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### Beyond the Reflection: Constructing the Whole from Scattered Pieces

Loud noises escape my phone. Angry, I know it's 7:00 a.m. Eyes struggling to stay open, I start my morning like most teenagers do: scroll through my Instagram feed, text a few friends, and watch TikToks before beginning the long 8-hour school day. Entering the bathroom, I turn on the light, eyes squinting as if I have looked directly into the sun. Nevertheless, eyes push through the pain and immediately gravitate to the mirror. Hair: curly, brown with hints of blonde, laying a few inches below the shoulder. Skin: milk chocolate brown. Facial features: Caramel eyes and long, bushy, eyebrows; a slightly curved nose and full, rosy lips. A few freckles below the eyes and a mole on the cheek. I see a whole, normal-looking human. I blink and suddenly I am walking in the school hallways. My teachers see a whole, normal-looking human. My friends see a whole, normal-looking human. My peers see a whole, normal-looking human. So why do I feel incomplete?



In Tommy Orange's *There There*, Native American identity is explored, concealed, and highlighted through a focus on twelve characters. Some feel connected to their roots and some feel like a part of them is missing. Tony Loneman, a Native American man born with fetal alcohol syndrome, appears different than others. At the age of six, his life is changed; in the mirror, he "saw [his] face in the dark reflection there. It was the first time [he] saw it. [His] own

face, the way everyone else saw it” (15). Does a reflected image accurately encompass a person? Because of a minuscule, dark reflection, Tony is forced to enter the realities of life at a young age—a life filled with constant thoughts about his appearance and a yearning to find his reflection any chance he gets. He sees himself in the way others view him instead of seeing beyond the mirror. Beyond the surface. His reflection has “fucked with [him] since the day [he] found it there on the TV, staring back at [him] like a fucking villain” (16). Insecurities exacerbated, physical discomfort rising, and negative thoughts of appearing deformed begin to shape Tony’s identity. Embracing his syndrome is not an option anymore; his former friendly face and naiveness to his syndrome have quickly become his enemy. He allows his face to define his identity. The syndrome to define his identity. The authentic version of Tony is buried beneath the mirror's reflection as Tony is fighting to hide the sense of incompleteness he feels, but it is fighting back.



“There's something there, behind that stupid glazed over stare... He can almost see it, which is why he keeps looking, keeps standing in front of the mirror” (122).



Double Consciousness: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” - W.E.B Du Bois



I never knew what it felt like to be whole—someone who has a complete sense of identity. Half white. Half Black. Society has frightened me to allow the two to coexist in my life. I can’t have too many White friends or I am considered White-washed. But I can’t talk too

“Black” or I am considered ghetto. I can’t style myself in the latest trends or I am trying to be like every other White girl. Two people are living inside my one, normal-looking body. Societal pressures, standards, and expectations have shaped my identity. Masking seemed like the only logical solution. I acted one way for my Black peers and a different way for my White peers. As cowardly as it sounds, it took the stress off of me to pick a side. I was a whole on the outside only filled with jumbled pieces within, struggling to merge them as one.



“An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

- W.E.B. Du Bois



I am Black. I identify as Black. I am proud to be Black. To my Black peers, I fall short in the classification of being Black because I don’t act like a “normal” Black person. Inevitably in school, I received the words “You’re not really Black” countless times from Black students. If I’m not Black what am I? As I grew up people would tell me how to be more Black and how to abandon the white side of my identity. What if I wanted to be both? What am I thinking, there was no both. I was either in or I was out.

