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“‘It’s Us:’ Mimicry in Jordan Peele’s *Us*”

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## “It’s Us:” Mimicry in Jordan Peele’s *Us*

Harry Olafsen

*“Therefore thus saith the LORD, Behold! I will bring evil upon them, which they shall not be able to escape; and though they shall cry unto me, I will not hearken unto them.”*  
--Jeremiah 11:11<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction: A Cultural Tethering of *Us*

After producing *Get Out*, arguably one of the greatest horror films of all time, Academy Award winner Jordan Peele returned to the silver screen with his sophomore horror film *Us*. Starring Lupita Nyong’o as both Adelaide Wilson and Red,<sup>2</sup> the film centers upon her characters and their inherent duality. While all of the characters in the film have a Tethered counterpart, the film emphasizes the experiences of the Wilson family and their interactions with their respective others. This duality between the characters creates the terror felt in the film, and there is a clear sense that horror stems from seeing a reflection of the self in the Tethered (or Other). In this way, the premise of the film can be connected to the ideas of mimicry set forth in Homi Bhabha’s *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*. The Tethered are almost identical to their aboveground counterparts, and the only differences can be traced to the ideas of privilege and power: the aboveground people have the power and the Tethered have been severely oppressed. There are moments in the film where the Tethered and the aboveground persons interact with one another, revealing the sense of similarity— and even slight difference— between these two groups. The power struggle between them on the basis of class, race, and culture is evidently important in their interactions and their struggles to gain or maintain power.

To fully understand power relations and dynamics within the film, a brief plot synopsis is imperative. Adelaide Wilson and her family return to the beach where she swapped places with her Tethered counterpart in the 1980s. Upon her return, she realizes her family is in danger once the Tethered appear at her vacation home. The Tethered look almost identical to their counterparts, and they all wear matching red jumpsuits and wield gold scissors. Adelaide, with

her husband, Gabe, and two children, Zora and Jason, must fight their Tethered others to survive.<sup>3</sup> After escaping them upon their initial arrival, the family escapes to their friends' home for sanctuary; however, their home has already been overruled by their Tethered, and the original Tyler family has been killed. After fighting the Tyler family's Tethered to the death, the Wilsons continue to fight. All the while, Adelaide knows that Red is coming for her, and she understands she must defeat her in order to continue her life aboveground. After Jason is kidnapped by Red and taken into the abandoned underground tunnel system in the United States, Adelaide must face her fears and return to the place she began her life. Adelaide and Red perform an intense dance scene where Red continuously pierces Adelaide with her scissors until she can finally remember the dance. At the very end, Adelaide defeats Red, stabbing her directly through the chest, and Red lets out an eerie whistle, mirroring the one both girls sang upon first coming face-to-face. Adelaide recovers her son, and she reunites with her husband and daughter. The movie ends with Adelaide and Jason looking at one another, and Adelaide gives him a smile—the same smile she gave when she first escaped her Tethered life in the 1980s. Unfortunately, the viewer does not know what happens with the Tethered who remain above ground. After killing their counterparts, they simply link hands and look completely identical to one another, spanning the width of the United States in a mirror to the Hands across America Campaign of the 1980s, where the people came together to show the unity of the American people across the contiguous United States, thus echoing the unity of the Tethered over the aboveground people.

While the plot seems straightforward, there are subtle nuances that frame the critique Peele is making throughout the film. Kinitra D. Brooks at *Elle Magazine* makes the claim that “The doppelgänger is such a rich horror metaphor because it points to how we define humans and the boundaries of humanity. The appearance of such a being causes sheer terror, through confronting one's own Other” (“*Us Makes Us Look in the Mirror*”). Bhabha asserts a similar point in *Of Mimicry and Man*, theorizing that “mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*” (128; emphasis original). In this way, the Tethered are simply repeats or copies of the aboveground people, which falls in line with their existence. It is briefly stated in the film that the Tethered are part of a failed social experiment where the government attempted to clone the body and soul, but the soul could not be copied (Peele). Therefore, the “boundaries of humanity” Brooks mentions are truly that of horror: because the Other looks identical but it is not exactly the same, there is something missing.

