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Native American Iconography: Analyzing Peele’s Critique of American Imperialism in *Us*

Lucas Johnson

In Jordan Peele’s *Us* (2019), humans are taken over by an underground population of doppelgängers. The invasion originates from the abduction of the main character, a young girl named Adelaide Wilson who is swapped with her doppelgänger at a young age when she enters a hall of mirrors at the Santa Cruz boardwalk. Throughout the film, the doppelgängers and their scheme to take over America closely mirrors U.S. imperialist and colonial tendencies from the early 1600s to the late 1800s. The doppelgängers, or the “Tethered”, as the film refers to them, plan on replacing everyone in the United States by killing them and taking over their lives. Peele uses this connection to highlight how perspective and bias can shape opinion and reactions towards injustice. To modern day Americans, U.S. imperialism is seen as a necessary evil, one that helped push the world into modernity. When the Tethered take over in *Us*, however, it is considered a horror movie.

The most evident connection to American Imperialism in the movie is found in one of the very first scenes. A young Adelaide enters a hall of mirrors named “Shaman’s Vision Quest” (6:07). The entrance to the building is littered with Native American iconography. The cartoon man depicted on the front sign resembles a classic American Indian caricature. The Natives, of course, were the first victims of American Colonialism. Dating back as far as 1607¹, English colonies were established on Native American land with complete disregard to the previous inhabitants. This theme continued throughout the next 300 years¹ as the United States came to be country of its own and spread from coast-to-coast. Similar to the plight of the Natives, Adelaide’s abduction is the first time the Tethered begin to replace humans. As the viewer learns later in the movie, it is at this point that Adelaide’s

¹ From the Jamestown Colony (1607) to the Wounded knee Massacre (1890), Americans have been treating Natives as inferior beings for nearly 300 years. See Source [4].

Tether swaps with the real Adelaide, leaving the real Adelaide locked up and stripped of the life she used to have. The connection becomes even more obvious when the film hits the 23:41 mark, after many years have passed and the Tether Adelaide has settled into her new life quite comfortably. A passing shot of the hall of mirrors shows that it has a new name now, “Merlin’s Forest”. Just as Native American culture was cleansed from the U.S., the “Shaman” man is now replaced by “Merlin”. The “Merlin” character is a white European man, further establishing the connection. Tether Adelaide does not even remember the violence she committed in the past to get to where she is now. The point of all this is to emphasize that history is written by the winners. The U.S. won, so it gets to whitewash its actions and prosper from all the stolen resources it acquired. Tether Adelaide won so she gets to forget what she did in order to get to her perfect life. Peele moves to expose the hypocrisy of this way of thinking once the Tethered take over and the roles are reversed.

When the Tethered begin their invasion, regular Americans suddenly become the victims and the Tethered become the colonizers. After Red and the rest of the Tethered Wilsons capture the real Wilsons, Red tells the story of why the Tethered are taking over. She explains how the Tethered were forced to suffer until one day, they realized they were being “tested by God”, a revelation which set off their plan to overtake America. This is a direct reference to the idea of Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny was the concept that American expansion over Native lands was a God given right to all U.S. citizens². The most common pictorial representation of Manifest Destiny is an 1872 painting by John Gast called *American Progress*². In this painting, America, represented by a fair-skinned Angel, is seen bringing light and progress to the dark Native American lands. To most, the idea of Manifest Destiny was a perfectly sound rationale for invading Native lands². Now that Red is the Angel and the Tethered takeover is the westward expansion, however, the idea is meant to sound crazy. Red is intentionally shot to look insane. She is placed in the center of the frame, a violation of the Rule of Thirds³, making her seem very unnatural and out of place. When she delivers the line, “tested by God”, her eyes are looking off into the distance even though the people she is talking to are right in front of her, and tears are streaming down her face, making her seem unhinged and deranged. Peele’s

² Manifest Destiny was practiced in the 1850s onwards as an excuse to claim Native land for its resources under the guise of “spreading Christianity, technology, and education”. See Source [3].

³ The rule of thirds is a compositional rule that states that the most natural way to frame a subject is on one of the picture’s thirds. Pictures that violate this rule often look unnatural. See Source [2].

message here is clear. Justification by God only seems rational when it comes from a personal point-of-view. When forced upon someone else, the notion of “God given right” is logically incoherent. This point is further compounded at 48:06, where, when asked who they were, Red responds “We’re Americans”. To the Tethered, they themselves are the real Americans, who’s God given right it is to settle the lands of America, while the regular humans are the pesky Natives who are in the way of progress.

Peele’s third and final commentary on American imperialism comes near the end of the movie. After Red kidnaps Jason and leads Adelaide back through the hall of mirrors and into the underground facility where the Tethered were being kept, stumbles upon a few empty classrooms filled with rabbits. The viewer sees hundreds of rabbits lined up and down the halls and in each room (1:34:19). The rabbits unchecked growth in the underground lab mirror the U.S.’s unchecked growth during the late 1800s to mid 1900s. During this time period, the U.S. was becoming a world superpower⁴. With the Natives out of the way and no domestic threats to hold it back, the U.S. was free to extend its influence over Latin America⁴. The U.S.’s main goal was to make money, extracting as many natural resources from the lands as possible and setting up predatory contracts with smaller countries to force them to supply good and services at lower prices⁴. After the U.S. pulled out of these countries, however, most fell into disarray. Without American investment, their economies flatlined. Since the U.S. had installed their own leaders in favor of the democratically elected leaders of the past, no one was in place to fix the issues⁴. Eventually, these polices would come back to hurt the U.S. The Latin American drug trade, mass poverty leading to radicalization and attack on the U.S., and even the Cuban Revolution were all a result of America’s actions⁵. These same concepts are paralleled again in the film. The government that set up these underground facilities to further their own interests at the expense of the Tethered’s eventually pay the price when the experiments fall apart and the Tethered rise up to take revenge. Through these parallels, Peele is showcasing again the downfalls of American Imperialism and how the idea that America was in any way helping any of these Latin American countries is bogus. Peele is challenging anyone who sees America’s past as one of necessary evil and Machiavellian Progression (the

⁴ Panama Canal, Banana Wars, “Good Neighbor” interlude, Hemispheric Defense Doctrine, all served American interests better than Latin American interests. See Source [5].

⁵ U.S. foreign policy left many Latin American countries in financial ruin, leading to a vast increase in crime and drug trafficking, and lit the way for dictators to take control. See Sources [5,1].

idea that the ends justify the means) to see it for what it really is; a big country bullying smaller entities into doing what it wants, and then paying the price afterwards.

Typically, horror movies are seen as cheap shock content that push a disturbing or grotesque story with no real deeper meaning or narrative. Peele's film *Us* turns that stereotype on its head with its deeply imbedded social commentary and complex themes. Although this essay in particular focused on Peele's message as it relates to the analysis of American Imperialism through the placement of Native American iconography, much remains uncovered in regard to Peele's additional commentary on other topics including race, class, and mental health. Further research into these topics as they show up in Peele's other works such as *Get Out* and *The Key and Peele Show*, and how the themes in those works reflect back once again onto *Us* would be interesting. Additionally, seeing as *Us* proves that social commentary and horror can be quite successfully intertwined, additional research into how old horror classics reflected the social issues of their own times might also prove fruitful. All said, Peele's *Us* stands out on its own right as a shining example of horror done properly: enough scares to make it fun, and enough thoughtful detail to make it interesting.

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