpose of psychoanalysis, Lacan notes that it is through the description of “feelings, beliefs, delusions, assents, intuitions, and dreams” which create an “illusory reality.” This illusion is no less real, however, because it seeks to “*verify* the system by determining through it the very phenomena that constitute our knowledge of it” (Lacan 63). Lacan’s theory of dreams suggests that through a thorough analysis of what one dreams about themselves, it may reveal aspects of their unconscious. The perception of one’s self verifies the reality of the world the subject inhabits. Perception is vital to truth as perception subtly and subconsciously reveals aspects of reality that the subject may not be cognizant of but may still affect them.

Shannon Winnubst offers a challenge to Lacan on the premise that his argument, while accurate in its portrayal of identification and self, is flawed because Lacan suggests that it is universal. Winnubst suggests that for Lacan to speak of his experience as universal is not only inaccurate but can only exist as a direct byproduct of white masculine privilege. Lacan’s inability to denote race as a factor in the subject’s perception of the mirror skews the entire hypothesis. Winnubst argues that children of color do not receive the opportunity to develop their identification and ego prior to social awareness; by the time Black children realize that they are people, they will have also realized that they are Black. To ignore race when gazing into the reflection speaks of a privilege that the disenfranchised do not have access to.

Winnubst creates her argument by noting that the infant, when realizing they are a gestalt, must notice their skin is the organ that binds their body together. It is through the discernment of skin as a function of completeness that the subject can realize their humanity, and also realize the boundaries of their person. Just as Lacan notes that images help form identification, Winnubst argues the same. However, she contends that in Black children situated within the West, ego formation is tinged with dangerous notions as the visible racial markers place them in a realm of the other. While White children can simply be children, Black children must see themselves and understand what it means to be a person who looks so very different from the dominant force. Socialization, which Winnubst labels as the cultural symbolic, plays two different roles in White and Black children. For White children, the ability to see their body and believe it to be a person is not only privilege, but a privilege that helps uphold the systemic values of a racist society. She argues, “[w]hiteness is not a color, it is not a race; it is just human. It just *is* . . . and it is this invisibility that renders whiteness ubiquitous, that renders it the universal signifier” (Winnubst 41). If whiteness is the universal signifier of what it means to be human, to see oneself and see anything other than whiteness creates a problem: what exactly are you?

Citing Frantz Fanon who argues that when gazing upon himself, the Black man realizes “the fragments have been put together again by another self,” (qtd. In Winnubst 39), Winnubst notes that the mirror plays a very different role for children of color. Instead of allowing a space of blank interpretation, the subject must gaze into the mirror already socialized by the beliefs of the cultural symbolic:

His image of his own body, a foundational site for his ego- and subject-formation, is interpellated by the cultural symbolic in which it is located. The black infant attempts to gather himself into a “whole body,” but can see himself only as he is

seen by the white racist world. Only by taking on the limits and proper models of visibility of the phallic field of white supremacy can he cobble together an image of himself and form himself into a functioning, legible subject. (Winnubst 39)

Winnubst correctly argues that it would be unwise and even irresponsible to believe that socialization would not have occurred in child prior to eighteen months. In a world that is dominated by images, humans are socialized well before they realize who they are. To ignore the social stigma attached to race is a privilege not afforded to the disenfranchised. To live in a racist world means to be socialized into believing that negative portrayals of others is the norm. For a person of color, to accept the dominant as the accurate portrayal of humanity is reject one's self. Therefore, the reflected image is not self-alienating because the subject rejects the mirror as not belonging to their body, as Lacan argues (Lacan 77). Instead, the mirrored image is alienating because the subject all too well identifies with its image and sees what the dominant narrative has conditioned them to see. When gazing upon the mirror, a person of color does not see themselves without the stigma connected to them from being a Black body in a racist society.

Winnubst's analysis of the mirror stage theory aligns with W. E. B Du Bois's theory of double consciousness, which suggests that Black bodies are always at war within themselves. Du Bois argues that Black people cannot possibly see just themselves as they are always viewing their bodies through the lens of dominant white culture. Du Bois adds an additional layer to Lacan's mirror stage theory; not only does doubling reveal matters of the unconscious but also seeing doubled versions of self depict the pervading issues surrounding marginalized groups in an oppressive society. Each theorist, Lacan, Winnubst, and Du Bois, therefore offers tools to analyze the use of reflections and doubling within Black art and literature. The mirror and the use of seeing double are tools to unlock issues concerning identity and society.

3. *The Famished Road*

Ben Okri explores the motifs of doubling, hallucinations, and reflections in his novel *The Famished Road*. The story follows a young boy named Azaro growing up in an impoverished Nigerian community who details his everyday existence. Azaro's father feels the strain of being unable to provide for his family, frequently turning to alcohol and becoming verbally and physically abusive to his wife and child. Azaro's world is intermixed with spirits and unknown forces. Part of Azaro's trouble stems from the fact that he is an abiku. An abiku child according to Yoruban mythology can navigate two different realities, the spirit world and the human one. While the basic meaning of the abiku is disagreed upon, the shared belief maintains that the abiku is destined to return to the spirit world through a shortened life span (Afolayan 37). The child's death is inevitable. The myth not only explains the frequent child loss that occurs throughout African communities, but its symbol is used to portray the social and political issues infringing upon society. Azaro's name is taken from the name Biblical Lazarus who is capable of human restoration after death as Azaro is able to exist in both the "real" and spiritual world. Azaro relies on this multiplicity of self throughout the text in order to derive meaning from not only social matters, but historical and political problems as well. Because Azaro is constantly navigating both the "real" world and the spirit world, he is the only character in the text that receives a double view of the world. He experiences life but watches it as an outsider. He can see the people in front of him, but also the spirits that plague the characters. Azaro's view is multiplied, which both creates a disassociation with his own image and the people around him and provides him with a deeper understanding of the world.

Azaro's visions of the world blend reality and dream methodology together, without ever making it apparent if the latter is the true reality. Okri's use of hallucinations and dreams to invade reality create enough reasonable doubt to question if truth is fixed. Investigating with a

Lacanian lens, it is important to note that Lacan maintains that dreams and hallucinations not only dictate the way we see ourselves, but dream analysis is a prominent tool in understanding reality by unlocking the unconscious. Through a discussion of his dreams, “[the subject] formulates what he suffers from and what he wants to overcome . . . he confides his secret failures and his successful designs, he judges his own character and his relations with other people” (Lacan 67-68). Okri’s manipulation of the abiku myth mixed with the dream technique is ultimately used to reveal the truth of the oppression within the community. Azaro’s community is entirely African, which means he does not experience the same sense of socialization as discussed by Winnubst. Instead, Azaro’s identification is shaped by his subjugation as a member of the disenfranchised. The doubling of Azaro and the world he sees is oftentimes distorted, ultimately highlighting the social unrest, political injustice, and the classism issues that prevent Azaro from discovering his true sense of self.

Azaro’s decision to remain in the world of the living in order to appease his mother means he must release the aspects of his personality, which make him powerful. He says, “I had buried my secrets early. I buried them in moonlight, the air alive with white moths. I buried my magic stones, my mirror, my special promises, my golden threads, objects of identity that connected me to the world of spirits. I buried them all in a secret place, which I promptly forgot” (Okri 17). If Lacan argues that the mirror is one of the fundamental methods of establishing a sense of ego and identity, by burying the mirror and then forgetting it, Azaro is stuck in the world without direction. His identity cannot be shaped by what he sees in himself, rather it is constructed by the people surrounding him.

