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

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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, specifically 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 one essential character, there will be an elaboration of just how Orange is able to explain the Indigenous plight by having a musician seamlessly correlate and communicate with the character present in the text. Through the examination of just one particular intertextual reference, 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, specifically famous Hip-Hop musicians, 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, and oppression, to be examined in regard to the harsh realities of life for Indigenous peoples living within contemporary society.

The character that Orange chooses to begin and end the novel with goes by the name of Tony Loneman. An in-depth analysis of Tony helps to explain his purpose, justifying how and why Orange chooses to convey him as an innocent individual with some childlike tendencies. For example, Tony's dependency on others for support is partially due to a tragic character flaw that he is born with, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (or as Tony calls it, "The Drome") (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. Knowing that Tony has these traits grants him the ability to set the tone for the entire story, as well as foreshadow the final negative outcome in the plot of *There There*. Tony is also an Indigenous individual, making the circumstances even more complex while allowing the audience to discover some of the most important themes of the novel through Tony's own self-awareness and personal reflections.

He copes with his facial deformities and intellectual condition by subconsciously embodying the idea of double consciousness, rendering 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, they simply dismiss or disregard him thereby

categorizing him as an outsider or “other.” Tony is familiar with this not only due to his phenotype but also due to his racial/ethnic background as an Indigenous individual. All of these aspects 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 (8). Indigenous peoples are overtly aware of this concept so that they can continue 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.

Symbolic annihilation refers to the significant lack of proper representation of a particular group of people. Carrie Louise Sheffield further classifies symbolic annihilation as a form of genocide, “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” (94). Within popular culture, Indigenous people 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 includes in the novel work as a double entendre, based on the song they are from entitled “Rhinestone Cowboy.” The title of the song alone helps define how Indigenous people have been symbolically annihilated throughout history. The emergence of the heroic American “cowboy” has left Indigenous people to be the opposing enemies within music, movies, and other forms of media. The term “rhinestone” is representative of diamonds, gold, or land, all things settlers were looking to obtain when originally expanding the United States’ territory and partaking in the mass genocide of thousands of Indigenous peoples. The most pertinent, yet ambiguous, portion of the song is the miniature segment, or outro, that comes after MF Doom’s recited lyrics. It elaborates on how “[t]hey were the foes of society” and/or “[t]he villains,” which, in this case, pertains to how Indigenous people have been horrifically personified within the aforementioned forms of media (Madvillain). Regardless, Tony’s subconscious recognition of this absence of Indigenous individuals as positive role models propel him to seek a sense of belonging through the outlets that are readily available.

MF Doom is an ideal public figure for Tony to idolize due to how the artist physically presents himself, his influence within popular culture, and how he is viewed by both society and other artists within the music industry. His physical appearance as an artist is atypical, portraying himself as a masked “super villain” (personifying Marvel Comics’ Doctor Doom). This is much different from other modern Hip-Hop artists who are mentioned 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 due to his physical characteristics. This

also serves as a reference to much of the media and social propaganda that has occurred throughout American history, as Indigenous peoples have been commonly illustrated as the enemies or “villains.”

Although Tony is viewed in a similar manner, as an outsider, outcast or “other,” he is able to use language to overcome his disability in order to be accepted by the general population. He embraces being brash and blunt by remaining honest with everyone he encounters. Orange even has Tony doing a first-person narration of his own story, stating how “[he has] this big body to help [him] since [his] face [has] it so bad,” which directly relates to “The Drome” (19). Tony even displays confidence and knowledge regarding his own personal being by capitalizing on his abnormal facial features, using them as a protective mask and remaining indifferent to the ways people react when seeing him. Just like MF Doom, Tony does not care about stereotypes or how other people perceive him and faces his challenges head on. Sheffield would describe this as owning up to one’s characteristics and “construct[ing] their own sense of a ‘real’ identity outside of the one shaped through US history and the mass media” (100). Furthermore, this conscious altering of identity provides some evidence of the younger Indigenous peoples’ dissociation from modern popular culture, simultaneously showing the necessity of assimilation for the sake of survival.

Once again, both MF Doom and Tony have an acute understanding of survival through assimilation that stems from adapting to their surrounding environments to continuously earn a living in their respective occupations. The difference between them is that the latter is not a gifted or talented musician, leading him to pursue a job as 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” (5). Unfortunately, Tony, like

many other Indigenous peoples, belongs to a lower socio-economic class and does not have access to the same infrastructure as someone who is granted a better education. This makes many Indigenous people, including Tony, easily susceptible to engaging in illegal activities to sustain a regular source of income, which directly results from their oppression and is 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. MF Doom is an independent artist who carefully chooses who he works with so that he can maintain a steady income and relevance within the music industry. Tony, on the other hand, survives by distributing multiple kinds of narcotics, such as marijuana and cocaine, in order to try to rise above the poverty line. Some would argue that this is not Tony's only option, and with proper influence and guidance, Hip-Hop itself could be "used as a positive means of identity (re)construction" (Sheffield 99). Tony though, much like MF Doom, adapts to life by assimilating himself into an informal economy as a means of survival, which somehow prevents him from enacting in more dangerous and self-destructive behaviors.

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 is able to exploit both the past and present difficulties that ultimately condemns Indigenous people to a state of abject alterity within America. Through his use of intertextual references, Orange is able to home 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 Native/Indigenous plight to be forgotten and demonstrates the impact just one member within the community can make even within contemporary times.

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