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"The Girl Had a Shadow": *Us* (2019) as a Modern Black Gothic

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Abstract: In this research paper, I examine how Jordan Peele's film *Us* (2019) fits into the genre of a modern "Black Gothic." I analyze how Peele uses imagery, character construction, and social references to construct a modern Black Gothic film that considers the intense history of oppression and silencing of groups on the basis of their race and class in the United States. I use the foundational definitions and examples provided by Maisha Wester and Sheri-Marie Harrison to argue how *Us* fits into and further modernizes the Black Gothic genre, as well as examining how Peele's imagery contributes to the horror and the social commentary of the film. Ultimately, this paper provides a close reading of the whole film as a part of a larger conversation around how the historical and modern oppression of Black individuals and communities is embedded into the very foundation of the United States as a nation.

In mid-18th century Europe, the Romantic period ushered in the emergence of Gothic literature. The Gothic genre--which dwells on the mysterious complexities of human fears, desires, and base nature--became widespread and extremely successful, as works within the genre allowed their authors to explore the cultural fears of their historical eras within the frightening framework of looming manors, supernatural monsters, and haunted heroes. As Gothic literature thrived throughout the centuries, many non-European authors manipulated and expanded upon the traditional conventions to reflect their own identity or culture. Within the last few decades, African American writers have established a "Black Gothic" genre, made up of works that adapt and subvert the white-centered traditions of Gothic literature in order to comment on the historical oppression of their people. One of the most influential figures currently operating within this genre is filmmaker Jordan Peele, whose most recent film, *Us* (2019), exemplifies a contemporary evolution of the Black Gothic framework. In *Us*, Peele uses imagery of doubles and shadows, construction of duality within the characters of Adelaide and Red, and references to racial and social divides in America to construct a modern Black Gothic film that forces the viewer to consider the intense history of oppression and silencing of Black people and working-class communities in the United States.

With *Us*, Jordan Peele presents a contemporary entry into the established subgenre of the Black Gothic and continues its tradition of subverting and reinventing the traditions of the European Gothic. To examine the creation of the Black Gothic, we must first explore the

foundation of traditional Gothic literature. While classic works like *Dracula*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Frankenstein* did address the racial issues of their times, they did so in a manner exclusively centered around white people and white fears. The traditional Gothic text is characterized by the exploration of human emotions and anxieties, and as defined by H.L. Malchow, expresses “a language of panic, of unreasoning anxiety, blind revulsion, and distancing sensationalism.”¹ Through the landscape of fear and the internal and external struggles of its characters, the Gothic serves as a discourse on a particular culture’s concerns and anxieties, especially through representations of the “Other.” The Other is the grotesque and “uncanny” villain of a gothic tale, being the manifestation of the hero’s repressed nature.² It is through the fear of the Other that the Gothic often becomes extremely racialized, as the “Othered” figure is often represented by a non-white person or a dark monster. The author’s treatment of this character generally reflects their ideas about the place of different races in their society; frequently, the Other represents the “blackened evil that torments and is defeated by good whiteness.”³ Therefore, the British and American gothic tradition relies heavily on relegating non-white figures to the role of monstrous Others, characters who are used to show the triumph of white purity.

It is from this traditional basis that Black authors, filmmakers, and artists have developed their own Gothic, responding to and creating within the genre in which their bodies “have been historically overarticulated and manipulated to render them nonnormative.”⁴ The creators of Black Gothic texts deliberately revise the stereotypes of the European Gothic to challenge the portrayal of people of color as perverse monsters that must be defeated; they re-center the genre on the struggles of communities of color in an examination of the long-lasting violence that they have faced at the hands of oppressive colonial powers. Within this subversive effort, Black artists transform the notion of the uncanny from their own sensationalized bodies into an exposure of the colonial *process* of silencing and repression, rejecting their own “Othering” and shifting the idea of strangeness onto “the institutions that marked them as savage.”⁵ The deliberate changes that Black authors make within their own Gothic stand in direct defiance of the traditional gothic texts which have “exiled African Americans to the shadows,” and Black authors use their revised Gothic to “scream back” at such texts.⁶