When Azaro does greet the double version of himself, he does not at all identify with the image. If anything, he feels a strong sense of alienation from his image. After leaving Madame

Koto's bar, Azaro follows a dog which leads him astray. What was supposed to be "a straightforward path from Madame Koto's bar to [his] house" becomes troubling as he goes deeper into the forest. Azaro ends up in a more developed part of his town where "all the houses were gigantic, the trees were small, the sky low, the air golden" (Okri 104), and he cannot find a way out of it. Azaro sees the spirit version of himself, who directs him to the proper way home:

"I was sent to tell you to go home."

"That's what I am trying to do."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course. Anyway, who sent you?"

"Who do you think?"

"Our king"

"What king?"

"The great king."

"Where is he?"

"What sort of question is that?"

There was a pause. I looked hard at the riddle who stood before me. He stared hard at me too.

"You look like me," I said.

"It's *you* who looks like *me*," he replied.

Then as a suspicion of who he was began to dawn on me, he said: "Take that path there and you will be all right." (105)

Azaro's conversation with his doubled self starts as a need for direction; he is lost and uses his second self to be found. Throughout the novel, it is consistently discussed that the forest

around Azaro's village is disappearing as the land is becoming developed. It is no coincidence that Azaro becomes lost as he enters this area of the forest with its giant houses as he is directly confronted with colonization and modernization. Azaro's need for a doubled version would be to provide him comfort and support in his time of confusion. However, Azaro's sense of alienation from himself makes him distrust the boy. When talking, the lack of speaker tags within the conversation makes it difficult to ascertain which character speaking is the "real" Azaro, a point which seems especially purposeful. If one follows the flow of conversation, Azaro both asks "Who sent you?" and answers "Our king," which means that Azaro asks the questions and answers them himself. His doubled version is there just to help Azaro arrive to his own conclusions. However, there exists an overall sense of distrust amongst the two. Azaro calls the replication of himself "a riddle" and looks upon him with "suspicion" (105). While the image is generally helpful to Azaro, he cannot quite conceptualize what the being is, demonstrating Azaro's lack of identity. He does not recognize himself. The suspicion connects directly to the Lacanian belief that mirroring creates a sense of disassociation; when one gazes upon themselves in the mirror, they feel a sense of alienation to the image. Taking it one step further, Winnubst's theory explains this alienation and suspicion with which Azaro greets his own image. Winnubst's analysis primarily focuses on the self-hatred Black people experience, but her theory can easily be applied to any of the disenfranchised. As an under-privileged youth, Azaro cannot identify with his own image positively. Winnubst notes that the black youth cannot see the "whole body" (39) because the dominant view controls their vision. In a world where there is a social hierarchy dependent upon race and class, stigma is assigned at birth to anyone within the marginalized community. Members of the same community and background are taught to be in competition with one another and wary of their neighbors. As a member of the impoverished, Azaro learns to

be distrustful of all. The White people he interacts with are colonizers and the African people in his own village are consistently attempting to take advantage of the lower-class community.

Azaro's view of masculinity is corrupted by his father. An alcoholic, verbally and physically abusive, and a victim of economic oppression, Azaro's dad becomes his guide into what it means to be a poor African male. The man who sleeps "with suffering still on his face" (Okri 237) and tells Azaro "[the] only power poor people have is their hunger" (Okri 112) teaches Azaro both the stigma associated with race and class, and how to navigate it. However, he is not a helpful role model. At work Dad struggles with the manual labor, "trying to bear the load with dignity" (Okri 232), and when he returns home, it is to get drunk and be physically abusive to his family. Because he cannot lash out against those that oppress him, he abuses his family, which are the people he can control. It is through these interactions, that Azaro learns what it means to be poor: bearing the load of suffering and abusing those underneath him for any semblance of control.

When Azaro breaks a window of a blind neighbor, Dad is forced to fix it. Watching from afar, Azaro notices that the neighbor was condescending to his father. Azaro notices that "The [neighbor] pushed Dad around as well. I could see Dad struggling to contain his anger" (Okri 486). Dad does not react, but finishes the window, and when the two arrive home, "Dad suddenly pounced on [Azaro]" (Okri 486). The old man forcing the family to pay for the window is a further reminder that Dad will never be wealthy; there is always something to keep him impoverished. Dad does not punish Azaro for breaking the window; it is only after the old man (who he has no control over) pushes him around that Dad feels the need to "pounce on" Azaro, as if he were prey. By watching his father, Azaro not only becomes aware of the crippling effects of poverty but learns the toxic traits of masculinity. Even though Azaro does not exist in a White

society, Winnubst's point is still accurate. Azaro cannot find who he is because the heavy weight of systemic oppression makes him suspicious of his own image.

As a member of the marginalized community, Azaro does not develop his own ego and sense of self through the use of mimicry in mirror play. Instead, his mirrored image is a product of socialization and class oppression. He does not see himself for who he is necessarily; he sees what he *needs* to be in order to survive. He shows this by reenacting his father's poor behavior when he starts drinking and later when he meets Ade. After demanding Ade climb down from a van and Ade refuses, Azaro was "disconcerted by his serenity, [so he] clambered up the van and tried to push [Ade] down" (Okri 551). Azaro becomes socialized by the oppressive elements of his society. Not only does he bully Ade, he expects reciprocal aggression from him. Azaro is learning to live up to the expectation that he needs to be violent to demonstrate his authority, that he needs to exert shows of masculinity, and lastly, that the world will take advantage of him if he allows it. Azaro learns violence and aggression as direct consequence of oppression and colonization.

As Frantz Fanon is discussing Black psychology, he reflects upon time when he saw a small boy and the child was afraid of him. He thinks to himself he wanted "to be a man, nothing but a man" but the impossibility of it because his "body was given back to [him] sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly . . ." (Okri 113). Fanon realizes that his mirror is distorted by expectations of what Black men are supposed to be. He realizes that being a man, or finding his own identity, was reserved for White men, and that he was expected to "behave like a black man . . . [he] was told to stay within bounds, to go back where [he] belonged" (Okri 114-115). In essence, Fanon realizes that Black men adopt the personas of their

stereotypes and learn violence through their interactions. Azaro's father is a product of a colonized and classist system, who learns that he must stay where he belongs. He works laboring to develop the forest under a White man's guidance and returns home where he is oppressed by the wealthy corrupt landowners and politicians. He gains respect only when he resorts to violence; otherwise, people are consistently taking advantage of him. There are very few options for him. Azaro, in turn, learns those same behaviors and begins to distrust those around him, including his own image. It makes sense that Azaro is unable to identify with his own image and is suspicious of his doubled self. He has witnessed the crippling effects of socioeconomic disparity that creates classifications. He is both raised and socialized to believe what he should be, not what he is.

