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Intrigue and Identity: MF DOOM and Tommy Orange's *There There*

English author Virginia Woolf wrote, "I am not one and simple, but complex and many" (Woolf 57). Woolf analyzes the role of identity and perception as she suggests an individual does not have one identity, but many. Her analysis alludes to the idea of many individuals struggling with defining themselves and absorbing one, distinct identity for others to perceive them with. Individuals sometimes create several personalities to present to others depending on their audience. British-American rapper Daniel Dumile, also known as MF DOOM functions as an example of an individual who has multiple identities. His, however, has relation to his musical career as he creates several personas, some with a physical mask, for when he performs. In a similar way, Tommy Orange presents numerous Native Americans that struggle with their identity in his novel *There There*. The various characters, placed in a modern setting, face the choice of participating in a Native American cultural celebration, creating personal moments of tension for various characters. Tony Loneman acts as a remarkable example in that he struggles with his cultural and physical identity, similar to Dumile. Tommy Orange creates a relevant novel addressing the various cultural and physical struggles of contemporary Native Americans related to their identity through his incorporation of the character Tony Loneman and Loneman's love for MF DOOM.

As a rapper, Daniel Dumile has several different musical personas that enhance his artistry. In his identity of MF DOOM, or Metal Face Doom, he wears a metal mask as a part of

his appearance. He adopts this particular identity from the Marvel comics character of Doctor Doom, who also wears a metal mask (Ramirez 4). Dumile creates one of his musical identities based on the identity of a fictional character who wears a mask to hide his permanently injured face. MF DOOM perhaps wears the metal mask to hide his true self or figurative injuries from his past. The mask started “with an old spray painted Darth Maul mask” and finished “with the fully sculpted face plate that marked Dumile becoming Metal Face Doom” (Fuertes-Knight). Dumile’s creation of a mask enabled him to adopt the identity of MF DOOM; the mask displays his physical appearance and identity as MF DOOM. The metal mask allows Dumile to embrace a unique sense of self to present to the world. As MF DOOM functions as one of Dumile’s identities, he, in a way, indirectly implies he has several different versions of himself, all having distinct and diverse characteristics.

Dumile’s varying physical appearances separate his different musical identities and creations. With his MF DOOM persona, the metal mask acts as the identifying characteristic. While the mask helps to identify a specific persona, it does not define the associated artistry. Dumile’s different identities can “preserve his artistic integrity as a lyrical rapper, build upon his complicated narratives, and explore new creative avenues” (Lee 7). Daniel Dumile’s various personas enable him to experiment in a creative way. In this way, he hopes his audience focuses on the music and lyricism of his artistry instead of him as an artist. The metal mask he utilizes “opens up the creative space for Dumile to play with additional fantastic personas and weird themes in other albums” (Ramirez 7). As an artist of many personas, Dumile creates the opportunity for himself to explore many different musical areas. Instead of having to maintain a strict and specific style, Dumile’s multiple musical identities allow him to experiment. His “lyricism and production has always been the forefront of his influence as artists and fans that

talk about him constantly reference his rhymes, storytelling ability, and his golden age cartoon inspired production” (6). His audience praises his music and the associated themes and addressed subjects within his songs. Having different personas — and, in the case of MF DOOM, a masked persona — allows an audience to concentrate on music and not specifically the artist. Especially with a masked artist, secrecy surrounds their persona, thus allowing their identity to remain unknown and their music dominate their audience’s attention. Instead of their identity, the music, rhymes, lyrics, and other auditory characteristics take precedence over the person performing.

Like MF DOOM, Tommy Orange’s character Tony Loneman presents several versions of himself to other people in *There There*. Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) functions as one of the more prominent identities Loneman describes as having. Throughout the novel, he also struggles with his Native American identity. MF DOOM’s persona assists Loneman by helping him achieve a sense of acceptance as it relates to his identity. Loneman expresses his adoration for MF DOOM, saying “I knew I liked him when I heard the line ‘Got more soul than a sock without a hole.’ What I liked is that I understood all the meanings to it right away, like instantly” and goes on to describe how these particular lyrics helped him saying, “it made me feel like I’m not stupid. Not slow. Not bottom rung. And it helped because the Drome’s what gives me my soul, and the Drome is a face worn through” (Orange 18). In this particular instance, Loneman describes how MF DOOM’s lyricism helps Loneman accept his physical characteristics. He says Dumile’s lyrics allow him to feel as if fetal alcohol syndrome does not define him as a person. Instead, he recognizes it and acknowledges that it functions as one part of his identity and not the entirety of his identity.