Furthermore, the Black Gothic genre has become more relevant to modern culture and appears in many popular contemporary forms. Childish Gambino’s music video for his 2018 song “This is America” is one recent visual representation that evokes the past and present of the

¹ Maisha L. Wester, “Introduction: The Gothic - Old and New, Black and White,” in *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places*, (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

oppression of Black Americans through imagery such as Confederate army costume pieces, vehicles from the era of the War on Drugs, and police memorabilia; additionally, the music video is set in a cavernous warehouse in which sudden violence lurks around each corner, calling on the eerie manors typical of classic gothic literature.⁷ Gambino’s music video, as well as other examples such as Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017) utilize dark humor juxtaposed with scenes of brutal violence to show “the ways in which daily black life can suddenly descend into horror.”⁸ *Get Out* follows protagonist Chris as an awkward meet-the-parents weekend turns into a horrifying, racially-motivated kidnapping. The film presents a terrifying situation that plays with absurdity to represent the trauma that white violence and racism has given to Black communities. As is shown in these examples, the modern Black Gothic exemplifies the discourse surrounding persistent racism and white supremacy in America, and the allusions that Peele and Gambino make to the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow laws, which they symbolically tie to modern issues such as police violence, exemplify how “Gothic violence remains a part of everyday black life.”⁹

Us (2019) presents another entry from Peele into the modern Black Gothic genre, joining in the conversation with *Get Out* and “This is America” about how the history of the violent suppression of Black communities in the United States lingers, continually affecting the lives of Black Americans. One way that Jordan Peele establishes *Us* as a contemporary Black Gothic text is through his imagery of doubles and shadows, which invoke the conventions of the traditional gothic while also subverting them and relating them to oppression in America. Peele visually emphasizes the importance of this specific imagery by repeatedly showing doubled and/or shadowed objects throughout his film: a frisbee lands perfectly on top of a circle; a real spider crawls out from under a toy spider; “11:11” appears repeatedly.¹⁰ Most obviously, Peele utilizes doubling and shadowing imagery through the horrific presence of the Tethered, who first appear to the viewers as a murderous family of doppelgängers that interrupt the summer vacation of Adelaide Wilson (Lupita Nyong’o) and her family.

Peele’s use of doppelgängers in his film is reminiscent of the British Gothic tradition in which the doppelgänger was frequently used as an uncanny “Other,” familiar in physicality and behavior but differing from the Self in that it “figures as an alter ego... [articulating] his or her base desires.”¹¹ Peele’s Tethered do indeed reflect distorted versions of the lives and “base” desires of their above-ground counterparts; this can be seen when the doppelgänger of Adelaide’s friend Kitty (Elizabeth Moss) mimics her double’s plastic surgery by grotesquely cutting her

⁷ Sheri-Marie Harrison, “New Black Gothic,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 23, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/new-black-gothic>.

⁸ Harrison, “New Black Gothic.”

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Us*, directed by Jordan Peele, (1990; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures), HBOMax, 27:44; *Ibid.*, 16:02; *Ibid.*, 31:28.

¹¹ Wester, “Introduction: The Gothic”, 12.

jawline, as well as theatrically performing various emotions in a reflection of Kitty's dream to become a movie star.¹² However, the Tethered differ significantly from the doubles of the traditional Gothic in that they actually *destroy* the boundaries and order between them and the Self.¹³ Peele subverts the doppelgänger of the classic Gothic by showing the Tethered, uncanny and grotesque versions of human beings, as rising up against their doubles in a violent and deliberate manner, breaking through the boundaries that stand between the Self and the Other; the oppressor and the oppressed.

