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Cover Page Footnote

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Indigenous Evolution in a 'Post-Racial' America in Tommy Orange's

There There

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Abstract

This paper will present an in-depth analysis of Tommy Orange's novel *There There*, demonstrating the marginalization of Native Americans living in a so-called post-race United States. Orange provides intertextual references, mainly Hip-Hop musicians, to help establish where this particular group of people, Urban Native Americans, fit into contemporary society and popular culture. By focusing on the breakdown of characters such as Tony Loneman, a black-market entrepreneur, the Red Feather brothers, three young boys coming of age, and Dene Oxendene, an aspiring filmmaker, there will be an elaboration of just how Orange is able to explain the Indigenous plight by having a musicians and authors seamlessly correlate and communicate with the characters present in the text. Through the examination of these multiple intertextual references, other relevant topics and themes that are portrayed within the novel will be explored, including double-consciousness, symbolic annihilation, and assimilation. The reiteration of these reoccurring themes related to oppression also allows for the exploitation of the negative past and present lives of Indigenous peoples in America to finally be discussed, and more importantly recognized, by a broader audience.

Keywords: Native Americans; Oppression; Media; Symbolic Annihilation; Hip Hop/Rap

Modern authors go to great lengths to demonstrate their viewpoints by using outside cultural and social references. In Tommy Orange's novel *There There*, the audience is able to further connect to this urban literary work through the inclusion of intertextual references, ranging from famous Hip-Hop musicians to well-known authors, that the text can be found collaborating with on a symbolical and metaphorical level. These intertextual references allow for a discussion of major topics and themes, such as double-consciousness, symbolic annihilation, assimilation, oppression and self-loathing, to be examined in regard to the harsh realities of life for Indigenous peoples living within contemporary society.

Tony Loneman is the first character that Orange introduces in the novel, as well as the character he chooses to later end it. Even though it is never explicitly expressed in the novel by the author, there is a parallel, and intertextual reference, to Tony Loneman from *There There* and Willy Loman from the play *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller. From their names to the qualities each character possesses, it is obvious that Orange creates Tony as the modern, Indigenous version of Willy. Both characters have names that convey innocence and childlike tendencies, such as having to rely on others for support. Without going into all of the exact reasons of why Willy is portrayed as he is in the play, it is still much easier to do an in-depth analysis of Tony as a character when comparing him to Willy. For example, Tony's name and dependency on others is partially due to a tragic character flaw that the reader is told he is born with, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (or as Tony calls it, 'The Drome') (Orange 15-16). This particular characteristic is something that Tony does not have any control over, directly affecting his facial phenotype and his level of intelligence, which is similar to Willy who cannot stop his body from rapidly aging and his mind from deteriorating. These two characters also set the tone for the stories they are presented in, foreshadowing a negative final outcome in the plot of both *There*

There and *Death of a Salesman*. What sets Tony apart from Willy is, again, the fact that he is an Indigenous individual, which helps the audience to see some of the important themes, that are exclusive to the novel, through Tony's own self-awareness and personal reflection of himself.

As for Tony's ways of coping with his facial deformities and intellectual condition, his subconscious understanding of the idea of double-consciousness renders him the opportunity to analyze why he is judged solely off of his physical attributes. Since many people do not have 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'. Being known as 'other' is something Tony is familiar with not only due to his phenotype but also due to his racial/ethnic background as an Indigenous individual. All of these aspects combined force Tony to subconsciously comprehend W.E.B. Dubois' thoughts on "this double-consciousness," which include how one sees society, how society sees them, and how the individual sees oneself (3). Indigenous peoples, along with many other social groups and communities that are marginalized within the United States, must also be overtly aware of this concept in order for them to successfully survive within American society.

One of the most detrimental points of view that Tony has is how he sees himself, which affects how he is able to relate back to society. The intertextual reference that best exemplifies this is the correlation Tony has with the underground Hip-Hop artist he listens to, MF Doom. What sets MF Doom apart from other mainstream artists in the music industry is his unique use of meter and rhythm, mixed with obscure lyrics, that shed light on modern social issues within America. Immediately, Tony gravitates to the artist's style and lyricism, not because they are so meaningful but relatively clever and simplistic rhymes that even he can interpret. The line that Orange chooses to input in his novel, "Got more soul than a sock with a hole," along with Tony's

basic explanation of it, gives him a layer of agency as the groundwork is formed for deep-rooted symbolism and an intricate relationship between the character and artist (18). Tony could possibly try to connect himself with other representations in the present-day cultural media that better reflect him as an individual. The problem is that Indigenous peoples are not positively depicted within mainstream media, or rather experience symbolic annihilation.