The mimicry extends to racial and class dynamics in the plot. The African-American Wilson family continuously attempts to live up to the same standard as the white Tyler family. While both families are clearly middle class, as they are able to afford luxuries working-class families could not, the Wilsons always fall just short of maintaining the status of the Tylers. In a review of the film in the *New Yorker*, Richard Brody claims, “The Wilsons are black, a fact that, as depicted, has little overt effect on their lives. Avoiding the stereotypes of black Americans in movies, Peele instead knowingly depicts them as a stereotype of a financially successful, socially stable, and cinematically average American family” (Brody). However, this is simply not the case. There are moments in the film, such as a scene where Gabe purchases a rundown boat to compete with Josh's luxury private yacht, where we can see the limitations of each man's success. Since both men have the same occupation, they should be able to have the same things; however, Gabe continuously strives to reach the same socioeconomic status as Josh but continuously falls short in some aspect. While the Wilsons are undoubtedly middle-class Americans, their black identity holds them back from achieving the same standard of living

above ground, mirroring that of American society in 2019. In turn, this falls in line with Peele's *Get Out*, a film centered on a racial critique of the sociopolitical climate in the United States, which he continues to bring into his second horror film *Us*.

In order to critique Peele's film in this way, a postcolonial lens into the storyline seems to be the most effective means of analysis. According to Bhabha in his 1994 publication entitled *The Location of Culture*, he argues, "[Art] renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present" (7). *Us* does this perfectly; the film breaks the present in-between space to critique the current sociopolitical climate in the United States today through the use of the Tethered (or Other). In terms of postcolonial theory, the Other is an idea that has been employed over and over again, and the roots of this analysis lie within this theme. Therefore, while the film is American and critiques America, critical race theory would fall short in capturing the true essence of what is happening in the film. Peele uses the doppelgänger (or mimicry) to critique colonial notions of the colonizer and the colonized—an inherent postcolonial approach to reading the film. From the perspective of American critical race theory, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefanić argue that "critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law" stemming from the American Civil Rights Movement (3-4). Since critical race theory is deeply embedded in the politic from which it emerged, using critical race theory alone would prevent me from analyzing the Other in this film fully and completely. Peele himself states that the inspiration of this film comes from fearing doppelgängers, and this proves to be much more postcolonial in nature than what critical race theory could bring to my specific reading of the film (Meyers). Additionally, the racial implications of *Us* would benefit from an analysis using critical race theory more deeply, but postcolonial theory, as read through Bhabha, allows race to be considered and theorized while simultaneously covering aspects of the Other as defined in postcolonial theory. Therefore, a reading and interpretation of the film under the lens of postcolonial theory via mimicry falls more directly in line with the themes and tropes Peele expertly inputs throughout the film, allowing us to read the film in this way despite its overt connection with American culture.

Ultimately, Peele's new blockbuster *Us* can be read through many different lenses, as the critiques he makes throughout the film tend to be quite subtle.<sup>4</sup> For purposes of my analysis in this paper, I will connect Bhabha's idea of mimicry to the film, as I feel this is the most obvious analysis. However, there are race and class implications that must also be addressed in order to understand the full extent of the mimicry Peele employs in the film as read through postcolonial theory. Therefore, I argue that *Us* offers a critique of American society and culture which can best be seen when reading the film through the theoretical lens of mimicry, showing that true horror comes when the Other (or in this case the Tethered) "is almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 130).