Peele's imagery of the repressed Other confronting and killing their doubles exemplifies his rejection of the European Gothic's suppressed and racialized Other. This subversion fits within the Black Gothic tradition of flipping the system of oppression in order to question "the reason for the hiding and the historical moment of silencing [of repressed groups]."¹⁴ Although the Tethered are the same race as their doubles, they differ in their levels of privilege and power; while the Wilsons live a comfortable middle-class life, with the ability to vacation to their own summer home as seen in the film, their Tethered counterparts are forced to live in underground tunnels and act out the lives of their doubles. The conditions that the Tethered must live in is first explained to the viewer through Red's speech to the Wilsons:

Once upon a time, there was a girl, and the girl had a shadow. The two were connected, tethered together. When the girl ate, the food was given to her warm and tasty. But when the shadow was hungry, she had to eat rabbit, raw and bloody. On Christmas, the girl received wonderful toys, soft and cushy. But the shadow's toys were so sharp and cold they sliced through her fingers when she tried to play with them. The girl met a handsome prince and fell in love, but the shadow, at that same time, met Abraham. It didn't matter if she loved him or not. He was tethered to the girl's prince, after all.¹⁵

Red's speech exemplifies the dichotomy between the living conditions of the Tethered and those of their doubles: the Tethered live in a grotesque mirror of their double's life with no choice in what they eat, what they possess, or who they love. Peele therefore constructs the Tethered to be both doubles *and* shadows of their counterparts, identical in physicality but forced to remain suppressed and silent, representing the most complete form of oppression: the absence of free will. By emerging from the shadows and claiming their space in the above-ground world, Peele depicts the complete upheaval of an oppressive structure, with those who have the least privilege--those who literally live *below* everyone else--breaking out of their silenced and invisible status in order to participate in "The Untethering."¹⁶ The Tethered force their doubles to see them and feel their

¹² Peele, *Us*, 1:13:23-1:13:26; *Ibid.*, 1:14:36-1:14:57.

¹³ Wester, "Introduction: The Gothic," 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁵ Peele, *Us*, 44:41-46:15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56:29.

anger, and the Tethereds’ ultimate goal of joining hands in a long link forces the above-ground world to acknowledge their presence, even if there is no one left alive. Therefore, Peele not only shows how oppressed, underprivileged groups are often silenced and kept in the shadows, but he also forces the viewer to examine, up close, the suffering of the oppressed Others in his film.

Additionally, Peele establishes his film as a modern Black Gothic through his construction of protagonist Adelaide and antagonist Red. Peele’s depiction of duality in each woman’s personal nature and their roles as both colonizers and colonized within their respective communities breaks down the “us versus them” convention of the traditional Gothic and introduces a commentary on colonialism and oppression. Firstly, we can look at Adelaide as echoing the Byronic heroes of classic gothic literature: Adelaide lives her life above ground as a traumatized and anxious person, her behavior indicating that she feels like an “outlaw... haunted by some secret consciousness of guilt.”¹⁷ The guilt and fear surrounding her encounter with Red at the carnival as a child lingers throughout her growth, and soon after her family’s arrival to their summer home, Adelaide’s anxiety over her tie to Red reaches a breaking point, and she tells her husband Gabe (Winston Duke), “My whole life, I’ve felt like she’s still coming for me... she’s getting closer.”¹⁸ Addy’s acute awareness of Red’s pursuit and proximity to herself exemplifies the strength of their connection and Addy’s status as the tortured and “surveyed” heroine--where she is the heroic “us,” Red is the villainous “them”--a perception solidified by Addy’s actions in protecting her family, evading Red, and killing other members of the Tethered throughout the film.¹⁹

However, Addy’s role as the hero is complicated in the aftermath of her victory over Red, when Peele reveals that Red is the “real” Adelaide from the beginning of the film and that the Adelaide character being followed after the carnival was originally one of the Tethered who abducted her double and returned to the surface in her place.²⁰ This revelation makes the viewer question Adelaide’s morality, and therefore their own, as they are shown how Addy condemned her double to a life of pain in order to live a good life herself. The viewer retroactively must consider Addy’s very nature; the moments of brutality she displayed in murdering the Tethered hold new meaning as possible signifiers of her Tethered origin. Furthermore, the viewer becomes aware of the fact that Addy was murdering members of her own kind, firmly aligning herself with the above-ground humans and showing no sympathy for those facing the oppression that she escaped. Since Peele compels the viewer to empathize with and root for Addy, despite her occasional slips into brutality, her true identity makes them question their previous allowance of her actions on the basis of believing her to be the human hero.