What is often meant when mentioning symbolic annihilation is that there is a significant lack of proper representation of a particular group of people. Carrie Louise Sheffield further classifies symbolic annihilation as a form of genocide, which she defines as “a psychological as well as a physiological attack on humanity that has far-reaching effects on survivors and their descendants,” or in essence “the creation and perpetuation of historical trauma” (Sheffield 94). When Indigenous people are shown in popular culture, they are usually depicted in an essentialized way that is demeaning, derogatory, and/or discriminatory towards the whole community. This makes the MF Doom lyrics Orange chooses to include in the novel work as a double entendre for this theme of symbolic annihilation, based on the song they are from entitled “Rhinestone Cowboy.” Although most of the lyrics within the song may be a more personal reflection of the artist himself, in this scenario the title alone becomes symbolic in defining how Indigenous people have been annihilated within the culture.

Through the emergence of the heroic American ‘cowboy,’ Indigenous people have always been the opposing enemies within music, movies, and other forms of media. The term ‘rhinestone’ can also represent diamonds, gold, or land, all things settlers were looking to obtain by committing to the idea of manifest destiny when originally expanding the United States’ territory, while also partaking in the mass genocide of thousands of Indigenous peoples. Perhaps the most pertinent, yet ambiguous, portion of the song is not even part of the lyrics MF Doom

can be heard reciting but the miniature segment, or outro, that comes afterwards. It elaborates on how “[t]hey were the foes of society” and/or “[t]he villains” (Madvillain) which, in this case, pertains to how Indigenous people have been horrifically personified within the aforementioned forms of media. Either way, Tony’s subconscious recognition of this absence of individuals as positive role models, that could potentially represent and connect him with his ancestral cultural history, propel him to seek a sense of belonging through the outlets that are available.

MF Doom is an ideal public figure for Tony to idolize due to the artist’s influence within popular culture, how he physically presents himself, and the way he is viewed by both contemporary society and other artists within the music industry. His physical appearance and portrayal as an artist are atypical, appearing as a ‘super villain’ with a mask (specifically as Marvel Comics’ Doctor Doom) which is much different than other modern Hip-Hop artists who are mentioned later within the novel, such as Chance the Rapper, Eminem, and Earl Sweatshirt. Tony sees this ‘villain-like’ character as a reflection of himself, since he too is looked at as strange or odd strictly due to his genetic facial predisposition. This also becomes a blatant reference to some of the familiar reoccurrences throughout American history, as both Indigenous peoples and African Americans have been illustrated as evil or ‘villainous’ through various forms of media and social propaganda.

Even though the other artists that are mentioned have been considered outcasts at some time throughout their lives, MF Doom makes it apparent that he is distinctly different from his contemporaries — again, through his appearance but also by remaining as an independent artist, who is outside the current mainstream music platform. The way he does this, other than by personally embodying the image and persona of a ‘super villain,’ is by metaphorically exploiting major ongoing issues within the country through his lyrics. An example of this is prevalent in

another song by MF Doom, entitled “Rhymes Like Dimes,” where he compares “sell[ing] rhymes,” or music, to peddling illicit narcotics, jobs that the media insinuates as being typical of peoples whose racial/ethnic background is not white (MF Doom). This perspective conceives MF Doom’s own double-consciousness yet is contradictory to the ‘super villain’ character he establishes himself as, because, in reality, he is consistently combating the constant historically cultural and social oppression of entire groups of people. The downside to revealing all of this information, that shows who is truly the evil oppressors of the general public, is that it completely sets him apart from the rest of the music industry and leaves MF Doom to forever be an utter outsider from society.