*You have to talk with extra slang. You can’t talk properly. Shorten your words. Wear a bonnet. For an extra point wear a bonnet outside of the house. Wear your hair down. Don’t do any White girl hairstyles. You have to listen to rap music. Say the N-word. Make sure you don’t have too many White friends. And don’t act like the private school kids. Get long acrylic nails. Do your edges. Oh, and you have to eat cultural foods. Specifically Fufu.*

I didn't check all the boxes. I didn't *want* to check all the boxes. If I did, it wouldn't be me. Although I knew these aspects of Black identity weren't me, I convinced myself that because I didn't reflect the entire list, I wasn't allowed to associate with being Black. But my skin color wasn't White. I was stripped of an aspect of my identity merely due to the stereotypical standards of race. I didn't want to portray stereotypes, I just wanted to be me. With my Blackness slipping through my fingers and disintegrating into thin air, it felt impossible to ever be whole—none of the pieces within me connected while I still appeared whole, normal, and Black on the outside. I was stuck in the middle—lost, abandoned, and hopeless. I didn't fit in. I was incomplete.



The caged bird sings  
 with a fearful trill  
 of things unknown  
 but longed for still  
 and his tune is heard  
 on the distant hill  
 for the caged bird  
 sings of freedom. (Angelou 15-22)



Orvil is Indian.

Orvil Red Feather, a fourteen-year-old Native American boy, feels alienated from his identity. Lost in the darkness, yearning to find acceptance from his heritage, he is only surrounded by family members who have created a wall between themselves and their Native identity. As a result, the only source Orvil has on how to “be” Native is through the internet.

Filled with thousands of videos and photos, the internet teaches Orvil how to express his cultural identity at the cost of his authenticity. He feels as if he has to adapt to all customs and practices to truly fit into the Native group. Orvil believes he has to “dress like an Indian, dance like an Indian, even if it is an act, even if he feels like a fraud the whole time, because the only way to be Indian in this world is to look and act like an Indian. To be or not to be Indian depends on it” (122). Orvil is either in, or out. There is no in-between. Society has secluded, prevented, and intimidated him from attempting to break the “standard” Nativeness. There is no one correct way to express identity, but the pressures Orvil feels cause him to feel like a fake. An imposter. A con. Even if he doesn’t want to reflect these specific aspects of Native identity, society is inadvertently forcing him to change who he is to keep the Native category aligned. He appears as Native on the outside, but that isn’t enough. To be Native is to perform cultural dances. To be Native is to dress in original clothing. To be Native... Portraying stereotypes was inherently taught to Orvil through the internet and seen as the only proper way due to his great aunt's resistance to teach their culture. Beneath this mask is a naive boy longing to find a connection to his roots, unknowing of the multitude of ways identity can be expressed.



Edwin is Indian.

Edwin, a half-native young man, faces the struggles of balancing a multidimensional identity. Pulled between two sides like a game of tug-of-war, one side will eventually gain more power. Similar to Orvil, the internet has been Edwin's source of how to be Native. Video, after video, after video, Edwin learns “[he is] not Native enough... Every possible way [he thinks] that it might look for [him] to say [he’s] Native seems wrong” (72). Why does society so strongly influence minorities and dictate the way they express themselves? Looking Native isn’t enough.

Being his own type of Native is unacceptable. There is no group for Edwin. Lost, hopeless, and secluded, Edwin is stuck in the middle filled with feelings of confusion about where he truly belongs. Insecurities rising, self-doubt in the essence, and ongoing thoughts of who he is shape Edwin's identity. It all seems wrong for Edwin. It all seems prohibited. He feels he is losing his Nateness, a huge component of his identity, merely because of fears of expressing cultural identity in the wrong ways.

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"Build bridges, not walls. Build bridges, not walls. Build bridges, not walls," my brother says.

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I am incomplete. Isolation is not the answer. But it is the only way to accept that I may not fit into either group. What is wrong with me? Just pick a side. I can't abandon one of the two, I have adapted to a life of masking my identity. Having two people in one body. It seems far too late to take off the mask, but I just want to be me.

Build bridges, not walls. Slowly I had to find some way to connect my Black and White heritage instead of choosing seclusion. I had to look past the surface, delve within me, and undergo a trial-and-error process.