Another way Azaro gains insight about the world is through dreams and hallucinations. Azaro's multiple views creates the belief that there may be different realities. On the one hand, many of Azaro's run-ins with spirits appear to be childhood naïveté. If Azaro is scared, he, typically sees a spirit. For example, Azaro becomes scared of being alone in Madame Koto's bar, thinking that the customers were "materializing, it seemed, from the night air" (Okri 208) and believing them to be disfigured and deformed spirits. It is purposefully vague if Azaro's wonderings are accurate portrayals (perhaps there are disfigured spirits chasing him) or the hyperactive imagination of a child who creates monsters when he's scared. Monali Pathange notes Azaro's spiritual self and real self as being a separation of unconscious and conscious self. Azaro's visions reveal his unconscious because "[in] Azaro's case he is bombarded with exotic and mysterious visions, which compel him to follow the enchanted road. These visions are a permanent part of his life and they keep interrupting and disrupting his daily activities. Azaro learns to acclimatize to this situation where he lives with the dominance of both the ego and the

unconscious in his life” (Pathange 508). If Azaro’s vision are representations of his unconscious, it is through his dreams and hallucinations that the reader is provided access into the trauma Azaro cannot bear. His unconscious intruding into his conscious life are the ways in which Azaro represses the oppression he combats daily. Okri uses Azaro’s dual view of the world, his dreams, and hallucinations to create a new reality for Azaro that has double truths – it is a means for Azaro to comprehend the implicit dangers of the political and social world around him.

Azaro many times believes that the spirits who want to steal him away are politicians (Okri 171). The spirits are deformed in appearance. Azaro describes them as “stranger than any I had seen before . . . their eyes were all swollen and their lips were big and bruised” going onto list the physical attributes they were missing, including a lack of fingers, a contorted head, missing teeth, and blind (Okri 162). If Azaro sees the truth through his hallucinations, he can see the corruption displayed in their physical bodies, which is quite literally decaying. His view of the spirits is a direct criticism of politicians, and those in power. He is right to distrust the politicians, who people in the text consistently refers to as “rats.” When Azaro tries to communicate with the rodents, he notes that “[b]ut they couldn’t understand me because, unlike us, they speak only one language” (Okri 113). Dad believes the rats can be friends, because both rats and the impoverished are motivated by hunger. However, it becomes clear throughout the text that the rats are not hungry; the language they speak is greed. They are constantly eating, never satisfied, and in the words of Azaro, they “continued chewing away at our lives” (Okri 291). They continuously take, even if they are not hungry, stealing from the impoverished and leaving them with nothing.

It is no coincidence that the corrupt landlord, who threatens to raise the rent for basic repairs and votes, is seen constantly eating as well. When attempting to collect the rent, “Mum

was silent and as the landlord munched away on his kola-nut the rats started chewing” (Okri 137). He, like the politicians, are driven by a need to consume. They will take until there is nothing left to give. The rats continue to chew the family’s food until the photographer kills them all, creating the belief that this cycle of oppression will not end unless it is stopped by force. As long as there are people to take advantage of, those with the power to do so will continue.

The politicians align themselves with thugs throughout the book and use their power to oppress and abuse the citizens. This is especially prevalent in the example of the poisoned milk. Azaro watches the milk and notices something growing out of it that grew “very tall and white and resolved itself into a ghostly agbada (a robe worn in West African communities). There was no one in the agbada and it took off from the powdered milk and flew around the room. Then the garment, all white, folded itself, compacted and settled into the form of a bright indigo dragonfly. It buzzed its wings round the room and disappeared into the impenetrable darkness of a corner. My headache grew more severe” (Okri 196). Again, Azaro’s dream of the milk reveals a truth hidden from reality. Whether intuition or the reality of the milk, Azaro sees a sinister element rising from the milk with the ability to transform. The ghostly agbada lives in the milk, turns into a dragonfly, and disappears. Azaro’s vision allows him to realize the milk is not what it is disguised as, that there is something more to it. He is the only one in the village who can see the powdered milk for what it truly is. It is not what it appears to be; instead it is poison disguised as aid.

Azaro’s vision affords him the ability to see the world around him more clearly but strips him of the ability to see himself. His journey towards identification is strangled by oppression, social injustice, and lack of economic resources. When he sees himself, he cannot recognize who he is. His “mirror,” or discovery of self, is tainted by the oppression he must experience. Aligned

with Winnubst's theory, Azaro is born into a socialized world which treats members of the marginalized communities as lesser. He cannot see himself outside of the roles society has given him and instead learns potentially damaging methods to combat his exploitation. However, Azaro's double vision as an African child affords him the luxury to see the world clearly. Okri's portrayal of the spirit world is not so far-fetched when compared to Azaro's reality. His reality, a mixture of spirits, monsters, and talking animals, does not seem so ridiculous in a world where politicians are poisoning their own constituents and heavy rain forces the citizens to live in piles of their own excrement. Azaro's hallucinations and dreams better reveal the world's social and economic disparities. It is only by marrying the two together would one understand the whole picture. Through Azaro's visions, a new truth is revealed. Lacan's belief that truth isn't fixed and that reality can be constructed by self is also proven through Azaro. He is struggling to obtain his identity in a world where reality of any given situation is problematic to ascertain.

4. *Mama Day*

"The Other Place," the deeded home that belongs to Cocoa, as the ancestral land passed down from Bascombe Wade and Sapphira Wade, remains an elusive mystery throughout Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. It is a place of healing and magic but also a cemetery holding the body of the oppressive slave owner, Wade. Willow Springs exists in a world in which women can create lightning, spirits walk amongst the living and visit through dreams, and women use herbal medicine for both healing and harm. It is "other" in the same way that Azaro's world of spirits and reflections is "other." It is not seemingly of this world, and yet it serves an implicit purpose of revealing more accurate version of truth. The novel centers on the romantic relationship of Ophelia (Cocoa) and George, who visit Cocoa's hometown of Willow Springs to meet her family. During the visit, Cocoa is poisoned by a neighbor, and in his quest to save her, George sacrifices his own life to heal Cocoa. Through it all, Miranda (Mama Day), Cocoa's aunt, offers

her guidance and magical abilities to protect Cocoa. Naylor's use of Willow Springs to create a second reality mimics Okri's in that both texts use a manipulation of vision and space to create a world filled with magical realism. Through the dual settings of the idyllic Willow Springs to the urban New York City, two worlds are created. Naylor's use of mythology, dreams, hallucinations and doubling are similar to Okri's in that the visions are used to reveal a truth that is more indicative of reality than what the characters believe to be true and are products of their socialization throughout society. Throughout Naylor's text, she uses mirrors, dreams, and hallucinations to reveal the importance of culture and history to combat the negative images of blackness that pervade both the conscious and subconscious.

The reader's introduction into Willow Springs begins with talk of the legend of Sapphira Wade and the saying 18 & 23. This phrase, 18 & 23, is never concretely defined by the citizens, as they believe it is "just our way of saying something" (Naylor 7) to the chagrin of the ethnographer, Reema's son, who visits and is unable to grasp the concept. As an ethnographer, he has a goal of putting Willow Springs in a book and putting it "on the map" (Naylor 7). He interviews the people and ultimately decides that 18 & 23 is about "ethnography, unique speech patterns, cultural preservation," and later arrives "the conclusions that 18 & 23 wasn't really 18 & 23 at all—was really 81 & 32, which just so happened to be the line of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Spring sits on the map" (Naylor 7). Reema's son is symbolic of Western ideology—he is focused on categorizing Willow Springs, determining the "truth" of the place by assigning some sort of scientific value in it. After leaving Willow Springs and pursuing his education in the United States, he loses his ability to understand the culture of Willow Springs. His definition of 18 & 23 is basically the same as what the people say it is—

“unique speech patterns” and “a way of saying something” conveys the same meaning. Their inability to understand one another is a direct result of their societal differences. Language is social, inherently relying on the cultural patterns of the people. Reema’s son, who has fully transitioned into a Western society, cannot grasp the meaning of what the people are saying.