### **Mimicry in the Film**

Mimicry's uncanny nature makes it an unsettling and horror-producing theme. Seeing someone or something that is incredibly similar but not quite the same as the viewer can produce reactions of fear. Bhabha makes the distinction that "mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is thus, the sign of a double articulation;

a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (126). It is in this double articulation of the self and power where horror is produced. Therefore, being a product of mimicry does not limit autonomy and agency; it is a struggle for power within a larger systemic structure, which can clearly be traced throughout the film. Adelaide and Red constantly battle for power within the realm of colonial power and mimicry until one dies; however, the effects of the mimicry can still be felt long after Red’s eventual defeat. The theory of mimicry can be difficult to grapple with, and Peele’s *Us* highlights this theory in all of its complexities. Traces of mimicry can be felt long after a sense of autonomy emerges, showing that power relations can be interwoven and multi-faceted, creating complex dynamics and relations between the colonizer and the Other.

When the young Adelaide walks through the house of mirrors on the beach in the 1980s, she comes face-to-face with her Tethered counterpart for the first time. In this very moment where the two young girls look at one another in shock and horror, the essence of mimicry is embodied. According to Bhabha, “mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power” (126). The Tethered person, in this moment, is almost identical to the aboveground person, creating an inherent power struggle. Only one of the girls can have power in the situation, and the Tethered girl uses her time under what is essentially colonial rule to upend the aboveground girl and swap places with her. In this moment, Adelaide recognizes that Red “is almost the same but not quite,” as Bhabha argues, compelling her to live out the rest of her life within the tunnel system until she can come back up to the ground for revenge, which creates a lifelong struggle for power between them.

In the meantime, Adelaide has to adjust to living above ground: she needs to learn social cues, language, and standards of living. She is learning how to be something she is not; she can never fully be an above ground person, but she can learn to act like them. However, this is not achieved without challenges. As Bhabha writes, “mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (126). Before Adelaide fully learns English, she is essentially functioning as a mute. In one scene, Adelaide’s parents take her to a clinical child psychologist because they feel she has been through a traumatic experience that is keeping her mute. In reality, this Adelaide is not their original daughter, and she is physically unable to speak English (Peele). While she looks exactly like their true daughter, she is showing signs of the slippage: she cannot blend until she learns and understands what it means to be an above ground person.

Adelaide continues this slippage throughout the film, showing that she is still Tethered at heart. In a scene where she is speaking with Kitty after returning to the beach for the first time in almost thirty years, she is literally at a loss for words. She is unable to remember a response to some of the questions Kitty asks. Luckily, Kitty does not question Adelaide too much, and she ascribes her lack of a response to shyness. In reality, it seems as though Adelaide cannot muster up full answers to some of the questions Kitty asks her, particularly about coming to the beach as a child (Peele). While this can be equated to the fact that talking about the beach, especially when on the beach where the switch occurred, brings up deep-rooted anxiety and fear, language still escapes and fails her in this moment just as it did as a child. Essentially, Adelaide is in between the colonial state and the original state of nature, as Bhabha argues (127). She has memories of her life as part of the Tethered, yet she is trying to live a normal life with the above ground folks. The beach brings back the original fears of the switch, leaving her speechless; however, she still does not have the words or experiences necessary to complete the interaction with Kitty, thus showing her slippage through mimicry.

In terms of language, the Tethered have their own method of communication that Red has seemingly mastered. When Red and her family arrive at the Wilson house, they break in and tether Adelaide to the table. Red instructs her family using various noises, hand gestures, and ticks to get them to do as she says (Peele). They respond without hesitation, and they completely understand what she is telling them to do. However, the Tethered have not reached a level of articulation that the above ground people can comprehend. While the Tethered seem to be mimics of their aboveground counterparts, their use of unique language gives them a sense of agency, as per Bhabha. He writes, “The desire to emerge as ‘authentic’ through mimicry . . . is the final irony of partial representation” (“Of Mimicry and Man” 129). Bhabha is stating that mimicry is not a state of prolonged reality. The Tethered have their own language that has not been taken over by their state of mimicry, and they use it to their advantage to subvert the power struggle of the aboveground over the Tethered.

