

Subverting Pop Culture and Setting Imagery:

A Comparative Analysis of Derek Walcott's *Omeros* with Jordan Peele's *Us* for their Deconstruction of American Colonialism

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Introduction

All it takes is one quick Google search to realize that Derek Walcott's 1990 epic poem *Omeros* and Jordan Peele's 2019 film *Us* have not yet been compared in an academic essay. At first, that would stand to be reasonable, as they are both different forms of media and are separated by decades and the conception that film is largely entertainment and poetry is mainly academic. However, after one scratches the surface of these apparent incongruencies, their similarities come to light—they both have settings by the coastline (St Lucia and Santa Cruz), African-American authors and protagonists, a penchant for meta pop-culture references, and most importantly, an underlying theme of critiquing North American colonialism. While Derek Walcott's *Omeros* was made as a “deep hymn of the Caribbean” and a lament of the imperialist intrusion that carved up his homeland of St. Lucia, he also delves deeply into the scars of American Colonialism and its decimation and erasure of Native Americans, as well as its oppression towards African-Americans. (Walcott, 321) Jordan Peele's *Us*, on the other hand, is a doppelganger-themed horror film on the surface, with deep undercurrents of post-colonialist themes rippling throughout its runtime.

This essay will not only justify the suggestion that the two works should be compared analytically in an academic fashion, but that they complement each other in their postcolonial themes, striking imagery, and subversion and homage to pop culture touchstones, harmonizing as

potential companion pieces of colonial deconstructionist media. Books IV and V of Walcott's *Omeros* will be especially examined for their themes of Catherine Weldon and her involvement with the Sioux tribe, while Jordan Peele's crucial beginning scene of *Us* at the "Shaman Vision Quest" sideshow in Santa Cruz will be explicated as a foundational element for viewing the film in a postcolonial lens. (Scott) The imagery of both forms of media will be analyzed in relation to colonialist criticism, showing the unique way that imagery is employed and subverted to reexamine colonialism in both *Omeros* and *Us*.

Part I: Imagery in Regard to Pop Culture References

Derek Walcott utilizes a plethora of pop culture references in his magnum opus *Omeros*—from The Beatles to Bob Marley, Edgar Allan Poe to Herman Melville. Even the title, *Omeros*, is the original Greek name for Homer, who created the epics *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, both of which there are plentiful and obvious nods to. (Gidmark and Hunt, 9) Instead of merely name-dropping these famous names, Walcott weaves them into his narrative while simultaneously subverting them in regards to their colonial perspective. Take, for example, his deconstruction of Melville's epic novel *Moby Dick*. Walcott first references the novel by likening the waves he watches around Africa to that of "a sea whose rhythm swells like Herman Melville." (Walcott, 184) He then goes on in the stereotypical patois of Melville's *Moby Dick* character Fleece, the black cook, asking in a sort of lament how any black individual could ascend any social ladder with the imperious definition of "whiteness" given by Melville. (Walcott, 184) While Walcott certainly derides the white supremacy in the colonialist tinged *Moby Dick*, he also utilizes the work to carry his narrative, describing his "shout like a harpoon, like Queequeg," who was one of the main characters in the novel—a non-American islander,

similar in that regard to Walcott himself. (Walcott, 184) By intertwining other classic narratives into his story, Walcott is able to follow in the epic literary tradition of referencing prior epics, while also subverting them to portray a postcolonialist critique of America, and by extension, of his homeland of the Caribbean.

Jordan Peele, likewise displays a wide variety of pop culture references, from *The Lost Boys* and *The Shining*, to Michael Jackson's "Thriller" and The Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations." (Cameron) He does this for a twofold purpose: to walk in the tradition of horror classics that have come before and to undercut the context in which those classics have been made.

(Cameron) In this way, he is using a very similar technique to Walcott, employing pop culture references in a way that strengthens the narrative even while subverting the works in their white-centric context.

For example, he liberally borrows from Spielberg's *Jaws*, so much so that he thanks Spielberg in the end credits, partially for his permission to feature the movie on a t-shirt that one of the characters wears. (Meyer) But beyond this explicit nod and a boating scene that plays on underwater fears, Peele infuses the theme of a danger lurking just underneath the surface, while subverting *Jaws*' whitewashed focus. Instead of the horror trope of a white girl being in danger from an otherworldly threat (like Chrissie floating just above a Great White Shark in the beginning scene of *Jaws*), *Us* places the black protagonist Adelaide in a Santa Cruz amusement park where she drowns in a hall of mirrors with her fear of her doppelganger, also referred to in the movie as the Tethered—those who literally have been abandoned underneath a subway below Santa Cruz, yet are tethered to the movements of their doubles above ground. (*Us*) The undercurrent fear is not that of a foreign creature (the shark), but of a repressed population that mirrors ourselves, surfacing to supplant the above population. By paying homage to *Jaws*' motif

of an ever-present danger slinking just beneath the surface, Peele reexamines the comfort of modern postcolonialism by introducing the forgotten half of ourselves in the shape of usurping doppelgangers.