The expression 18 & 23 being the mirror image of 81 & 32 seems a purposeful manipulation of Lacanian methodology by Naylor. As a mirror of its situational placement on the map, 81 & 32 may be viewed as an alienating concept to 18 & 23 and provides reasoning why the citizens of Willow Springs view 81 & 32 with a sense of hostility. It suggests two different realities in place. The longitudinal and latitudinal location on the map—81 & 32—connects to what one would commonly refer to as the fixed or true reality, the Western view. The concept of 18 & 23 is an inverted form of this reality, which serves to undermine everything 81 & 32 represents—the stereotypical depictions of Black Americans, the categorizing and collecting of culture, and the overall sense of colonization as a means to conquer. By creating 18 & 23, the people are creating their own identity. The slaves having “no choice but to look at everything upside-down” (Naylor 8) is spoken by Reema’s son as a condescending remark upon their ignorance. To believe in 81 & 32 is to inherit those same ideologies as Reema’s son. Investing into 18 & 23, and rejecting 81 & 32 serves as a means a self-preservation. The slaves would really have had no other choice but to create an alternate reality or get stuck in societal depiction of what their reality should be.

The phrase 18 & 23 directly connects to the legend of Sapphira Wade, who killed her slave master in 1823, inherited the land, and created the town of Willow Springs for future generations to inherit through the matrilineal bloodline, skipping every other generation. Sapphira Wade is proof that reality can be manipulated, and mythology can be stronger than

proven reality. However, it becomes clear that the symbol of Sapphira Wade is more important than the reality of her. As readers, we learn that Sapphira was bought by Wade in 1819 through the paratext, specifically the bill of sales which the other characters in the novel never read in its entirety. It is impossible pinpoint her origin and story, however, the communal voice of the citizens of Willow Springs all agree that “if we put our heads together we’d come up with something—which ain’t possible since Sapphira Wade don’t live in the part of our memory we can use to form words” (Naylor 3-4). The part of our memory that is not used to form words implies a break between the subconscious and the conscience of the mind. Although the citizens are unable to verbalize who Sapphira Wade is, her essence exists intuitively in each person. It is Lacanian in nature to believe that through the subconscious (dreams, hallucinations, and visions), one is able to gain insight into a reality that would otherwise be ignored and unknown. The present is less important than what lies in the unconscious. When speaking about the dreams of the unconscious, Lacan highlights that the subject is addressing more than just their present reality, they are addressing some other, “[someone] who is imaginary but realer still: the phantom of a memory, witness of his solitude, statue of his duty, or messenger of his fate” (Lacan 67). The unconscious stores all of the memories and facts of reality that the conscious self cannot access, but still control current behavior. In this manner, the dreams and hallucinations reveal truths that need to be revealed

Mama Day’s dream of Sapphira Wade unlocks the part of her unconscious that she cannot access. Sapphira Wade is the messenger of fate that plays a direct role in the identification of every citizen in Willow Springs. She exists in the part of the memory not used for language because she is beyond theoretical conception; she is a truth that cannot be proven scientifically but whose reality is equally as important as what can be found in the rational part

of the brain. Sapphira does not exist to any of the characters until she visits Mama Day in a dream, where she refuses repeatedly to provide Mama Day with her name. In the dream, Mama Day becomes somewhat infantilized as she goes through the emotions of being a daughter:

[She's] got no ears . . . she's got no mouth. There's only a sense of being. Daughter flooding through like fine streams of hot, liquid sugar to fill spaces there was never no arms to hold her up, no shoulders for her to lay her head down . . . Melting, melting away under the sweet flood waters pouring down to lay bare a place she ain't known existed: Daughter. And she opens the mouth that ain't there to suckle at the full breasts, deep greedy swallows of thickness. (Naylor 283)

Mama Day is stricken into a “sense of being,” functioning on pure needs and feelings, like a small child. The experience of being nursed is almost sensuous in its description, highlighting the sumptuous fulfillment to be found in being nourished by Sapphira Wade. It is an experience that Mama Day never has never had, of being mothered. It is only through this mothering that she can gain the knowledge to help Cocoa and to realize her purpose.

Mama Day has a completely obscured vision of self through her dream. When she gazes upon the well where Peace is buried and waits to see her reflection, all she sees is a “bottomless pit. . . There ain't much chance of seeing through to the bottom, of even seeing her face, 'cause the sunlight is swallowed long before it reaches that fair” (Naylor 284). She fails to receive clarity until she closes her eyes completely and “looks at the sounds” (Naylor 284). Mama Day's inability to see her dead ancestors through the well or see herself in the dream suggests that her search for identity has been obscured. To not gain a full vision of herself in her subconscious state implies that Mama Day, the strongest woman in the text, still has yet to discover who she is. The obscuration of self in images connects directly to Winnubst's theory of the mirror stage

theory. Mama Day is unable to see herself because she does not have the luxury of being without the pain of societal issues and systemic racism. As she travels to the well, Mama Day suffers “the weight of her years with each question, the heaviness of each ache, each sorrow, she had learned to step over in order to get the strength to go on” (Naylor 283). To be a Black woman and be on the search for identity is inherently linked with the pain of oppression and the historical weight of subjugation. Seeing is an important motif investigated throughout the text. Visions are constantly questioned and what the characters sometimes see is all too often misconstrued. Mama Day’s dream places an implies that it is only through the negation of viewing the world around you as reality can you obtain direction. To “look at the sounds,” is to rely on alternative senses, to “see” with objects other than the eyes. If she relied on images, she would inherently be faced with the same problems as Frantz Fanon, who sees himself and only sees the stereotypes society has chained to his image. To rely on other senses, is to gain a more complete picture.

George is a direct representation of the problem of relying on Western reality to gain a view of truth. As a product of a foster care system of sorts, George grows up with a disconnect from his past. As he notes when speaking to Cocoa, “You had more than family, you had a history. And I didn’t even have a real last name” (Naylor 129). George’s last name is taken from the institution he grew up, the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys. The signification of last names historically has an importance, especially upon Black people. Slaves were identified by their master’s last names; a symbol of freedom was in choosing their own names. George’s name linking to a White institution is inherently symbolic of his total oppression and definition of himself—foisted upon him by a white culture. Daphne Lamothe concisely explains an aspect of George’s character by writing, “The text ascribes his cultural amnesia, his purported inability to

'listen' to his blood, to inculcation with Western values resulting from his institutionalization in an orphanage that instilled him with mainstream, dominant American values of individualism" (160). Sapphira Wade refuses to reveal her name to Mama Day because she does not want to relinquish that power of her identity. Since George Andrews obtained his name from the White institution that raised him, he never obtained that power.

Without a connection to his culture or history to counteract the images of racist society's depiction of Black men, George can only be what he sees. He is taught to "[grow] up with absolutely no illusions about [himself] or the world" (Naylor 26), the implication being that George is unable to see beyond his White view of his future. His identity is shaped by the Wallace P. Andrews Institution; the dominant culture frames his view of himself, as Fanon warned framed as the reality for all Black men. As Cocoa reminds the reader, through the voice of Mama Day, "[f]olks see what they want to see, she told me. And for them to see what's really happening here, they gotta be ready to believe" (Naylor 97). George cannot believe he is anything other than what he is taught to be because he does not have any other view of himself other than societal expectations. As Mama Day warns about Bernice's "magic seeds," which are in truth placebos that Mama Day gives her so that Bernice will think she will become pregnant: "The mind is a funny thing, Abigail—and a powerful thing at that. Bernice is gonna believe they are what I tell her they are— magic seeds. And the only magic is that what she believes they are, they're gonna become" (Naylor 96). Mama Day's seeds are not magical, but they still work for Bernice. The seeds are a metaphor for self-identity. Because Mama Day calls the seeds magical, Bernice believes it and they help her become healthier and able to successfully carry a child. George is never told that magic exists, nor is he told that seeds can be anything other than what

they appear to be. He cannot see a reality other than what is presented to him as truth, and so he cannot find his identity separate from the narrative told to him.