Red, on the other hand, is living between both worlds, because she has the ability to speak English and communicate with the Tethered. In this way, she “is almost the same but not quite,” because she does not have the lived experiences of the aboveground people after around eight years of age (Bhabha 126). Bhabha elaborates on the idea of living between both worlds in *The Location of Culture*: “The negating activity is, indeed, the intervention of the ‘beyond’ that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where ‘presencing’ begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness” (9). While Red has moved on (by force) from the world and into the tunnels, she is still in the unique space between her original home and the home she knows. She can balance and switch between both cultures, particularly on the basis of language, when necessary. The viewer sees Red interact with her family in the same way she can hold a full conversation with Adelaide (Peele). At the heart, Red is in a place of “unhomeliness,” because she can switch effectively between both worlds regardless of the amount of experience she has in each place. Red toes the line of the inferred boundary between origin and relocation, thus placing her in a unique position in relation to the rest of the Tethered personas.

While the Tethered seem to be the oppressed and the aboveground people the oppressors in the realm of the postcolonial, Adelaide and Red complicate this comparison. Adelaide manages to escape her life among the Tethered, thus challenging the structure of the aboveground; on the other hand, Red is forced to enter the world of the Tethered, and she is the reason they assemble and organize. While Adelaide is living her life on the ground, Red manages to adapt to her new life while simultaneously getting the rest of the Tethered ready to fight back against their oppression. In this way, Red is both the oppressed and the oppressor, or the colonized and the colonizer. She is among the Tethered, yet she is still an outsider who enters this realm and organizes the people.<sup>5</sup> By including this complexity in the film, Peele essentially does exactly what Bhabha theorizes by “creat[ing] a crisis for the cultural priority given to the *metaphoric* as the process of repression and substitution which negotiates the difference between paradigmatic systems and classifications” (Bhabha 130; emphasis original). It is unclear which position Red takes within this system. In actuality, she is most likely both; she tends to occupy several spaces and positions at once, placing her in a precarious position compared to the rest of the characters in the film. She is the embodiment of mimicry, yet she can also play the role of the mimicked.

The film contains one clear moment when the Tethered realize Red is unlike them, and they want her to save them from their fate (Peele). The Tethered copy exactly what the people

aboveground do, but in a more animalistic fashion. However, Red beautifully dances for the Tethered just as Adelaide dances aboveground.<sup>6</sup> They see and realize the beauty and elegance in her dance; it has no traces of being produced by a genuinely Tethered person. The Tethered people realize that Red can save them from their position, almost like a god-like figure. To revisit my point above, the Tethered see that Red embodies “a difference that is almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha 130). She blends in with the Tethered in terms of appearance, but her dancing abilities set her apart. She breaks the “paradigmatic systems and classifications” set forth for the Tethered, which allows her to eventually organize them to rise and attempt to take over the aboveground for themselves (Bhabha 130). Meanwhile, Adelaide is living her life aboveground, dancing the same dance as Red, and blending in almost seamlessly (Peele). Both women— Red and Adelaide— are subverting mimicry and enforcing it in some way, and this can be seen in this first dance scene in the film.

Interestingly, the Tethered essentially come to see Red as their savior, thus complicating her as part of the oppressed group. She eventually encourages them to rise, but she first makes them all identical in appearance and provides them with two common goals: kill their aboveground counterpart and link together hand-in-hand (Peele). Once the Tethered do, in fact, come to the surface from the depths of the tunnel system, they know nothing of organized religion. However, Red is still able to recall her faith from childhood, and she makes this known to the Wilson family upon arrival. When describing her experiences as part of the Tethered, she tearfully states:

“Once upon a time, there was a girl and the girl had a shadow. The two were connected, tethered together. And the girl ate, her 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 had 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 the shadow realized *she was being tested by God.*” (Peele; emphasis added)

Despite all of Red's heartbreaking discoveries about her life, she equates the experience to being tested by God. Once the Tethered see her in this way as well, she gains the power to assemble, rise, and try to reclaim what was taken from her so many years ago. However, the viewer does not know of the switch at this point in the film, causing the empathy to lie with Adelaide rather than Red. Comparatively, Bhabha theorizes that there are “strategies of desire in discourse that make the anomalous representation of the colonized something other than a process of the ‘return of the repressed’” (130). Living among the Tethered, Red is not in a state of repression, however, when compared to the aboveground people, she absolutely is. Peele purposefully makes this distinction complex in order to alter where sympathies lie, because he wants the viewer to

grapple with the idea of good versus evil. In the film, this distinction is unclear, because we see these various themes battling with one another for the film's duration. While Red may be the savior for the Tethered, she also plays a role in their subjugation, while she, herself, is continuously oppressed by Adelaide and the rest of the aboveground people.