¹⁷ Wester, “Introduction: The Gothic,” 6.

¹⁸ Peele, *Us*, 34:56-35:32.

¹⁹ Wester, “Introduction: The Gothic,” 9.

²⁰ Peele, *Us*, 1:49:06-1:50:22.

Peele's choice in giving the name "Adelaide" to his protagonist also complicates the idea of her nature, as the name means "kind" and "noble."²¹ Both the protagonist and the antagonist's possession of this name at some point in their lives asserts the fact that they both have the potential to live as a kind and loving person--Adelaide is shown to be through her determination to protect the family that she has created--but only the one that lives above-ground has the means and ability to do so. Through the process of the originally-Tethered girl taking the name "Adelaide" from her above-ground double, she is acting as a colonial power and an oppressive force by robbing Red of her free will and potential to live a "noble" life. It is because of Addy's determination to preserve her own ability to live freely that she forces Red into the subjugation of the Tethered community, and Addy further exemplifies colonialism by violently claiming a space that did not belong to her and was already occupied by someone else. At the end, Addy murders Red, actively oppressing her once again in an effort to prevent Red's destruction of the life and status that Addy took from Red initially.

Peele's construction of the duality within Red's character likewise allows him to comment on and provide a multilateral view of colonialism and oppression. As shown through the ending's revelation, Red had her past and her future stolen from her and appropriated by Addy, reflecting the historical oppression of Black communities. Through the process of the slave trade, millions of Africans were taken from their families and lives and forced into subjugation, robbing them of their futures as independent people as well as preventing the generations after them from learning and practicing their cultural histories. Red's journey echoes this process, as she was forcefully taken away from her home and made to live in destitute conditions as a result of her switch with Addy. In this way, Red is very representative of an enslaved person subjected to colonial rule. Furthermore, the Tethered community as a whole exemplify a severely repressed people. As the result of a government cloning project that was abandoned because of its failure to replicate a human soul, the Tethered are left with the inability to break away from their ties to their above-ground counterparts and are very literally silenced through their inability to speak.²² Red, through her role in organizing the Tethered uprising, therefore embodies the suffering and anger of a colonized people; this is reflected in her name, as the color "red" evokes the emotions of passion and anger and the images of blood and death, and these connotations are applied to the Tethered as a whole through their red jumpsuits. In this way, Red can be seen as the power that subverts the role of the Tethered as "monstrous and unfathomable" Others by forcefully asserting their right to exist among the same "sky... sun... wind... [and] trees" as their above-ground doubles; as Red asserts to Adelaide, the Tethered are "human too, you know... Exactly like you."²³

²¹ "Origin of the name Adelaide," *Baby Name Wizard*, accessed 2020, <https://www.babynamewizard.com/baby-name/girl/adelaide>.

²² Peele, *Us*, 1:36:30-1:36:39.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1:36:06-1:36:18; *Ibid.*, 1:35:55-1:36:05; Wester, "Introduction: The Gothic," 5.