Now as for Tony, he has no choice but to be an outsider, outcast or ‘other,’ again due to his appearance. However, with language he can technically make the decision to overcome his disability in order to be accepted by the general population. Instead, he embraces the power of being brash and blunt by remaining, for the most part, honest with everyone he encounters. Orange even has Tony doing a first-person narration of his own story, stating to the reader how “[he has] this big body to help [him] since [his] face [has] it so bad,” which he directly relates to ‘The Drome’ (Orange 19). Tony is obviously confident and knowledgeable regarding his own personal being but fully displays this fact by actively capitalizing on his abnormal facial features, using them as a protective mask and reacting indifferently to the ways in which society interprets him. Just like MF Doom, Tony does not care about the stereotypes that other individuals have of him and faces his challenges head on. Sheffield describes this as a way for both individuals to own these characteristics and “construct their own sense of a “real” identity outside of the one shaped through US history and the mass media” (Sheffield 100). Furthermore, this conscious altering of identity provides evidence for some of the younger generation Natives dissociation

from the typically standard modern popular culture, while simultaneously showing the hypocritical necessity of assimilation in order to survive.

When explaining Tony's survival through assimilation, MF Doom is, once again, the only artist mentioned within the novel that correlates with Tony. Both MF Doom and Tony have an acute understanding of survival that stems from the necessity of adapting to their surrounding environments so that they may continuously earn a living in their current occupations. The difference between MF Doom and Tony is that the latter individual does not seem to be gifted or talented enough to be able to achieve such a feat of becoming a musician, leading him to pursue the job of a drug dealer. J. Kelly Robinson believes that Tony's situation is due to the "exceptionally high" unemployment rate of Indigenous people that is "directly related to educational level" (Robinson 5). MF Doom even recognizes how this is a terrible option for any individual to undertake, again in his song "Rhymes Like Dimes," by informing his audience that "Only in America could you find a way to earn a healthy buck / And still keep your attitude on self-destruct" (MF Doom). Unfortunately for Tony though, like many other Indigenous peoples, he belongs to a lower socio-economic tier within the United States and does not have access to the same infrastructure as someone who is granted a better education simply because they are part of a higher socio-economic status. This makes many Indigenous people, including Tony, easily susceptible to engaging in illegal activities to sustain a regular source of income, which is a direct result of their oppression and an example of their assimilation, as well as marginalization, within modern American society.

The similarity between MF Doom and Tony, however, is based on the fact that they both work for themselves, doing whatever it takes to overcome the obstacles in front of them. For instance, MF Doom branches out to work with many new, young rising artists, along with some

who are already well-known and highly established, so that he can continue to maintain a steady income and relevance within the music industry. Tony, on the other hand, survives by distributing narcotics, such as marijuana and cocaine, in order to try to rise himself above the poverty line. Some, like Sheffield, would argue this is not Tony's only option, and with a proper influential guide Hip-Hop itself could be "used as a positive means of identity (re)construction" (99). Tony though, much like MF Doom, adapts to life by assimilating himself into an informal economy as a means of survival, which in turn somehow helps prevent him from enacting in more dangerous and self-destructive behavior(s).

A few of the other Hip-Hop artists that are mentioned as intertextual references within Orange's novel, such as Chance the Rapper, Eminem and Earl Sweatshirt, are also associated with other characters who are even younger than Tony Loneman (who is barely 21 himself). Although they are not favored by the major character of Orville Red Feather, these three well-known, and relevantly prevalent, mainstream Hip-Hop artists are highly admired by one of his younger brothers, and sub-character, Looter Red Feather. Initially, since all three of the Red Feather brothers, Orville, Looter and Lony, are aware of their racial/ethnic background as Native/Indigenous, one would think they would automatically be attracted to learn about, and listen to, music that represented their ancestral heritage and cultural background. Like Tony though, this is not the case, as their 'grandmother' (in reality, their great step Aunt) Opal Victoria Bear Shield tries to prevent them from engaging in anything related to their Native/Indigenous background, regardless of whether or not it has been symbolically annihilated within the country's media. As the second oldest of the three, Looter decides to find other means of musical entertainment which he does, again, by immersing and assimilating himself within the modern music genre known as Hip-Hop/Rap.