Therefore, the question of the Other is made manifest: who is the Other in this circumstance? The answer to this question may lie in Bhabha's idea of the stereotype. In *Of Mimicry and Man*, he fleetingly mentions this idea, arguing that stereotypes are rooted in various forms of oppression, particularly racism (132). He fleshes out this idea more clearly in "The Other Question," where he reconsiders the idea of the stereotype and its larger implications in the realm of postcolonial social discourse. One of the major arguments he makes is that "[t]here is both a structural and functional justification for reading the racial stereotype of colonial discourse in terms of fetishism" (27). Therefore, a major part of this idea is associated with racial implications that Peele manages to limit in the film. The Wilsons are a black family, and there is not a clear moment in the film where they become the object of this fetish; similarly, none of the Tethered have to deal with this sense of fetishism either. However, Bhabha also makes the case that "[t]he fetish or stereotype gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defense, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it" (27). Therefore, the stereotype is something that needs to be mastered—despite all of its changes and alterations—and its dismissal is valid yet also questionable. While the stereotype, according to Bhabha, is inherently racist, there is a performative nature to the stereotype that can give the oppressed a certain agency in some situations, because it is something that the colonizer cannot repudiate or change (27-28). In this way, Adelaide and Red use this idea of the stereotype to survive in their worlds. Adelaide learns how to act more like the aboveground people until she becomes one, yet her slippage is still evident through language. In an earlier example of Adelaide's and Kitty's interactions on the beach, it is possible that Adelaide loses her voice out of discomfort with Kitty's bragging about her husband's successes as compared to Gage. The silence could stem from discomfort with racism and feeling unsettled by the white family they are spending the day with. On the other hand, Red takes on the role of colonizer as she organizes the people, forcing them to look and act identical, despite her position as part of the Tethered herself. Both women use the stereotype (and embody it at its fullest extent) for this sense of power and agency in their own lives.

The person who is being stereotyped or who falls under mimicry is not completely without agency in this sense. There is a limitation to the agency, particularly in slippages where the quality of being the same but not quite like the Other is embedded in the guise of the stereotype, yet in other moments, this quality is empowering. For instance, despite the fact that Red helps organize the Tethered to rise, there is an agency in this uprising. They may all look alike and have the same goals, but they are still managing to break free from living their lives in the abandoned tunnels. This, in turn, begs the question: are they trading one oppressive system for another? This question cannot be answered, because the film ends before we can really know and understand the full outcome of the situation. Nevertheless, Bhabha's ideas of mimicry are quite complicated when viewing *Us* at a deeper level, yet they are continuously upheld and traceable throughout the film.

### **Interpreting Mimicry through Race, Class, and Culture**



Several major factors that have not yet been addressed in this analysis of mimicry, the stereotype, and the Other as seen in Peele's *Us* are race, class, and culture. In order to fully understand and grapple with these theories, these three themes must be looked at more intensely. *Us* challenges and complicates some of Bhabha's work, especially since the leading family is Black. Therefore, Bhabha's ideas of mimicry raise complicated questions about race and colonialism. Class relations also play a key role, as there is a power struggle between the black Wilsons and the white Tylers. Finally, all of this can be placed within a cultural framework, also theorized by Bhabha, to help make sense of all the complications and challenges that arise within this context. Ultimately, Peele creates a social commentary in the film on the basis of race, class, and culture, and one of the best ways to make sense of this critique is through Bhabha's ideas on mimicry.