George's and Cocoa's journeys toward identity are very different. Cocoa has Willow Springs to depend upon and so she can see beyond the scope of systemic oppression. George does not. Because of George's inability to distance himself from his Western identity, the story ends with George dead, unable to believe in a reality outside of what he has been taught and as Mama Day phrases it, he differs from the other man of Willow Springs because "those men believed—in the power of themselves, in what they were feeling" (Naylor 285). Cocoa has more of a connection with her cultural history and her past. However, like Mama Day, there are moments where Cocoa is infantilized in her quest for self-identity. The most prominent example is Cocoa getting her hair braided by Ruby. As Ruby braids her hair, Cocoa reflects that "Twenty years melted away under her fingers as she sectioned and braided my hair" (Naylor 246), begging to be called "baby" by Ruby to feel the sense of protection it inspires. The act of hair braiding not only has direct ties to African culture and traditions but is maternalistic in nature; it is one of the first ways a mother tends her child, braiding hair to keep it protected.

In her analysis of the religious significance of hair braiding in *Mama Day*, Monica Coleman notes that "Ruby recreates Cocoa's childhood world as she is braiding hair. But at the same time, Ruby is also creating something new—the illness that is about to plague Cocoa" (Naylor 133). Coleman goes on to say, "Ruby and Mama Day function as ritual leaders. They are "shamans" who lead and guide the power that is manifest and honored in the ritual" (Naylor 133). Coleman's analysis highlights the importance of Mama Day and Ruby because their job is to guide, to help, and to heal. Cocoa is dependent upon those figures, just as Mama Day is dependent upon Sapphira Wade in her dream, for nourishment and guidance into her identity. It

is only through Ruby's ministrations that she can "make the gray light disappear" (Naylor 261) symbolically clearing up any confusion that Cocoa has. Cocoa can thrive because she has these figures to counteract the dominant norm.

When Cocoa gazes upon herself in the mirror, she is faced with a grotesque image of her decaying face. She sees her "flesh gummed on the brush bristles," and her "image frowning at [her] had a gouged cheek with the extra flesh pushed up and dangling under the right ear," (Naylor 275). Cocoa looks away from the disfigurement and "dabbed more powder on the brush, stroked even firmer on the left side—and gouged a deeper hole" (Naylor 276). The disgusting image that Cocoa sees is most obviously explained away because the Ruby has poisoned Cocoa with the nightshade, causing intense hallucinations. However, the hallucinations only seem to occur when Cocoa is gazing upon self. Applying a Lacanian reading of the moment reveals that Cocoa's hallucinations are an attempt to reveal a truth about her that she does not know. For one, it is important to note that the mirror Cocoa is gazing into is cracked, which "spread from the far corner where the vase chipped it up toward the middle" (Naylor 275). The blank canvas that a mirror is supposed to be is already distorted, from a fit of temper from Cocoa. For Cocoa, the Black woman, the mirror is already tainted in violence instead of a place of neutral expression.

The more Cocoa tries to improve the image, the more she causes self-harm. The powdered rouge causes gashes to appear on her face. By using make-up, a symbol of covering up her image, Cocoa is only creating more damage. In her search to find self, if Cocoa only continues to "cover up" the ugly depictions, she cannot hope to heal them. Last, not only is Cocoa's face distorted, it is understandably viewed by Cocoa with a feeling of suspicion and mistrust. Her image is frightening. When she gazes upon the mirror, she can only see something

terrifying. Winnubst's theory about a person of color's inability to see the "whole" body when gazing in the mirror explains why Cocoa cannot see the "whole" body when gazing upon herself – she literally sees herself in decaying pieces. The fractured pieces are symbolic of the fractalization of Cocoa's psyche. Growing up in a racist society, Cocoa is constantly at odds with her own body. Her insecurities are a direct byproduct of living in a world that has conditioned Cocoa to view her body with disgust. From wearing the wrong foundation to appear darker in skin tone to objectifying other people of color throughout the text (for example, Cocoa referring to the women of color she interviews with as Cherry Vanilla, milkshakes, and licorice), Cocoa seems to struggle with race and her placement in it. The grotesque image in the mirror may not be reality but it does reveal an inner truth. In trusting the mirror, she is trusting societal depiction of Black women. By depending upon the mirror to offer truth, Cocoa sees herself and the weight of systemic oppression. Maxine Montgomery concisely sums up the solution to Cocoa's problem: "In order for [Cocoa] to be healed she must acknowledge the reality of her malady. In other words, Cocoa has to question the authority of the fractured mirror if she is to realize the complex self that the 'living mirrors' figured by a transnational maternal household image" (165).

Cocoa realizes the image in the mirror is tainted when she, like Mama Day, closes her eyes to what she is supposed to see and focuses on other forces to help navigate her towards truth. Cocoa finally "sees" herself when looking at her grandmother. She says, "[r]eflected off the clear brown of her irises, I finally saw my face in a mirror that could never lie" (Naylor 287). The only mirror to be trusted is the image of her family history, the guide of her ancestors. Any other representation of Cocoa is false, a tainted image controlled by societal oppression and influenced by perception. However, Cocoa has to learn to distrust the mirror and that her self-

alienation must be unlearned. The journey towards identify for Black Americans is more challenging as there are no images to rely on that are not tainted. It is only through a new reality, a focus on the “other” instead of the dominant, that Black people can obtain the skills to learn who they are. Mama Day was able to obtain part of the story about her ancestral connection to Sapphira Wade, but she still walks away with pieces missing and she never learns Sapphira’s name. She realizes, however, that “[the] other place hold no more secrets that’s left for her to find. The rest will lay in the hands of the Baby Girl—once she learns how to listen. . . . I can’t tell you [Sapphira’s] name, ‘cause it was never opened to me. That’s a door for the child of Grace to walk through” (Naylor 307-308). Naylor’s message is clear; for Black Americans, whose histories are lost and past unknown, the steps to reclaim identity are multigenerational. To deconstruct a systemic programming of conditioned and learned behaviors on how to view Black bodies needs time to occur. The other place, as a place of altered reality, reveals a truth that would otherwise be unknown to Mama Day. It is only in this “other place” that Black bodies are able to believe in “the power of themselves.” The other place needs to exist in order to combat the dominant norms and expectations.

Months into her relationship with George, Cocoa begins to distrust the happiness to be found in the relationship. It is not because she fails to trust George, however; it is because she cannot believe that happiness is for her. She says, “Nothing I had met in that world had prepared me for your possibility. So it only stands to reason that I felt what I saw was impossible” (Naylor 99). To see is to believe. Nothing in her world had convinced Cocoa that happily-ever-after was possible for a Black woman. Just as she must unlearn her belief that she is destined to have unfulfilled relationships, she must unlearn all of societal expectations for herself. Each character in the novel is on a quest to obtain some aspect of their identity and each character must be blind

to what is presented to them as “truth” and “reality” in order to discover their identities. When nothing in this world prepares people of color to see anything more, it becomes almost impossible for one to find themselves.