However, Red’s position as an oppressed-individual-turned-leader for her community, like Addy’s role, becomes complicated at the reveal of their switch. Red is not born among the Tethered, and although she lives a majority of her life with them and is subjected to the same horrific conditions, her above-ground upbringing sets her apart. Such is demonstrated in the scene where Red dances before an audience of the Tethered, who identify that “the beauty and elegance in her dance... has no traces of being produced by a genuinely Tethered person.”²⁴ This scene exemplifies that Red’s above-ground origin affords her the means to take executive power over the Tethered people and identify herself as the god-like figure that would “deliver them from this misery.”²⁵ Her adoption of this savior role evokes connections to historical colonial invasion of Indigenous lands, in which colonizers were promoted as religiously-ordained agents of civilization while demeaning colonized people as inferior. Red’s position as a colonizer, which deliberately clashes with her dual role as an oppressed figure, is emphasized through her attitudes toward the Tethered community; she expresses open disdain for her Tethered family, referring to her child as a “monster” and showing no remorse when any of her family members are killed.²⁶ Red is also largely motivated by her own personal agenda, using the “Untethering” as a means to enact her personal revenge mission against Adelaide, and her lack of interest in the other Tethered indicates that she does not care too deeply about their liberation as a whole. Furthermore, Red’s planned uprising consists of the Tethered killing their doubles and subsequently joining hands in a mimic of the “Hands Across America” event of the 1980s; however, these actions do not really improve the overall lives of the Tethered, exemplifying the fact that Red is just using them to “make a statement.”²⁷

Stemming from the representation of Red acting as a colonizer towards the rest of the Tethered community, Red can also be viewed as a representation of gentrification within modern social movements. To provide a current example of this problem, many have made the argument that the “Black Lives Matter” movement has experienced gentrification by white people and large corporations, which has “overshadowed the courage of the original Black activists” and rendered many of the protests “performative.”²⁸ In Peele’s film, Red serves as a manifestation of such gentrification, as she is an outsider with a privileged upbringing who, albeit against her will, infiltrates an underprivileged community and assumes the leadership position in a revolution for an oppressed group to which she does not inherently belong. Red is the only Tethered person able to speak English, and though Adelaide’s ability to speak proves that the Tethered can learn,

²⁴ Peele, *Us*, 1:39:57-1:40:20; Harry Olafsen, “It’s Us: Mimicry in Jordan Peele’s *Us*,” *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (2020): 25, doi: 10.17077/2168-569X.1546.

²⁵ Peele, *Us*, 1:40:20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 46:24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:40:48.

²⁸ Erin B. Logan, “White People Have Gentrified Black Lives Matter. It’s a Problem,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-09-04/black-lives-matter-white-people-portland-protests-nfl>.

Red does not teach any other Tethered how, not even her own family. Through this deliberate deprivation of ability, Red renders herself the only Tethered with the ability to lead the movement. Overall, Peele depicts Red in the role of both the colonizer and the colonized, oppressed in relation to Addy but an oppressor in relation to the other Tethered. The duality of both Addy and Red's characters elevates Peele's commentary on the layers of oppressive systems in the United States: Addy represents the way that individuals are encouraged to push others down to maintain the security of their own lives, and Red exemplifies how social movements for the betterment of oppressed groups are often taken away from their subjects and do not end up significantly bettering their situations.

Lastly, Jordan Peele builds his film as a contribution to a larger conversation within the Black Gothic genre around persisting racism and inequality in America, centering much of the commentary in his film around the ways that the United States functions as an oppressive force to many groups based on their race and class. The title of the film itself reflects Peele's intentions, as it can be read as both the word "us" and the acronym "U.S."; additionally, when Gabe asks the Tethered "what" they are, Red responds, "we're Americans."²⁹ Many of Peele's references and imagery discuss racial disparities present in the United States, a nation that was created through the "conquest and disinheritance of... Native Americans."³⁰ While Peele does not include any Indigenous characters in his film, he does use imagery that alludes to the erasure of America's violent colonialist history--the funhouse at the boardwalk is initially named "Shaman's Vision Quest" and features a stereotypical image of a Indigenous leader, but later the name has been changed to "Merlin's Forest," exemplifying the "erasure of a horrific part of American history."³¹

Indigenous experience in America is also defined by widespread impoverishment, and Peele alludes to the disparities experienced by such lower-class communities not only in his depiction of the underground life of the Tethered, but also through his inclusion of the "Hands Across America" campaign. Peele's reference to this famous '80s social movement, which was intended to raise awareness about homelessness and hunger, points to the tendency of the American upper-middle class to participate in self-assuring performative spectacles for the benefit of those less fortunate. Such performative actions, while most likely resulting in short-term awareness and assistance, often die out quickly and actually function to move the focus away from pressuring the government into implementing policy and change that will work to actually *eliminate* the problems of class disparities in the United States.