In *Of Mimicry and Man*, Bhabha theorizes, "the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction. It is a form of colonial discourse that is uttered in *intra dicta*: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed" (130). This site of interdiction, as Bhabha argues, is race: "almost the same but not white" (130). Therefore, there is a racial struggle at the heart of mimicry, which is complicated in the film. Adelaide and Red are both black women, yet they engage with some of the themes put forward by Bhabha as mentioned in the section above. However, their blackness does come into question throughout the film as a source of oppression, particularly with the aboveground people. The Tethered really do not concern themselves with race, as they are tethered to their aboveground counterpart; nonetheless, these aboveground people can practice and inhibit racist elements that fall in line with mimicry.

One of the major instances of mimicry in the film is of Gabe, a black man, trying to live a similar lifestyle as Josh, a white man. They both have the same job at the same company, but there still seem to be some inequalities between them. For instance, Josh tells Gabe about the boat he just purchased, persuading Gabe to buy a boat as well. Josh's boat is fully equipped and state-of-the-art, but Gabe winds up purchasing a used crawfish boat that tends to stall and lag (Peele). Considering both men have the exact same job, it leads the viewer to wonder why Gabe purchases the lackluster boat. Is this because, despite having the same job, the men make different salaries because of the color of their skin? The similarity between Gabe's and Josh's family dynamics make this a likely possibility. Even the houses each family occupies are vastly different; the Tyler family home is grandiose, and the Wilson family home is a standard middle-class American house. Clearly, Peele is critiquing race and class structures in America, particularly how race impacts class dynamics and relations.

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. While Gabe is not to be faulted for this, Bhabha writes that "from such a colonial encounter between the white presence and its black semblance, there emerges the question of the ambivalence of mimicry as a problematic of colonial subjugation" (131). This striving to be more like the white family is in itself a form of colonialism, because of the social and political structures that are upheld to limit the success of black Americans. While the rest of the Wilson family is not very anxious about living up to the Tylers, Gabe is. In this way, he is upholding the idea of mimicry by attempting to keep to a standard that society is preventing him from reaching on the basis of race.

To fully understand this point, we must look at the culture creating and upholding this inequality. According to critical race theorists Delgado and Stefanie, “race and races are products of social thought and relations . . . [and] races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (8). As this is an American film, taking a brief look at this definition from critical race theory helps clarify Bhabha’s arguments on race for a largely American audience. Since race is a social construct, the culture is entrapped within the boundaries it has created. Within these bounds, there is an inherent inequality.<sup>7</sup> In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that the colonized subject wants to keep their place in the social system with equal representation, but the colonizer wants to Other the colonized even on the basis of race: “you’re *different*, you’re one of *us*” (44; emphasis original). Because 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” (*The Location of Culture* 45). In this form of mimicry, the colonized is tethered to the colonizer, yet still maintains some semblance of uniqueness. Again, this person “is almost the same but not quite,” and within the cultural conditions and makeup, can never truly fully *be quite*” (*Mimicry* 130).

This idea, though, is further complicated by the unique positions of both Adelaide and Red. Adelaide is the original Tethered person, yet gets to live free; conversely, Red is the original aboveground person, yet she has to live life among the Tethered. Therefore, both women have experiences as both oppressor and oppressed. Furthermore, both women are black, thus complicating the entire system of mimicry according to Bhabha. He writes, “It is not the colonialist Self or the colonized Other, but the disturbing distance *in-between* that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness” (*The Location of Culture* 45; emphasis added). Both Adelaide and Red occupy this in-between space, making them the truest form of the colonial Other, despite their ability to occupy both roles as either colonized or colonizer. Thinking about this in terms of “Of Mimicry and Man,” they are the embodiment of being “almost the same but not quite,” on either side of this binary (130).