In addition to struggling with fetal alcohol syndrome as a part of his character, Loneman also struggles with acknowledging his Native American identity. Native Americans, from a

contemporary standpoint, have an inaccurate portrayal. Native Americans “are not positively depicted within mainstream media, or rather experience symbolic annihilation” (Lindenman 4). The poor representation of his Native American identity contributes to his confusion related to his understanding of himself. Native Americans have a negative portrayal in the media and may, in a way, encourage Loneman to embrace said negative portrayal. This insinuation may cause confusion for Loneman, as he may not want to embrace the ‘negative’ attributes of his culture, but, at the same time, wants to celebrate his Native American identity. That combined with his attitude of uncertainty towards Native American culture contributes to Loneman’s struggle with his identity. Due to his physical appearance, Tony has a sense of familiarity when it comes to exclusion and judgment based on external attributes. Thus, Tony Loneman “is familiar” with this judgment “due to his racial/ethnic background as an Indigenous individual” (Lindenman 3). His Native American identity creates prejudices against him in that people make assumptions based on his appearance. Loneman embraces violence as a means to help him process where his identity lies. On his way to the powwow, for example, Loneman describes how people stare at him for his Native American identity instead of because of the fetal alcohol syndrome. He says, “No one on the train knows about the powwow. Tony’s just an Indian dressed like an Indian on the train for no apparent reason. But people love to see the pretty history” and that “he’s used to being stared at, but this is different. He wants to laugh at them staring at him” (Orange 234). In this instance, Loneman recognizes that people make presumptions based on appearance and instead of confronting those who do, he chooses to embrace the stares from others. He goes as far to encourage them to stare at him because of how he dresses and presents himself. Similar to MF DOOM, Loneman utilizes his identity to control how others interpret him. While MF DOOM controls his appearance so people appreciate the music and not the artist, Loneman

controls his appearance so people recognize his Native American culture and not the fetal alcohol syndrome. Both Dumile and Loneman wear a mask, whether physical or figurative, to protect how those around them perceive them.

In the later moments of the novel after Loneman is shot, he, in a subtle way, references his adoration for MF DOOM and the help he has offered Loneman. Dumile employs the use of a metal mask to create a distinct identity for himself. He chooses “to conceal his face to protect the integrity of his art” (Ramirez 4). The mask Dumile wears does not function as a representation of him, but instead of his music and the persona related to said music. He has the ability to remove the mask and still maintain his original identity as Dumile. The persona of MF DOOM simply functions as a mask for Dumile. In a similar way, Loneman, as he struggles his consciousness, Loneman references his understanding of his identity. He says, for example, “He watches himself go up, out of himself, then he watches himself from above, looks at his body and remembers that it was never actually really him. He was never Tony just like he was never the Drome. Both were masks” (Orange 288). Loneman references MF DOOM’s persona and his incorporation of a mask in his appearance and compares it to his own identity. In this instance, he realizes that neither fetal alcohol syndrome nor his Native American identity entirely define him as a person. They act as singular attributes and, like Dumile, Loneman wears these different masks, or presents himself differently, to those around him.