Part II: Imagery in Regards to Setting

In Chapter XXXIV of Book 4 of *Omeros*, Walcott broaches the topic of American colonialism by introducing a Native American on horseback: “Clouds whitened the Crow horseman and I let him pass into the page...” (Walcott, 175) The narrator then explicitly makes a reference to colonialism by stating that on his journey “Manifest Destiny was behind me now. My face frozen in the ice-cream paradiso of the American dream, like the Sioux in the snow.” (Walcott, 175) Manifest Destiny was the colonial ideology that purported that conquering America from coast to coast was a divine destiny; here Walcott strips it of its grandeur by comparing it and the “American dream” to something as trivial as “ice-cream,” and by foreshadowing the horrors of the Sioux massacre at Wounded Knee. (Van Sickle, 36) The imagery of whiteness (clouds, ice-cream, snow, etc.) repeatedly comes up in these passages, a motif that becomes increasingly identified with colonialism and erasure.

Omeros also delves into the oppression of African-Americans and the slave history that is part and parcel of America’s colonialism. In Chapter XXXV, Walcott muses on the supposed “necessary evil of slavery” present in the “Jeffersonian ideal” of the America Consitution. (Walcott, 177) Once again, the surrounding imagery of the scene is employed to further the narrative, as he describes “white, peaked belfries” of churches right next to “Negro shacks,” highlighting the hypocrisy of the religious South. (Walcott, 178)

Weaving his narrative back to the Natives, Walcott employs a fictional representation of Catherine Weldon, who in real life worked with Sitting Bull and the Sioux to help them fight for their land and keep it from the American government. (Zurru, 123) Walcott uses Weldon as a narrative vehicle to detail the plight of the Sioux at the hand of American colonialism, where hundreds were ultimately murdered in the Wounded Knee Massacre. (Zurru, 127) He utilizes imagery from the wintry setting to make the polemic more vivid and tangible. In the third section of Chapter XLII from Book 5, he describes “The snowflakes pressed their patterns on the crusting panes, lakes hardened with ice,” using white, frigid imagery to symbolize and foreshadow the coming encroachment of the American troops. (Walcott, 213) This connection is made even more explicit when he ends the section with “Red god gone with autumn and white winter early.” (Walcott, 213) Later, the dichotomy of red and white symbolic imagery is even further evoked, when Omeros narrates that “As the salmon grows tired of its ladder of stone, so have we of fighting the claws of the White Bear, dripping red beads on the snow. Whiteness is everywhere.” (Walcott, 217) The blood signifies the Sioux, and the constantly falling snow represents the smothering colonialism that has erased their culture. (Zurru, 130) It is noteworthy that Walcott subverts the general connotations of snow and whiteness which are “(cleanliness, purity, innocence, and so forth),” as Zurru observes, and that he transforms it into something treacherous and murderous. (Zurru, 130) Through the icy imagery of the setting that Catherine Weldon finds herself in, Walcott skillfully propels his polemic of American colonialism, denouncing the “white siege outside my door,” as Weldon puts it. (Walcott, 218)

This critique of American colonialism, while peripheral to the immediate locale of the Caribbean, is crucial to the theme of imperial oppression and how it affects history. As Walcott mentions near the end of Chapter XLI, “colonies inherit their empire’s sin,” and so the same

colonialism that infects America is related to the European imperialism that infects Walcott's home island. (Walcott, 208) Elsewhere in the poem, Walcott comments on the concept of history. He mentions that "Art is History's nostalgia," showing his view that history is malleable to those with the power to create art. Gidmark and Hunt had this to say about Walcott's unique take on history:

Refusing to become a poet of repudiation, Walcott does not reject the past. Instead, he wishes us to see history for the fiction that it clearly is. Not only Caribbean history is implied; *all* history is taken in time, composed from a particular perspective. (Gidmark and Hunt, 11)

Walcott is interested in showing history's perspective from those that have been displaced and erased by colonialism; by doing so, he reexamines the idea of history, and shows that it is fluid and alterable, depending on those with power. In *Omeros*, he gives some of that power back to the half-forgotten minorities, telling their side of history not only so that they may be remembered, but that others can learn from the danger of ignoring the totality of history that is lost from the erasure of voices. He accomplishes this task by utilizing the stark imagery of his story's settings in a subversive way to shed light on the terrors of colonialism.