3. *Us*

Jordan Peele's *Us* focuses predominantly on the mirror motif, arguably more than any other example. The film follows a middle-class African American family, The Wilsons, as they journey to Adelaide Wilson's childhood home for a vacation. Adelaide gives the audience a sense of foreboding as the story unfolds. Eventually four people in masks begin to stalk the beach house and terrorize the family. As the Wilsons fight for their lives, it is revealed that Adelaide wandered into a fun house as a child and discovered her doppelganger in a mirrored reflection of herself. Adelaide has always felt her doppelganger's, Red's, presence was real and during her vacation, her Tethered self appears. She has an entire family of doppelgangers that match Adelaide's family. Red's “Untethering” is exposed to be a massive uprising of the Tethered, who escape the tunnels, kill their above ground twin, and join hands across the country to make a statement. Through a thrilling cat and mouse chase, Addy's (for the purpose of clarity, the adult Adelaide who was the original Tethered, will be referred to as “Addy”) own memories slowly reveal *she* was the one who was the original Tethered, trapped in the tunnels underneath the ground. Only through killing Red does Addy remember she took the original Adelaide into the ground and took her place. Peele's film begs an analysis of the American system of capitalism, colonialism, the prison system, and the pains of Black assimilation. The use of doubling and the mirror motif, is used throughout the film to not only reveal the intricate social issues that pervade Black American culture, but to show the danger assimilation presents to the Black psyche.

When Adelaide wanders from her parents as a child, she enters the “Shaman’s Vision Quest,” a stereotypically depicted Native American fun house (fig. 1). In bright yellow letters with lights are the words “Find Yourself,” appearing almost as a beacon in the otherwise darkened



Figure 1: The funhouse as Adelaide sees it as a child
 Source: “Us.” *Then & Now Movie Locations*, 2019,
www.thenowmovielocations.com/2019/08/us.html.

background. The use of the Native American caricature, which is later replaced by a wizard, hints at the threat to be found within the seemingly innocuous funhouse. Directly relating to Winnubst’s theory regarding mirrors and people of color, minority groups do not have the luxury of seeing a whole body reflected at them in the mirror. They are constantly fighting to combat stereotypical depictions of who they are when establishing identity. A White body entering the funhouse can use this experience to “find themselves” within the maze mirrors, ignoring distortions for the truth of their appearance. For Native Americans, or other bodies of color who can be used as props and decoration, visiting the funhouse, there would be no blank slate for self-identity. The journey towards discovery is always rife with self-doubt, stereotypes, and depictions told to them by the dominant narrative.

The use of the shaman-figure is therefore a hint to the audience that this funhouse may not be so fun for a person of color. Adelaide’s journey towards self-discovery begins (and ends) with the use of mirrors. In typical funhouse fashion, the mirrors Adelaide encounters are filled with distortions of herself, her body appearing elongated and stretched out. Adelaide tries to find her way out of the maze of mirrors but becomes confused, crashing into a mirror that she believes is

an exit. Just as with Naylor's *Mama Day*, the mirrors offer a false perception of truth and are an inherent threat to Adelaide. But, in the words of Addy herself, the girl who appears in the final part of the scene "wasn't a reflection. She was real" (Peele 40). She is real, in the sense that she exists as an actual person. But Adelaide's doubled version of herself is real, also, in the sense that she exists to reveal aspects of herself that Adelaide can't see. Adelaide's doubling directly relates to Winnubst, and by extension, W. E. B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness. Du Bois writes:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. (37)

Investigating the use of doubling with a Du Bois lens means that Adelaide's second self is a creation of this double consciousness. The two figures engage in a literal warring, hinting at the violent mix of rage and self-hatred that exists within Black bodies. The "real" Adelaide loses this

battle, as she is taken into the tunnels, with the Tethered Addy taking her place (Figure 2). When confronting the adult Addy, Red says that she never stopped thinking of Addy, about “[how] things could have been. How you could have taken me with you” (Peele 85). Red’s belief is that the Tethered Addy did not have to choose between herself and Red—they both could have escaped the tunnels together. It is a futile hope. To



Figure 2: *The original Tethered Adelaide (Addy) attacking Adelaide*

Source: Acuna, Kirsten. “23 Details You May Have Missed That Hint at the Mind-Bending Twist in ‘Us.’” *Insider*, Insider, 26 Mar. 2019, www.insider.com/us-movie-hints-adelaide-is-red-2019-3.

live in America, in a society which disallows “true self-consciousness” and only lets Black people “see [themselves] through the revelation of the other world” means that there can be no reconciliation of the double consciousness. Addy complains early in the movie that she does not feel like herself, to which Gabe responds, “I think you look like yourself” (Peele 39). The distinction is subtle, but important. Addy’s vision of self does not reveal who she is. She cannot feel like herself, because she has no inkling what being herself entails. She is literally lacking in identity because at this point, Addy does not remember she was born in the tunnels, but also metaphorically so. Addy buried a part of herself when she took Adelaide’s place. How can she ever see the whole body, never mind ever feel like one whole body if part of her must be lost in order to survive?

When Addy emerges from the tunnel, leaving Adelaide behind, she makes a choice to be a part of society. In doing so, she chooses assimilation, which means she must ignore all of her

memories, her oppression, and her rage that she felt while living in the tunnels. To be American is to bury the feelings associated with always living on fringes of society. The tunnel system is a symbol used by Peele to represent the disenfranchised. The movie opens with the lines, “There are thousands of miles of tunnels beneath the continental United States . . . Abandoned subway systems, unused service routes, and deserted mine shafts . . . Many have no known purpose at all” (Peele 1). While appropriately sinister for a horror movie, the abandoned, unused, and deserted tunnels are the perfect background for the land of people who do not have equal access in America. They live underground and do not have a purpose to serve. When asked by Gabe, “What are you people?” Red very theatrically proclaims, “We’re Americans” (Peele 50), to the family’s confusion. Red’s question indicates the people in the tunnel are the representation of true America, the people who are not a part of the one percent, that the dominant narrative all too frequently forgets about.

The Wilson family, including the adult Addy, her husband, Gabe, and her kids, Zora and Jason, try desperately to be a part of White America. Somehow or other, they never seem to quite make it. Gabe wears his Howard sweatshirt for the entirety of the film, proving that he is a Black educated man. The family owns two houses, their primary and vacation home, have two healthy children, and buy a boat. They are the representation of the American Dream. However, Peele reminds us, for Black Americans, the most they can hope for is second best. Gabe frequently bemoans the fact that his White friends, Josh and Kitty Tyler have more than him, even though they have similar jobs. Josh drives a better car, has a nicer and more modern home, and Josh’s luxury yacht is no comparison to the broken dilapidated boat Gabe can afford. The most glaring sense of racial disparity is when the Wilson family calls the police prior to the attacks occurring. The police respond, but tell the Wilsons that they are fourteen minutes away, more than enough

time for danger to befall them. Harry Olafsen argues that out of all the Wilsons, Gabe, specifically, has a desire to mimic his White counterpart. Olafsen writes, “The important part of this example is that Gabe continues to try to live up to the same standard of living as the Tyler family” (27). Olafsen makes it very clear that Gabe is not to be faulted, but citing Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry, which argues the colonized attempts to mimic the colonizer, Olafsen describes Gabe’s behavior as problematic. As Bhabha stated, “[b]ecause the colonizer, in this case the white man, attempts to identify with the Black man through this commonality, the Black man loses a sense of his own identity by splitting between blackness and whiteness. The attempt to live up to the colonizer is a form of mimicry, to which Bhabha interestingly calls ‘the tethered shadow of deferral and displacement’ (qtd in Olafsen)” (28). Olafsen articulately states that Gabe is tethered to White society by striving to assimilate, ultimately deferring his own sense of blackness to “fit in.” The Wilson family plays a role in their own colonialism by striving to be a part of American society. Olafsen believes that Gabe is the only character attempting to mimic White America, but just the existence the Tethers suggest otherwise. If they are to be read as double consciousness of the characters above ground, they are a depiction of reality. By rejecting those parts of themselves and burying the other part of their identities in search of cultural assimilation, the characters reject their own blackness. The journey to find oneself can never be achieved if assimilation means denying oneself.