The aforementioned artists that have been named and addressed as the sole listening pleasure of Looter Red Feather further correlate to him and his two other brothers through how they have been portrayed and represented before, as well as after, entering the music industry. As previously stated, each one of the three Hip-Hop artists, at one point in time, has been shunned by society while being ridiculed for their ambitious aspirations. They overcame the oppression set forth by not only society but at times their own family, friends, and communities in order to achieve their highest goals. The Red Feather brothers are doing the same thing in their own way by obeying Opal's demands/wishes yet collaborating together, unbeknownst to her, to find their own identities. This is a way for the brothers to assimilate and simultaneously explore their own personal interests, even if they do stem from modern culture, while subconsciously keeping them from participating in any self-destructive and/or self-loathing behaviors/activities.

These ideas of overcoming oppression rather than simply assimilating apply extensively to Orville more than the other two brothers. This is due to his heightened interest in learning about their ancestral heritage and cultural background by listening to modern Native/Indigenous pow wow music that he is able to download/stream from the internet. Lony is discussed less frequently but it is mentioned that he listens to classical music, such as Beethoven, showing the variation of someone who is dealing with subjugation and untraditionally assimilating within modern society by grasping ahold of music that is not necessarily the norm within popular culture. The major one out of the three that is not only battling against oppression but fully succumbing to assimilation is Looter due to his submergence into the music genre of Hip-Hop/Rap that is present within contemporary culture. He even goes as far as to try to write and record his own Hip-Hop/Rap lyrics based on the aforementioned artists that immensely influence and inspire him. This type of engagement in the arts could potentially be beneficial for Looter

by giving him a way to express himself and his identity while vocalizing about his lived experiences. This outlet could also positively impact Looter in the future as it allows him a way to be constructive and stay away from participating in various self-destructive behaviors, such as alcohol and drug/substance abuse, thereby possibly preventing self-loathing. Sheffield would see Looter's use of Hip-Hop/Rap as something even more interesting than what is simply seen on the surface, stating that it is also "a vehicle through which the Indigenous voice can be heard. It becomes an act of political resistance, allowing Indigenous issues to become public" (99). These three characters are prime candidates of Native/Indigenous people fluidly undergoing the assimilation process by using aspects that exist from other cultures as tools, or steppingstones, to help them keep intact their own personal identities, historical/cultural values of family and community, and still allow them to blend into society in order to survive.

Other than musicians, Orange uses authors and their works as intertextual references to talk about the important topics and themes that relay, once again, some of the struggles that Native/Indigenous people have faced throughout history and still continue to combat during modern times. One famous author that he acknowledges and quotes, Gertrude Stein, is seen in conjunction with one of the passages about a character named Dene Oxendene. Stein's relation in regard to the novel has to do with it being set in Oakland, California, the neighborhood she grew up in as a child. In one of the chapters of Stein's memoir-esque type novel, *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), she discusses the changes that the city of Oakland has undergone during her absence.

In Orange's novel, Dene Oxendene is not only very familiar with Stein's work but is also able to comprehend the chapter regarding Oakland within her novel on a deeper level because of his partial Native/Indigenous background. For Dene, Stein's quote stating "There is no there

there” takes on a symbolic double meaning (Orange 38). The first has to do with Stein’s original intentions of the statement, which was an examination of Oakland after she had been away from the city for such a long stretch of time. She realized that the city she had once come to know and love seemed to disappear right before her eyes due to the passing of time bringing about an evolution within society. The development and urbanization of Oakland subjected the city to alterations that made it different not only based on the ‘new’ and ‘improved’ storefronts and property that had been placed there but the new people who now flooded in, proceeding to call the city their home.

Dene recognizes this modernization in a much more intricate sense, that can also technically be thought of as broad, due to his racial/ethnic background. As a Native/Indigenous individual, he understands that his ancestors feel this very notion everywhere they go within the United States, let alone any other country that is part of either the North or South American continents. Ever since the white European settlers came to the these now known and highly populated American continents, Native/Indigenous peoples have been constantly belittled and terrorized for the land that they once solely inhabited. A Lakota woman, Hilary N. Weaver, finds that even now this “sense of a traditional homeland,” that has been somewhat lost yet somehow lives on, links Native/Indigenous people to an ever-lasting sense of their ancestral identity (245). Other than risking their lives trying to fight the oppression/subjugation and symbolic annihilation that the Native/Indigenous community is still being forced to endure, they have had to assimilate to survive and pass down this intergenerational trauma – these feelings of knowing that the places their ancestors once claimed as their own homes do not exist as they once did (and most likely will never exist in that same way ever again).