Jordan Peele likewise takes care to choose the imagery in his scenes' settings to accentuate the themes in his film, *Us*. The movie starts out showing a African-American family hanging out at the Santa Cruz boardwalk in the 1980s. One of the most crucial scenes near this beginning places the lead character Adelaide (or at least what the film leads us to believe is the main character) in a Native American themed carnival hall named "Shaman Vision Quest Forest." (Scott) This carnival attraction has stereotypical Native American imagery such as "a totem pole standing out front" and a "cartoon man depicted on the front sign" which "resembles

a classic American Indian caricature.” (Scott) (Johnson, 38) These insensitive appropriations of Native American culture echo the “Colonel Cody’s circus” referenced in *Omeros*, where Native Americans “were paid to ride around in howling circles, with a dime for their glory.” (Walcott, 179) This hall of mirrors is where the girl, Adelaide, gets lost and ultimately, as we discover in the film’s final denouement, swapped with her doppelganger, Red.

There are multiple layers of symbolism in this scene that further the theme of reexamination. The mirrors serve as a symbol for reflecting on past selves, a theme that is further enforced by the usurping doppelgangers that overtake Santa Cruz, and ultimately, the whole country. The significance of the setting of the swap being in a misappropriated Native American funhouse cannot be overstated; as the film goes on, the theme of postcolonial reexamination takes on a more general and explicit tone. After Red and her family of doppelgangers overtake the home of their above-ground counterparts decades later, holding them hostage, they disclose who they are—“We’re Americans.” (*Us*) The underground doppelgangers are all dressed in red, which could be construed symbolically as the past bloodshed that has been swept under the rug by American colonialism.

This line of thinking is supported by a recurring motif in the film—the linking of hands by the doppelgangers, first seen in the driveway of the Wilson family, and then eventually seen stretching across the amusement park in Santa Cruz near the end of the film. (*Us*) This linkage is a reference to the Hands Across America Campaign, an 80s event where “millions of people held hands with strangers for 15 minutes in a human chain that was meant to stretch from New York to California...an effort to raise money for organizations fighting hunger and homelessness.” (Piepenburg) Jordan Peele was inspired to include the campaign as a motif for *Us* when he saw

an advertisement of it during his time writing for the film and “got this really eerie feeling.” (Piepenburg) He expounds more on what unsettled him about the campaign:

There’s something cultlike about the imagery that makes me think of the Manson family singing folk songs as they leave the courtroom... There’s like an insistence that as long as we have each other, we can walk blindly past the ugliness and evil that we may be a part of. (Piepenburg)

By including the reference to the campaign in *Us* by way of the underground antagonists, he exposes the hypocrisy of white post-colonialism that is content to project peace and benevolence while perpetuating a system of oppression. When the doppelgangers link hands and stand in a long chain across a decimated Santa Cruz theme park, it is a scene inspiring horror instead of kindness and warm-heartedness. By flipping the connotation of the philanthropic event, he forces the audience to reevaluate who the oppressors and the oppressed are and blurs the line of colonization. The audience is called to question the Tethered’s revolution and conquest (and thus America’s past), as well as understand their motivation for doing so (and thus the forgotten scars of colonialism). By exposing the horror and laughable absurdity of blatant conquest intermingled with a token of togetherness, Peele strips away the comforting facade of a postcolonial America that equally serves and embraces everyone.

Conclusion

Both Walcott and Peele shed light on America’s colonial past, the former showing the wounds of the past, and the latter revealing the hypocritical forgetfulness of the present. Both techniques draw attention to the consequences of American Colonialism and the effect it wreaked and continues to wreak on minority populations. *Omeros* and *Us*’ affinity for pop

culture references are not only a way to bridge the classics with their narratives, but also a way to reinterpret the media in a post-colonial lens. Imagery in the settings of both works push the narrative forward while also harping on the themes of colonialism and erasure.

What makes both *Omeros* and *Us* such vital companion pieces is the way that both of their auteurs force the American audience out of their postcolonial comfort zone and reevaluate the colonialism of the past that still affects the present of today. They both strive to instill social awareness in the American citizen so that perhaps they will be cognizant and not fall prey to one of Walcott's damning lines: "We think of the past as better forgotten than fixed with stony regret." (Walcott, 192) Both *Omeros* and *Us* make sure the past scars of colonialism stay fresh in our memories so that we can shift our worldview and stop perpetuating the abuses of yesteryears.

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