²⁹ Peele, *Us*, 48:03.

³⁰ Wester, "Introduction: The Gothic," 18.

³¹ Amy Welten, "'They Are Us': A Research of the Visual Portrayal of Criticism of Fear for the 'Other' and 'Us Versus Them' Mentality in the Film *Us* (2019)," MA thesis, (Utrecht University, 2019), 33.

Peele uses horror as a means to confront his audience with the intense realities of racism experienced by Black people and the oppression experienced by impoverished communities, realities that very much still exist in the contemporary United States. The lingering effect of racial disparities is present through the experiences of the Wilson family, which allude to the disadvantages that Black individuals face in contemporary America. Although the Wilsons give the initial impression that they have been largely unaffected by racism and live their lives as a “tame” middle-class Black family, racial disparities become apparent through Gabe’s character. Gabe wears a Howard University sweatshirt for a majority of the film, alluding to his wealthy and highly educated status.³² Despite this, Gabe is shown to be constantly striving to measure up to his white friend Josh Tyler (Tim Heidecker), whose possessions, such as his boat, are just slightly better than those of the Wilsons, despite the proximity of the two families as living “right across the bay” from one another.³³ Gabe’s differences from Josh demonstrate Peele’s subtle suggestion that it is easier for a white person to occupy a position of privilege than it is for a Black person, who must attempt to “keep to a standard that society is preventing [them] from reaching on the basis of race.”³⁴

Additionally, in conjunction with Gambino’s “This is America” music video, Peele incorporates the ways that Black life is connected to brutality. The Wilsons are seen, at points, to not be visibly shocked by scenes of intense violence, such as in their relatively calm attitudes in the aftermath of the bloody scene at the Tylers’ home.³⁵ Peele’s showcase of the somewhat unfazed nature of the Wilson family alludes to the fact that as Black people, they are *used to* being confronted with brutality and violence, whether in personal experience or through the modern media, showing the effects of the “brutal torture and death [that] spans the history of [B]lack life in America” and displaying the Black Gothic tradition of “speak[ing] calmly about moments typically marked as terrible.”³⁶ Peele’s subtle references to racial inequalities can be seen as part of a continuous dialogue with his first film, *Get Out*, as both explore the “underground” white supremacy that still deeply affects the lives of Black Americans in what many believe to be the “post-racial” state that came about after Barack Obama’s election.³⁷

Overall, director Jordan Peele constructs his film *Us* (2019) to further modernize the subversive traditions of the Black Gothic and introduce a commentary on the levels of oppression that are so present in the history of the United States. By examining the complexities, construction, and effects of Peele’s commentary in *Us*, one can gain a greater understanding of the conversation within the Black Gothic genre. After viewing *Us*, and after bearing witness to

³² Welten, “They Are Us,” 21.

³³ Peele, *Us*, 24:32.

³⁴ Olafsen, “It’s Us,” 27.

³⁵ Peele, *Us*, 1:16:04-1:17:00.

³⁶ Harrison, “New Black Gothic;” Wester, “Introduction: The Gothic,” 29.

³⁷ Welten, “They Are Us,” 33; *Ibid.*, 32.

such current events as the Confederate flag being flown within the United States Capitol building as a part of the riots of January 6, 2021, we as Americans must ask ourselves: will we continue to brush off and ignore the disparities that exist in our own country in an effort to protect our individual comfort, security, and happiness? Or will we follow the feelings of discomfort that the Black Gothic instills in us, allow ourselves to feel and critically consider the despair of our nation's dark history, and finally begin to take greater action that will result in systematic and institutional change?

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