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Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.) (Whitman 1324-1236)

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Blue, formerly known as Crystal, is a Native woman raised by a White family. She has always struggled balancing both of her identities. Does she embrace the Whiteness she grew up with, or try to be Native merely because of her dark skin color? Abandoning her White identity seemed like the only logical solution until “Blue tilts the rearview down and looks at herself. She sees a version of herself she thought was long gone, someone she left behind, ditched for her real Indian life on the rez. Crystal. From Oakland. She's not gone. She's somewhere behind Blue's eyes in the rearview” (236). No matter how hard she tries to desert her White identity and create a wall between her two personas, both will forever be present. Abandoning is not the solution. Blue needed a mirror to discover her two identities could coexist. She now knows someone is roaming beneath the surface, craving to come out. Her identity is multidimensional and not limited to her life on the reservation and having Indian names; she will always be Crystal from Oakland no matter how hard she tries to renounce it. Blue is Indian. Crystal is Indian. She is Indian.

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### 1.) Hair.

I have a love-hate relationship with my long curly hair. It is hard to take care of and is either a hit or miss for how it turns out. No inbetween. Regardless, I have learned to love and appreciate the process I go through with styling my hair. I love the diverse styles, the long intense process of styling, and I love how I can wear Black or White hairstyles proudly. Hair down, side pony, knotless braids, messy bun, slick back, or flat ironed hair. I have done it all. I have loved it all. I don't limit myself to one hairstyle because that doesn't encompass my entire identity. I have found ways to merge my Blackness and Whiteness through my hair. The way I wear my hair doesn't make me more or less Black. It simply makes me, me.

I blink. It's 7:00 am, I hop out of bed and gradually make my way into the bathroom. I am brushing my teeth and washing my face, contemplating how I should style my hair this morning. Hair up or down? Hair down. Quickly, I jump in the shower so my hair is fully soaked. I separate my hair into small sections, delicately brush each section, and add my cream. I then add gel and finish off the routine by flipping my hair over and putting in mousse to achieve a full, shiny, look. Will it turn out? I will patiently wait and see. If it doesn't, I can try something completely different tomorrow. My hair is versatile and I love it. First bridge formed: Black and White hairstyles.

## 2.) Music.

I enjoy almost all types of music. Rap, Jazz, R and B, Hip-hop, the list goes on. Normally people make playlists for certain moods. For example, someone's hype-up playlist may consist primarily of rap music and touches of throwbacks. I only have one playlist. For all moods, with all artists. My favorite artist, SZA, takes up a majority of this playlist. Coming in a close second is the infamous Taylor Swift. "The one person you cannot listen to is Taylor Swift," one of my Black friends tells me. My love for Taylor Swift's music certainly comes from my White side, but why hide it? I can embrace my love for Taylor just as much as I embrace my love for SZA. My music taste doesn't make me more or less Black. It simply makes me, me.

I blink. Driving to school, "Love Galore" by SZA finishes. I catch my breath after just screaming every lyric. I patiently wait to hear the next song as it's a toss-up of any genre of music. "Exile" by Taylor Swift I see on the Apple CarPlay screen. A smile gradually appears on my face. I am ready to sing. Second bridge formed: Black and White music.

## 3.) Speech.



I love to talk. Bro, bruh, bet, yo, what up, appreciate you. The foolish list goes on. Good morning, Mr. and Mrs., thank you, hello. Speech taught by my parents for me to show respect to others. With my two types of speech ingrained in my brain, I automatically used my slang with Black people and my properness with White people. But why? The two can coexist. “You talk like all those White Private school kids” I frequently hear from my basketball teammates. Even with being made fun of, I am proud of the properness of my voice. Partly due to societal expectations, proper language assists me in achieving my lifelong goals, rather than using stereotypical wording to be accepted as Black. “You are only Black if you say the N-word” I hear from my Black peers at school. Being Black to me isn’t using a word that degraded our ancestors. It isn’t talking in a specific way. I didn’t want the N-word to be my key to finding acceptance from Black people and having a mask find permanence on my face. I formed my own group combining my Black slang, and White properness to express both sides of my identity. I now choose when I want to speak in a particular way, regardless of the race I am around. I allowed my voices to merge into one type of speech—my own type of speech. The way I speak doesn’t make me more or less Black. It simply makes me, me.

