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American Fictions Seminar

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Workshop Paper

For this project, I plan to create a podcast script (including talking script/points and selected audio clips from the examined works) discussing the relationship between Jordan Peele's new horror film, *Us* (2019), and Toni Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy*. I intend to place both of these works in today's cultural context, as well as in conversation with one another in the same artistic plane. This paper is meant to give a sense of the order in which I plan to discuss these topics, and what I intend to focus upon. I will begin with a brief overview of both of the works independently, and then move into a comparison of their elements of religion and double-consciousness (and possibly the combination of the two). I am aiming for the podcast to be about 30-45 minutes in length.

Overview of *Us* (2019)

Jordan Peele's second major horror film, *Us*, focuses on a seemingly upper-middle class black family, consisting of the mother, Adelaide, the father, Gabe, and the two children, Zora and Jason. We see that when she was a girl, Adelaide was traumatized by seeing an exact double of herself inside a fun house at the Santa Cruz Pier, and she has never been the same since. The movie's plot begins when Adelaide (now an adult) and her family are on a vacation to the exact same Pier in which she experienced her initial trauma. Adelaide is on edge for the entire time, until one night at their vacation home a family appears in their driveway, and they are all exact doubles of Adelaide's family. The doppelgangers break in, and eventually explain themselves

and pursue each of their doubles. All of Adelaide's family manages to escape their home alive, but upon arriving at their neighbors' house, they realize that the doppelgangers are not unique to their family.

Overview of *A Mercy*

Toni Morrison's third most recent novel tells the story about the characters on the Vaark farm in the late 17th- early 18th-century. Jacob Vaark was a tradesman who detested those who participated in the slave trade, until he was shortchanged by a trader named D'Ortega, who offered Jacob a slave of his choice in exchange for his services. Jacob reluctantly selected a young girl with the hopes that he could raise her in a better situation than D'Ortega, as well as impress his wife who continued to lose children to miscarriage and infant death. After this transaction, Jacob comes to realize a passion for the slave trade, and for the value of slave labor in building his farm and becoming wealthy.

The girl Jacob acquires, Florens, is the central and recurring character throughout the novel, and we hear her voice in alternating chapters. Now sixteen years old, Florens is in search of the Blacksmith with whom she is in love, and she has left the Vaark farm to pursue him. Jacob has since died, and the women on the farm are left to fend for themselves as Rebekka, Jacob's wife, is also very ill.

Other characters that are visited include Lina, a Native American slave on the Vaark farm who befriended Rebekka, and acts as a sort of head servant. Sorrow is another slave whom Jacob "rescues" from another, perhaps more miserable life, and she is haunted by a doppelganger-esque figure she calls Twin who speaks to her and accompanies her through life.

We learn about Rebekka, and her life as human cargo shipped from England to America to be sold as a bride.

Overview of Religion in Both Works

Religion plays a constant yet subtle role in both of these works. One of the first shots we see in *Us* is a seemingly homeless man on the Santa Cruz Pier holding up a sign with the words “Jeremiah 11:11” written on it. According to the King James Version of the Bible, the verse reads: “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.” Leading up to the home invasion of the doppelgangers, 11:11 is noted multiple times, and this indicates a type of coincidence and mirrored image that foreshadows what is to come for the characters. The very first man to be shown in the position for the Hands Across America demonstration is the man from the beginning of the film who was holding the Jeremiah 11:11 sign. This could be read as a statement that what is to come has strong religious connections, and can be compared to a type of revelation.

Apart from the 11:11 clues, a comparison can be made between Red’s character and a kind of Messiah. In an interview on *The Empire Film Podcast*, Jordan Peele confirms this comparison. In response to a question asking whether Peele was attracted to the verse because of its content or its mirrored image of numbers, he responded:

It was both. I mean, this, as you know, the character Red, which is Lupita Nyong'o's scarrier side, depending on how you look at it, you know, she is essentially leading this event, leading this, this brutal piece of choreography. It’s a demonstration inspired by Hands Across America, which is, you know, a very real moment in the 1980s United

States. And so I felt like it sort of referred to her intentions. She is an important figure in this story, you know. In some ways, the most important figure in the world in this story. And she's had a vision. She's had a connection to what she calls "God." And she's been shown a path. I think one of the fears in the writing process was realizing that this, the dynamic of the tethered was cult. That there is a... that they have a complete faith in their Messiah, that is Red. And to ultimately imply that them being the dark sides of us, you know, we're in a cult as well, just a less scary one on the surface.