The lives of the tethered are ultimately miserable. Red provides insight into when she tells the Wilson family a fairy tale describing how they live in the tunnels:

Once upon a time, there was a girl, and the girl had a shadow. The two were connected; tethered together. So whatever happened to the girl happened to the shadow . . . When the girl ate, her food was given to her, warm and tasty, but

when the shadow was hungry, she had to eat rabbits, raw and bloody. On Christmas the girl received wonderful toys, soft and cushy, but the shadow's toys were so sharp and cold they'd slice through her fingers when she played with them. Time passed. They both got older, and one day the girl met a handsome prince and fell in love. At that same time, the shadow met Abraham. It didn't matter if she loved him or not, he was tethered to the girl's prince after all. Then the girl had her first child; a beautiful baby girl . . . but the shadow . . . she gave birth to a little monster. Umbrae was born laughing. The girl had a second child, a boy this time. They had to cut her open and take him from her belly. The shadow had to do it all herself. She named him Pluto. He was born to love fire. So you see, the Shadow hated the girl so much for so long, until one day she realized that she wasn't being punished by the girl at all. She was being tested by God. (Peele 49)

The tunnels can be read in a multitude of ways. They can represent people of color and the lower classes. They also represent dehumanization that occurs with the prison system and stand as symbols of the impoverished. Peele uses the Tethered to represent all of the disenfranchised; it is an amalgamation of society's outcasts. The people in the tunnel suffer a lack of nutrition and are forced to eat rabbits. Red does not have access to adequate health care, meaning she has to perform her own C-section. There is in general a complete lack of choice; their lives are already determined from the people who are metaphorically and literally above them. Each of the names has a meaning as well. Abraham, as the father of this new generation that Red is trying to start. Umbrae, Red's daughter, means darkness and shadows. Pluto, the son, is named after the

Roman god of the underworld. This is, of course, a means to imply the inherent threat the family represents but the names are also purposefully dehumanizing. They give the characters roles that they must live up to; Abraham's only function in the movie is to create the children and protect the family and the Black children are inherently threatening. Their names reflect their lack of choice. Red's name shows her lack of identity; she is identified by the color of her jumpsuit. Her real name is Adelaide, of course, but that identity has been stripped from her.

The Tethered Wilsons obviously look exactly like their counterparts (fig. 3) except for the general sense of evil and malevolence.

Abraham wears a permanent frown, Umbrae smiles maliciously, and Pluto wears a rubber burn mask covering the burn scars on his face. They are a mix of rage and suffering. Even Pluto's burn scars suggest that Jason's trick with his lighter, which never seems to work for Addy's son, has worked all too well for Pluto. He



Figure 3: *The Tethered Wilsons appearing in the Wilsons' beach home*

Source: "What Is 'Us' About? Here Are Some Interesting Theories." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 26 Mar. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/03/26/movies/us-movie-theories-explained.html.

suffers because of Jason's whims. However, through various points in the movie, the Tethered are constantly attempting to be more human. Kitty's Tethered practices laughing and crying in the mirror and putting on make-up. Abraham takes the glasses from Gabe's face in order to fit in. Pluto constantly mimics Jason's behaviors (fig. 4), following his hand movements at all times. This ultimately leads Pluto to his death as Jason walks backwards and Pluto follows into a fire.

The mimicry is consistent with what Olafsen explores in his article; the Tethered try to adopt the colonizers' behaviors in order to assimilate. However, it is never done quite right. After being trapped in the tunnels for so long, being society's shadows, the Tethered lack the capability to learn empathy and compassion. Addy is proof that people are products of their environment; she is not evil even though she was born in the tunnels. She not only loves her own family but feels regret and pain when Pluto and Umbrae die. Because she escaped her environment, Addy can learn to be a human being. On the reversal, Adelaide/Red, who grows up in the tunnels, loses her entire sense of empathy. She does not even flinch when Pluto is killed right in front of her, instead using that moment to kidnap Jason.

Peele is making a direct commentary, not only on the prison system, but in general upon



Figure 4: *Jason in his werewolf mask moving his hand as Pluto mimics his hand movements*

Source: "Us's Jason/Pluto Theory, Explained and Debunked." *Vox*, Vox, 2 Apr. 2019, www.vox.com/2019/4/2/18290380/us-movie-jason-pluto-tether-theory-explained-true-false.

social services and programs offered in America. If you continue to treat disenfranchised people as "shadows," how can you expect them to grow into productive humans? The Tethered Wilsons lack basic human empathy and identification but not by nature. It is purely because of the lack of nurture.

Pluto is a direct symbol of this. Although he appears animalistic in nature, he mostly follows Red as a pet. He mimics Jason in search of human connection and guidance. Of all of the Tethered that the audience meets, there is a sense that Pluto could change. He stops his evil plan of lighting the Wilsons's car on fire to listen to Addy and respond to Jason. This is different from Umbrae who tries to attack Addy even as she is pinned between a car and a tree, dying. For the

teenage Umbrae, it is too late. For the small child Pluto, to escape the tunnels means that there is hope.

Red makes a discovery when she lures Addy back into the tunnel. She explains:

How it must have been to grow up with the sky. To feel the sun, the wind, the trees. But your people took it for granted. We're human too, you know. Eyes. Teeth. Hands. Blood. Exactly like you. I believe they figured out how to make a copy of the body, but not the soul. The soul remains one, shared by two. They created the Tethered so they could use them to control the ones above. Like puppets. But they failed, and they abandoned the Tethered. For generations the Tethered continued without direction. They all went mad down here. And then . . . there was us. (Peele 83)

The purpose of the tunnels is articulated by Red to serve the reversal, to control the people above ground. Whether it is true or not, the end result is what is significant. The Tethered are not treated as people, but rather abandoned once capitalistic America has no use for them. As a symbol of Black Americans in general and the slave trade, they are brought into existence to serve a purpose and if that purpose fails, they are left without direction, without help, and without any means to survive other than what they can do for themselves. What Red identifies as “the soul” has really nothing to do with having a theoretical soul. It is clear, through Pluto and Addy, that the concept of a soul is developed within human beings. It is a lack of opportunity, the lack of direction, that enables the Tethered to be so different from their counterparts. On the other hand, Red is speaking of the tearing of the soul in the same sense as Du Bois. It is the separation of two identities in which one must be masked and subdued in order for the other to thrive. Peele uses the symbol of the Tethered to not only reveal the intrinsic difficulty of

discovering self in America for people of color, but also to make a social commentary on the lack of opportunities for the marginalized in America.