I blink. It’s 9:45 am, I am walking through the hallways of Breck, Starbucks cup in hand, greeting my friends and teachers. “What’s up,” I say to my White friend while throwing up a peace sign. “Good morning amazing human,” I say to one of my Black friends. Each greeting is different. Each greeting is special. And each greeting is unapologetically me. Third bridge formed: Black and white speech.

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as i grew and matured

i became more sensible

and decided i would  
 settle down  
 and just become  
 a sweet inspiration. (Giovanni 14-19)

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Neither my Black side nor my White side reflects me alone. Beneath the almost permanent mask was a girl who was multiracial. I finally removed the mask I wore daily; and, a joyous young girl—so desperately waiting—emerged from beneath my skin. I created my own group that allowed my Blackness and Whiteness to happily coincide. They don't have to be opposites. They don't have to fight. They don't have to overpower one another. My Black and White sides can merge each piece of my identity into a beautiful mosaic of colors and attributes. I feel connected. I feel like myself. I feel complete.

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A Powwow. A Native American ceremony involving feasting, dancing, and singing. An event bringing together Natives—mixed, full, people close to their roots, people longing to be closer to their origins, the list goes on. For Tony, a man who views himself as nothing more than a villain, is unable to uncover his authentic identity—beneath all the layers—at the Powwow. It came to a point where it was too late to remove his mask.

When Tony gets shot at the Powwow, seeing the last moments of his life, he steps out of his body as if he were a ghost. Tony “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” (288). It took Tony to die to realize that he was wearing a mask his entire life. He was an imposter. Not long before the Powwow, Tony saw the start of the progression of his identity in the mirror when

“[he] pulled his regalia out and put it on... walked up to the TV... Looked at [his] face. The drome. [He] didn’t see it there. [He] saw an Indian” (26). Though the removal of his mask and seeing beyond the mirror's surface was just forming, the Powwow only allowed him to come closer to his roots through death. He was more than the drome. He was more than Tony. So worried about his outside appearance and the way others viewed him, the truth was never able to successfully escape the isolation. The specification of Tony remembering that “it was never actually him” stresses how death allowed Tony to comprehend how he was never authentic. Letting Tony, the syndrome, and his inner identity coexist was possible, just never fully examined. Wearing the Regalia was the beginning of unmasking; but instead of continuing the exploration, Tony stands there looking at his dead body, blood seeping out, still portraying the villain from six years of age. This imposter is lying in the grass, motionless, dead, and weak; but, Tony stands over this body understanding how he was capable of being himself. It was too late to change himself in the present, but Tony is at peace.

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“Don’t ever let anyone ever tell you what being Indian means.... You’re Indian because you’re Indian because you’re Indian” (119).

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Societal constructs often create rigid divisions compelling individuals to conform to predetermined groups. In this case, the marginalized groups— Black and Indian— are often not accepted in society due to traumatic historical experiences with White individuals in America. Keeping a tight-knit community often feels safer to non-dominant culture groups. Since White identity is the majority group in our society, marginalized groups do not want White culture invading racial traditions and connections that have formed from trauma and hope. This

close-minded idea is merely based on fear. Fear that history can and will repeat itself. Though fear is an emotion that tends to lead to avoidance, we have to break away from these molds for personal fulfillment. The fear has to lead to change because worrying about a group hinders our ability to find success in life; our identity is boundless and inherently free. The molds embedded into today's society only bring us back to the times in history when separation defined America. There is beauty in undergoing the process of finding our true selves; authenticity is found through diverse pathways and breaking walls.

We have to embrace this journey that is enriched by varied experiences and experimentation with different facets of identity. In essence, we remain innately whole, even when our completeness is temporarily obscured, awaiting the revelation of our authentic selves. It's a special process that we have to seize. No group represents you. Only you represent you. *We just have to be us.*



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