Not only does the Jeremiah 11:11 verse describe what is about to happen to humankind, it also assigns the role of Lord to Red, since she was the organizer of the revolt. Peele has also been quoted describing the movie as a sort of "dark Easter" story, in which a Messiah rises from the dead after a metaphorical death. Not only does Red rely on religion to guide her to this mission, she has become the God that she has idolized throughout her time in the underpass.

In Toni Morrison's novel, religion is a pulsing theme throughout each character's narrative, but especially in Rebekka's and Florens' lives. Rebekka describes her parents' version of religion as a cruel and hateful kind, one that she never wanted to take part of. "Religion, as Rebekka experienced it from her mother, was a flame fueled by a wondrous hatred" (Morrison 86). To Rebekka, organized religion could even be described as hellish, but she is also lost without anyone to believe in. "That was Lina. Or was it God? Here in an abyss of loss, she wondered if the journey to this land, the dying off of her family, her whole life, in fact, were waystations marking a road to revelation. Or perdition? How would she know? And now with death's lips calling her name, to whom should she turn? A blacksmith? Florens?" (117-118).

Overview of double consciousness in both

In his 1903 book, *The Soul of Black Folk*, W. E. B. DuBois coins the concept of double-consciousness, or the struggle that African Americans feel between their black identities and their American identities. Double-consciousness causes a veil to be drawn between black Americans and non-black Americans, a veil that becomes more and more noticeable as a black American begins to climb the socioeconomic ladder. One could say that the duality caused by double-consciousness could cause a metaphorical (or literal, in Peele's story) split between their identities, one self representing the reality and one self representing what might have been.

While the depiction of duality is quite literal in Peele's second film, the scholarly and societal allusions that he makes are more than twofold. Film reviewer from *The Tech*, Shreyan Jain, hits the nail on the head when she states, "In that way, Peele's film can be read as an explication of the double-consciousness of America itself, a nation that has conveniently chosen to forget and escape its tainted, troubled past and, in doing so, has neglected half of itself." This doubling of individuals as well as a nation indicates a severing of the past and the present; one in which literally haunts the characters for their entire lives. It is no surprise that this reckoning of the double-consciousness is portrayed in a horror movie format, and this haunting of a doppelganger can be seen in *A Mercy* through the depiction of Sorrow's identical ghost, Twin. While Sorrow rids of Twin through the birth of her child, the characters in *Us* must literally purge their double by killing them, a clear representation of the battle between the present and the past that the United States has been -- and will be -- grappling with.

More possible quotes:

- “Rebekka’s understanding of God was faint, except as a larger kind of king, but she quieted the shame of insufficient devotion by assuming that He could be no grander nor better than the imagination of the believer. Shallow believers preferred a shallow god” (87).
- “For a moment Job must have longed for the self-interested musings of humans as vulnerable and misguided as he was. But a peek into Divine knowledge was less important than gaining, at last, the Lord’s attention. Which, Rebekka concluded, was all Job ever wanted. Not proof of His existence -- he never questioned that. Nor proof of His power -- everyone accepted that. He wanted simply to catch His eye. To be recognized not as worthy or worthless, but to be noticed as a life-form by the One who made and unmade it. Not a bargain; merely a glow of the miraculous” (107).
- “That was good news, because Sorrow thought she was until /twin appeared at the foot of the pallet, grinning, holding her face in her hands. Comforted, Sorrow slept again, but easy now with Twin nestling near” (139).
- “Sorrow concentrated on mealtimes and the art of escape for short walks with Twin, playtimes between or instead of her tasks. On occasion she had secret company other than Twin, but not better than Twin, who was her safety, her entertainment, her guide” (141).
- “When she came to, eyes, the shape and color of her own, greeted her. The puffy clouds, mere threads now, drifted away. ‘I’m here,’ said the girl with a face matching her own exactly. ‘I’m always here.’” (149).
- “You are my shaper and my world as well. it is done. No need to choose” (83).