This difference can best be traced through one of the final and most crucial scenes of the movie: Adelaide’s and Red’s dance. While I discussed their dance as children, they perform the dance once again as adults, but this time one of them has to die at the end of the performance. For most of the dance, Red strikes Adelaide and slices and jabs her with sharp, golden scissors; however, Adelaide remembers two key points—the ending of the dance and the location of Red’s bed—that help her pierce and kill Red in one final swoop. As Adelaide kills Red, Adelaide lets out a horrifying sound similar to that of the Tethered when they communicate (Peele). Adelaide manages to live because she remembers her previous life, giving her the ability to deliver the ultimate blow at her old bed. Red, on the other hand, has the ability to communicate with Adelaide, showing the full extent of both her ability to remember her previous life and emotions associated with her former condition. For instance, just before her death, Red tells Adelaide, “If it weren’t for you, I never would’ve danced at all” (Peele). This shows that, although separate individuals, they have always been deeply dependent on one another. The only way they could have a semblance of freedom is through the death of either Adelaide or Red. Adelaide manages to win this battle, but she can never escape her truest, original identity as part of the Tethered.

Additionally, Adelaide's children are half-tethered, half-aboveground, which is another reality from her past life that she cannot escape. Zora, Adelaide's daughter, shows her half-Tethered side when she has to kill the Tethered Tyler twin sisters. She uses a golf club to bludgeon the second twin to death, and she continues to beat her body even after she is clearly dead, all the while letting out grunts and sounds that the Tethered also make (Peele). Once she realizes what she is doing, she stops, but she still naturally falls into this side of her inherent personality. As much as she tries to reject the Tethered, she unknowingly is a part of them because of her mother's identity. Bhabha makes the case that "colonial culture offer[s] the subject a primordial Either/Or" ("The Other Question" 27). Zora and Jason, however, break this primordial distinction, because they occupy both spaces within their own bodies. Yet, they still have the ability to be both the colonized and the colonizer, as they are part-Tethered and part-aboveground. By existing in between both spaces, Zora and Jason, like their mother, can relate to both groups because they are part of both; there is no either/or when it comes to their existence.

The Wilsons, whether Tethered or aboveground, are unable to escape the cultural implications of being black in America. This can clearly be seen in Gabe's relations with the Taylors; they do not have the same opportunities because of their race. This in turn impacts their class relations and mobility. Additionally, Adelaide and her children must live the balance between their blackness and their Tethered identities (full and half, respectively). Yet, all of these characters manage to occupy some space in between, making their position truly that of the colonial Other, as Bhabha theorizes (*The Location of Culture* 48-49). This position, in turn, creates a sense of horror in the film that can only be understood through the use of postcolonial theory, and Peele does an excellent job at balancing this unique, challenging position. Ultimately, Peele exemplifies Bhabha's idea of being "[almost] the same but not *white*," and this shapes the way mimicry is employed and utilized throughout the film ("Of Mimicry and Man" 130; emphasis original).

### **Conclusion: Re-tethering into Culture**

Considering how recently Peele's film *Us* was released, there has not yet been much scholarship produced concerning its central themes. Despite the lack of scholarship at the current moment, many reviews discussing the film have been written and published, as it is critically acclaimed. Brooks's review, as mentioned previously, offers one of the most interesting observations on the film: "Peele asks his audience to face ourselves in this dark hour, as a way to name the terror of not only America's past, but of a present in which all of *us* play a part" [emphasis original]. Much of this terror, for Peele and for the audience, stems from the use of the *doppelgänger*. This double makes us think about ourselves, and the role(s) we play in the world, and the idea of being faced with the self can create some of the most terrifying manifestations of thought and emotion.

When examining this position through the lens of Bhabha, particularly that of mimicry in his acclaimed "Of Mimicry and Man," this horror comes to make more sense. As Bhabha repeats throughout the work, the idea of being "almost the same but not quite" evokes a sense of horror through mimicry (130). When the double looks similar but is inherently different, there is a sense of disturbance for both people. In this sense, "mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation" (126). There is something being said about the colonizer and the colonized, and there is a power

struggle associated with this articulation. In the film itself, this articulation comes to a head in the battle between Adelaide and Red, or between the aboveground and the Tethered. While their dynamic is complicated, the question of mimicry is at the heart of their struggle. Both characters (in fact, all of the main characters) employ some sense of mimicry in the film to either gain agency or obtain power in some way, allowing the viewer to grapple with the complex nature of the relationships in the film. Of course, there are racial, class, and cultural boundaries that come into play as well, thus further complicating and challenging Bhabha's central ideas.