Another famous author that is referenced by Orange in *There There* to display the hardships that Native/Indigenous people continue to experience is James Baldwin. The line Orange specifically quotes from one of Baldwin's essays, "Stranger in the Village" (1955), comes right before the third section in *There There*, entitled "The Return," where many of the characters are either physically in route to returning to Oakland to partake in the pow wow or are mentally/emotionally reminiscing on their past in preparation for the pow wow. The quote by Baldwin, "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them," helps Orange to elaborate on Native/Indigenous people within both a historical and contemporary context simultaneously (157). However, to accurately synthesize Orange's reasoning behind introducing Baldwin's quote, it must be analyzed from its initial standpoint.

Originally fleeing from the United States to France due to being subjugated for his racial/ethnic background and sexual orientation, Baldwin's statement has a tremendous amount of meaning based on the African American community still being treated very poorly as a whole during this "post-slavery" era within America. This is not to say that everything remains as it was before the abolishment of slavery, but Baldwin observes that society still puts a ton of duress on the modern African American, continually subjecting them to a lower socio-economic class/tier solely because of their racial/ethnic background and phenotype. It is as if history is repeating itself and/or cycling through the same patterns. With the upper socio-economic class/tier within society unanimously choosing white people as the social standard, the fates of basically every other community of people are sealed. This leaves all of those people who are not considered the typical white standard in a submissive, or subservient, position in order to allow those who are considered the white standard to remain in a powerful and/or dominant position. Inadvertently, what this does is unify the people belonging to the lower socio-economic class/tier

– in this case the African Americans – and bonds them based on their common ancestral heritage and cultural background as they keep battling the horrible injustices and maltreatment done onto them.

Orange presents Baldwin's quote in the same exact context to his audience but obviously references people who are of a Native/Indigenous racial/ethnic background instead. Just like African Americans, Native/Indigenous people have been tormented by white settlers during the colonization of the United States through enslavement, as well as mass genocide. Not only has their population dramatically decreased but they have been banished from the territories they once called their home. Even within the modern day, Native/Indigenous people are still subjected to mistreatment that forces them to stay within a lower socio-economic class/tier. This is prevalent within each one of the Native/Indigenous character's Orange creates, from Tony Loneman to the Red Feather brothers to Dene Oxendene, as their racial/ethnic background has affected their socio-economic status due to how the social/cultural standards developed throughout American history. Whether it is through the misrepresentation and/or symbolic annihilation of their culture, the promotion of assimilation due to enabling them to subconsciously internalize the concept of double-consciousness or any other forms of subjugation that later influences self-destructive and self-loathing behavior, Native/Indigenous people have been made to almost seamlessly disappear. According to Alex R. Steers-McCrum, "Science, blood, and DNA cannot alone define Native identity" but the historical trauma that has been passed down among generations make up a part of that individual and communal identity that will always stay with them (221). Although the survivors may be able to establish their own personal identities and congregate amongst the common knowledge of their ancestry/history, just

like African Americans, they must consistently be persistent when trying to topple a machine-like regime that categorizes them as sub-standard.

By writing *There There*, Tommy Orange gains the attention of a broader and wider array of individuals who may not necessarily be interested in the topics and themes he deems important to his own racial/ethnic history. He utilizes both the past and present difficulties that ultimately condemn Indigenous people to a state of abject alterity within America. Through his use of intertextual references, Orange is able to hone in on the oppression/subjugation, as well as the symbolic annihilation, of Indigenous peoples which has led to their awareness of double-consciousness, having to assimilate, and establishment of self-destructive coping mechanisms due to the repercussions of self-loathing in modern society. Although lost, Orange does not allow the Native/Indigenous plight to be forgotten and demonstrates the impact just one member within the community can make even within contemporary times. It is not solely for the sake of their identity that Tony, the Red Feather brothers and Dene impart themselves on a long treacherous journey, but for the betterment of future generations of Native/Indigenous peoples.

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