Dumile and Loneman’s numerous identities enable them to protect themselves, in a way, from those around them. Instead of presenting their fully-authentic selves, they realize others would reject their genuine identity. Tony Loneman’s character, for example, frequently faces rejection and isolation because of fetal alcohol syndrome. Because many people do not struggle with fetal alcohol syndrome, “when they see or approach Tony their immediate reaction is to

simply dismiss or disregard him, thereby categorizing him as an outsider or ‘other’” (Lindenman 3). Because of his physical appearance, he faces an incredible amount of social rejection. He has an awareness of this social rejection based off of his appearance and he can connect it to his love for MF DOOM. Similar to MF DOOM’s incorporation of a metal mask, Loneman wears masks of fetal alcohol syndrome and Native Americanism. The two of them develop and present a different variant of themselves to the world. Dumile and Loneman both “have an acute understanding of survival that stems from the necessity of adapting to their surrounding environments” (Lindenman 7). Dumile recognizes how his identity takes away from the appreciation for his music. Loneman recognizes how his identity takes away from the appreciation for him as a person, thus he recognizes the importance of fetal alcohol syndrome not functioning as the defining characteristic for him and his identity. To Loneman, fetal alcohol syndrome simply acts as a mask, as he learned from MF DOOM, which does not define him as a person, but simply functions as a singular attribute.

The conclusion of the novel allows Tony Loneman to accept his identity and embrace the multitude of characteristics that make him himself. Despite the hardships he faces related to his identity and sense of self, he demonstrates resilience to the harsh world around him. He continuously attempts to adopt an identity that best suits him. One’s identity “is tied to resilience, and there is evidence of the importance of identity throughout the book” (Grinshteyn 3). One’s willingness to defy social standards related to identity shows strength as seen throughout *There There*. Loneman recognizes that his Native American identity and, most notably, his fetal alcohol syndrome, function as masks in that the two attributes determine how those around him perceive him. Towards the end of the novel, as he struggles with consciousness, Loneman reflects on an instance that occurred when he was four years old and playing with his Transformer’s action

figures. He says, “As Tony has them walk away from the battle, they talk about how they wish it didn’t have to be that way. They wish they could all have made it. Tony has Optimus Prime say, ‘We’re made of metal, made hard, able to take it. We were made to transform’” (Orange 290). Not only does the description of Optimus Prime’s metal mask reflect the image of MF DOOM’s metal mask, but at four years old, Loneman has the ability to recognize the normalcy of evolving and changing into a different version of oneself. MF DOOM reinforces the idea of individuality for Loneman. With MF DOOM’s masterful lyrics, “Tony could possibly try to connect himself with other representations in the present-day cultural media that better reflect him as an individual” (Lindenman 2). Loneman wants those around him to accept him as an individual. He turns to MF DOOM, as a clear example, to help him bravely embrace himself and his identity. As seen in the earlier parts of the novel, Loneman interprets MF DOOM’s lyrics as words of encouragement suggesting his attributes do not fully define him as a person and instead operate as characteristics that contribute to his understanding of his identity. In this way, he demonstrates a sense of resilience because of his willingness to go against the rejection he faces to embrace his various attributes. Similar to MF DOOM’s employment of various personas to help showcase his musical talents, Loneman recognizes the importance of transforming into and appreciating the different sides of oneself.

Through the mention of MF DOOM, Tommy Orange demonstrates the role that MF DOOM’s lyricism and music has on Tony Loneman’s character and his struggles related to his physical identity and his Native American identity in *There There*. Daniel Dumile, also known as MF DOOM, creates several different musical personas. The varied identities enable him to experiment creatively in addition to having a sense of control as it relates to his audience. The metal mask utilized in his MF DOOM persona encourages his listeners to focus on his music

instead of him as an individual. The various identities, or masks, protect Dumile and help him control his presentation to the world. Similarly, Tony Loneman, who struggles with fetal alcohol syndrome and faces confusion related to his Native American identity, faces harsh judgment from those around him based on his appearance. However, Loneman discovers MF DOOM, whose lyrics and persona offer him encouragement to embrace himself and his identity.

Loneman, because of MF DOOM's impact, has the ability to recognize that despite what he has believed his whole life, his fetal alcohol syndrome and his Native Americanism do not act as the entirety of his identity. Instead, like a mask, they function as attributes he can choose to embrace. Similar to Virginia Woolf's ideas related to identity, Tommy Orange exhibits an individual's sense of control and ability to possess not one, but many different sides of oneself to the world around them.

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