Red's goal for the "Untethering," the naming of her plan, is essentially that everyone is



Figure 5: *The end scene of the Tethered joining hands across America.*

Source: "Everything You Need to Understand About 'Us'." *StudioBinder*, 24 Mar. 2021, www.studiobinder.com/blog/us-movie-ending-explained/.

released from the tunnels, they kill their above ground counterparts, and they join hands creating a chain across America (Figure 5).

Peele's inspiration was the Hands Across America campaign, in which millions of people linked hands in 1986 for a small donation to create a link across America. The proceeds from this campaign were meant to provide support to the impoverished and food banks. The ultimate irony behind the project is by charging a fee to

get involved, it automatically excludes the impoverished. The depiction created from the campaign is for people who can afford it. By mimicking the campaign with the use of the *Tethered*, Red is making a statement about those who are not allowed to be the faces of America being able to exist, "to feel the sun, the wind, and the trees." She is creating a space for those who are considered invisible to be seen, for the shadows to come into the light.

The changing of Addy as she becomes more determined to destroy Red highlights an overall flaw in her character. As a typical of the thriller genre in general, the protagonist moves from being afraid to taking back their power. However, in this context, it is very unclear who is the villain and who is the hero. The iconic words Jason whispers when meeting the *Tethered* family for the first time, "It's us," from which the movie gets its title, demonstrates that there is

not a huge difference between the two. It is all a matter of circumstance and opportunity. When Adelaide is taken into the tunnels as a child, she is wearing a Michael Jackson Thriller shirt that her dad has won for her in the fair. The “Thriller” music video famously depicts Michael Jackson transforming into a werewolf, then back into his original self, but glancing at the camera in the very end with yellow eyes to signify that he is still the werewolf. The werewolf is within him, no matter the façade. The t-shirt is the big clue that this movie is about transforming into two separate beings.



Figure 6: *Addy watching Pluto walk himself into the fire right before final murder of Red*
 Source: “23 Details You May Have Missed That Hint at the Mind-Bending Twist in 'Us'.” *Insider*, Insider, 26 Mar. 2019, www.insider.com/us-movie-hints-adelaide-is-red-2019-3.

As Addy journeys throughout the movie, she becomes more and more like Red. It is strongly implied that Addy reverts back into the tunneled version of herself. Jason becomes frightened of her when he sees Addy stabbing the Tethered twin with scissors because she adopts Red’s weapon of choice. By the end of the film, Addy has killed multiple people, including Red, and her once white

jacket is stained red with blood (fig. 6), fittingly adopting the same color choice as Red herself. Not only does she begin to morph into Red but during the last kill scene she makes guttural and animalistic noise as she strangles Red, mimicking the language of the Tethered who have not had the opportunity to learn English. It is a reminder to the audience that Red and Addy are not different. They are the same person. Addy is capable of being Red just as Red is capable of being Addy. By burying one half of herself, however, Addy buries her unconscious, her impulse, and her emotions all for the sake of assimilation. When she kills Red, Addy soothes the terrified

Jason by explaining to him, “[e]verything is going to be like it was before” (Peele 91). Her other side destroyed, Adelaide is free to live her assimilated dreams.

Even with a complete lack of empathy, Red does not kill a single person, as the Tethered only kill their counterparts. The Tethered kill their oppressors as a desperate attempt to regain their lives. This makes Red’s earlier statement, the reminder to Addy that “[w]e’re human too, you know” more relevant. The Tethered are not viewed as human beings ever, just monsters. They do not follow our society’s expectations of behavior, their movements are a little too disjointed, and they cannot speak English. They are entirely too different and all too deserving of death. If they are symbolic of the marginalized class, Peele is again using the Tethered to depict how violence towards the colonized is universally accepted and they are villainized for using that same violence to revolt.

Peele’s use of doubling and the mirror motif add onto Winnubst’s theory that for Black bodies, the mirror is a source of alienation. He mixes the alienation one feels when gazing upon the mirror with Du Bois’s theory regarding double consciousness. Peele offers an analysis of the ways in which Black Americans are forced to separate their identity into two warring ideologies in order to assimilate. Adelaide’s separation means the burying of her subconscious in order to better appeal to White America. When Red is released, Adelaide must defeat her again in order to maintain her middle-class Black American lifestyle. Peele uses the mirror motif to not only discuss the dangers of Black assimilation upon the psyche but also to make a commentary upon social injustice. The Tethered community, as a symbol for the marginalized, are used, discarded, and subdued in order to maintain the capitalistic American system. The lack of choice and the concept of pre-determined lives are only reserved for those who live below ground and never for the ones on top.

4. Conclusion

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon discusses how a person of color who assimilates into White society, inherently becomes conditioned to believe that their blackness marks them as inferior. He writes “[for] the Negro there is a myth to be faced. A solidly established myth. The Negro is unaware of it if his existence is limited to his own environment; but the first encounter with a white man oppresses him with the whole weight of his blackness” (Fanon 150). The myth of one’s own inferiority is only revealed when the other is placed within the dominant norm. For Fanon, it is impossible to assimilate fully into a racist and classist society without being conditioned to inherit the same beliefs. The psychology becomes infected with the belief that one is subordinate because of one’s race, whether it is unconsciously or consciously known.

Within Black art, authors are using mirrors, reflection, and doubling to confront the systemic racism and classism that hinders people of color’s ability to discover a sense of identity. Lacan’s mirror theory, which purports the idea that the mirror is the main source of ego formation, ignores the socialization that occurs for people of color who are born into a pre-established hierarchal system. Both Winnubst and Du Bois offer arguments proposing that within the colonized, identity formation is more complex. Winnubst argues that when the Black infant gazes upon themselves in the mirror, they do not see their bodies prior to socialization. They are born into a world where they are already stigmatized. To see a Black body is to be distrustful of that same body because of the negative labels that plague people of color. To be born Black is to be born with certain expectations in place and to spend one’s life trying to counter those stereotypes. Du Bois adds onto this analysis with his theory of double consciousness which suggests that people of color have an internal warring within themselves. They can see who they

are but also the person society believes them to be, which means they are constantly fighting the negative image that is associated with their bodies. Doubling and mirroring, therefore, reveals inherent truths about the social order we live in while also highlighting the negative impacts the societal depictions have upon the Black psyche.

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* uses the symbol of the abiku Azaro and second realities to reveal how the unconscious can reveal truth. Azaro's journey to self revolves mostly on dreams and hallucinations, which directly expose the hidden social and political systems affecting the impoverished people of color. His use of doubling and reflections not only uncover the external conflicts he must face, but also depict the stigma assigned to the disenfranchised. Azaro learns violence and aggression as the only way of combating oppression through his father and does not receive the chance to establish his own identity. Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* similarly manipulates second realities to reveal the harmful impacts of Westernization. Naylor uses the mirror, dreams, and the reflection motif to reveal the internal warring of self that occurs within the characters. Lastly, Jordan Peele's *Us* uses the concept of "doubling" to highlight the warring of self that occurs in people of color who attempt to assimilate. The separated consciousness that emerges becomes a symbol of the disenfranchised who suffer continuously from the lack of resources, opportunity and choice.

In each text, the characters reveal that their unconscious is inherently affected by the social and political systems that control them. The trauma that they are blocking stems from living in a world where they are constantly denied access. The authors create a second reality to highlight the injustices the characters are facing. Fanon's depiction of the Black man, "oppressed with the whole weight of his blackness" is a consequence of colonization, even if the characters do not realize it. Their views, visions of self, and dreams of another world prove

that they are suffering. They are fighting to combat their own oppression and discover who they are in a world that has already dictated what they should be.

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