Ultimately, Peele challenges the viewer, forcing them to think critically about their assumptions about typical horror films. Viewers are left wondering about the film's treatment of evil: who—if any of the characters—is truly evil? While the framing quote from the start of the essay implies that it is the Tethered who are evil, the aboveground people initiate injustices against the Tethered. Peele's complex treatment of morality keeps viewers thinking about the Other, and race and class implications, resulting in the audience being left in a state of horror. Through the lens of Bhabha's theory of mimicry, we can begin to make sense of Peele's intentions for the film. Coming face-to-face with the Other—an Other that looks identical—produces fear, anxiety, and horror, leading to a complicated and deeply complex narrative, which Peele makes evident in his latest foray into the genre. While the Tethered and the aboveground may have differences, in this case, the dual nature of mimicry means that “the soul remains one” (Peele).

## **Notes**

1. Throughout the film, the trope of the Bible verse Jeremiah 11:11 continuously appears. Adelaide sees it just before she's switched with Red, and she sees it upon returning to the beach after being away for several decades. By using this verse, Peele wants the viewer to think about where the true evil lies: within the Tethered people or the aboveground people. I address this question in terms of mimicry in my analysis of the film.
2. One of the central premises of the film is the switch between Adelaide and Red in the carnival fun house. The original Adelaide becomes part of the tethered world, and the original Tethered Red becomes part of the aboveground world. I will refer to the character who spent the majority of her life aboveground as Adelaide (the original Tethered) and the character who spent the majority of her life with the Tethered as Red (the original Adelaide).
3. For the sake of space, I will list the names of the aboveground person and their Tethered persona here: Adelaide Wilson/Red, Gabe Wilson/Abraham, Zora Wilson/Umbrae, Jason Wilson/Pluto, Kitty Tyler/Dahlia, Josh Tyler/Tex, Becca Tyler/Jo, and Lindsey Tyler/Nix. The end credits of the film have these pairs stylized in a similar format with the Tethered names colored in red, matching their jumpsuits.

4. Many other analyses of the film need to be conducted in order to make sense of its many layers. For instance, Brooks makes a case for the film being a critique on the current political climate in America (“*Us* Makes Us Look in the Mirror”). A case for the film being about populism in America can easily be made as well, though I refrain from doing so here. Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone Magazine* makes the case that the film is about Donald Trump’s presidency and living in Trump’s America, which falls in line with Brooks’s critique (“Jordan Peele’s ‘Us’ Will Haunt You”). There is also potential for both feminist and ecofeminist readings of the film, considering the agency of Adelaide/Red and the setting of the Tethered in the abandoned underground tunnel system. Furthermore, there is a clear case for deeper racial analysis, as compared with Peele’s *Get Out*. However, there has been very little scholarship on the film because of its recent release.
5. There are, of course, racial dynamics that complicate this comparison, which Bhabha emphasizes in his theories. I will address these racial implications in accordance with postcolonialism in the next section of the paper.
6. It is unclear whether Red has the ability to copy what Adelaide does aboveground since she is not originally of the Tethered. When meeting with the Wilsons for the first time, Red explains that she had to give birth and get married much more forcefully and aggressively than Adelaide, and these were not her choices (Peele). Therefore, Red most likely mimics Adelaide in the most basic sense of the ideology, but Peele does not make it clear how this could occur considering their original positions in the world.
7. As stated in the fourth endnote here, an analysis equating current political ideologies and cultural climate, an analysis of the film considering themes of populism would be important. In the film, Gabe asks the Tethered Wilson family, “Who are you people?” to which Red responds, “We’re Americans” (Peele). This is a clear indication that Peele is saying something greater about American society within this film as well, which I mostly neglect in this study. While I discuss themes of race and race in America here, there is more analysis to be done following this idea.

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