



A Study of the Construction of Tony Loneman's Self in *There There* from the Perspective of Mirror Image

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Abstract: *There There*, the debut novel by Tommy Orange, breaks away from the traditional "homing in plots" often associated with Native American narratives. This work vividly portrays the struggles of urban Native Americans as they navigate cultural heritage and societal prejudice to achieve self-identity and identity reconstruction. From the perspective of Lacan's mirror theory, this paper analyzes the process of self-construction of Tony Loneman in Tommy Orange's novel *There There*. Tony, grappling with fetal alcohol syndrome, undergoes an identity crisis, moving through the chaotic pre-mirror stage, the self-awakening mirror stage, and the identity-reconstructing post-mirror stage. In the pre-mirror stage, Tony is unable to form a coherent self-image through external reflections, existing in a state of "fragmented body". During the mirror stage, he begins to break free from the gaze of the "Other" through Native American traditions, his grandmother's guidance, and the music of Daniel Dumile, actively constructing his self-identity. In the post-mirror stage, Tony's heroic actions during the shooting at the Powwow mark the culmination of his self-identity, transcending the dependency of the mirror stage and achieving a reconstruction of subjectivity. Tony's struggle not only reveals the identity crisis and self-redemption of individuals within multicultural contexts but also offers profound insights into the identity struggles of Native Americans in the face of modernization.

Keywords: mirror image; postindian; identity construction; *There There*

1. Introduction

Tommy Orange, a pioneering voice among the new generation of Native American writers, is best known for his works *There There* and *Wandering Stars*. Breaking away from the traditional "homing in plots" that often stereotype Native Americans, Orange shifts his focus to the authentic experiences of urban Native Americans and the social issues they face. His novel *There There*, which won the Hemingway Award and the American Book Award in 2019, employs postmodern narrative techniques to depict three generations of distinct yet interconnected urban Native Americans.^[1] Shaped by historical trauma, cultural heritage, and family dynamics, these characters strive to construct their identities while preserving their traditions.

In 1492, Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) arrived in the New World and believed that he had reached the East Indies, and referred to the indigenous people he encountered as "Indios" (Indians). From then on, Native Americans endured violent massacres. By the 1950s, Western colonizers implemented relocation and assimilation policies, which were acts of cultural erasure and exploitation. Forced to leave their homelands, Native Americans struggled to survive in urban communities, where they faced cultural conflicts, discrimination, social isolation, and challenges such as housing insecurity, educational disparities, and health issues. Disconnected from their ancestral lands and traditions, the community structures and values of urban Native Americans were severely disrupted, often leading to identity crises and dilemmas. Modern Native American writer Gerald Vizenor proposed the concept of "Survivance," which emphasizes a "vivid, active, and creative presence." This "presence" involves not only physical participation but also the active construction of cultural expression and identity beyond the passive definitions imposed by others.^[2]

There There holds significant relevance for the survival and development of ethnic minorities and has recently become a focal point of international research. Studies often explore themes of necropolitics^[3], the living conditions of Native Americans,^[4] and historical legacies.^[5-6] However, this paper adopts the perspective of Lacan's mirror theory to analyze Tony Loneman's journey through three mirror stages. Initially, Tony's self-construction is hindered by fetal alcohol syndrome. During the mirror stage, he overcomes his identity crisis through the "survivance" of Native culture and the support of his family and community, actively building his self-identity. Ultimately, during the shooting at the Powwow, Tony achieves identity reconstruction and self-recognition. This analysis not only deepens the understanding of Tony's individual identity reconstruction but also prompts profound reflections on the fate of contemporary Native Americans and the construction of individual identity within a multicultural context.

2. The Mirror Stage

Jacques Lacan, the renowned French psychoanalyst and founder of postmodern psychoanalysis, introduced the "mirror theory" in 1936. This theory defines the mirror experience as any conscious state that blurs the boundaries between reality



and imagination, and it has been widely applied in literary criticism. Through observation, Lacan noted that a newborn infant exists as an "undifferentiated" and "non-subjective" being. However, between 6 to 18 months of age, the infant reaches the first critical turning point in its development—the "mirror stage." Lacan proposed that the human psyche evolves through three distinct phases: the pre-mirror stage, the mirror stage, and the post-mirror stage. He elaborated as follows: (1) Initially, the infant perceives the reflection in the mirror as a real object, unable to distinguish between the image and itself, or between the image of others and others themselves. The infant cannot separate itself from external objects, and its sense of self is conflated with others. (2) Later, the infant realizes that the reflection is not a real object but merely an image of another. This leads to a separation from the mother, as the infant no longer sees itself and the mother as a unified whole. From this point, the infant begins to differentiate the image from others and from their reality. (3) Finally, the infant realizes that the reflection is its own image. It learns to distinguish itself from its reflection and begins to develop a sense of self.

2.1 The Pre-Mirror Stage: The Chaotic Initial State of Tony Loneman's Identity

The pre-mirror stage refers to the psychological state of an infant before the formation of self-awareness. During this phase, the infant has not yet developed a sense of self through mirrors or other external mediums, existing in a state of the "fragmented body," unable to distinguish between self and the external world.^[8] This chaotic state is vividly embodied in Tommy Orange's novel *There There* through the character Tony Loneman, whose struggle with self-identity, particularly his psychological state before the mirror stage. It manifests that he lacks self-awareness. Jacques Lacan posits that infants begin to form self-awareness during the mirror stage, typically between 6 to 18 months.^[8] However, Tony's self-awareness does not develop healthily in his early years. Instead, due to congenital condition (fetal alcohol syndrome) and the impact of societal gaze on individual identity, his self-identity becomes fragmented, leading to a failure in constructing a coherent sense of self.

Tony Loneman, a central character in Tommy Orange's *There There*, is born with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), caused by his mother's alcohol consumption during pregnancy. This condition affects his facial features and cognitive abilities, giving him a distinct appearance and causing him to perform poorly on intelligence tests. Tony's first realization of his difference occurs during a childhood experience at a park. While playing with his friend Mario in a sandpit, Mario asks him, "Why's your face look like that?" This moment marks Tony's initial self-awareness. Later, he sees his reflection in a black TV screen, clearly recognizing his difference from others. Upon returning home, his grandmother Maxine tells him that he has fetal alcohol syndrome: "My mom drank when I was in her, she told me real slow that I have fetal alcohol syndrome. All I heard her say was Drome." FAS causes his facial features to be different from others, leading society to often perceive him as "abnormal" or a "monster." In Lacan's theory, infants in the pre-mirror stage cannot form a complete sense of self through mirrors or external mediums, existing in a state of the "fragmented body," which further deepens Tony's identity crisis.^[8] Tony constructs the concept of "Drome" in his mind, plunging into profound confusion and struggle over his identity. He often stares at his reflection in the mirror, noting, "My eyes droop like I'm fucked up, like I'm high, and my mouth hangs open all the time. There's too much space between each of the parts of my face—eyes, nose, mouth, spread out like a drunk slapped it on reaching for another drink." These features make him stand out, and Tony faces constant rejection and discrimination due to his unique appearance. He gradually realizes that his face is the primary reason for others' prejudice: "People look at me then look away when they see I see them see me." This experience of being avoided makes him acutely aware of his difference, feeling like an outcast in society. In the mirror, Tony does not see an idealized self but an image deemed "abnormal" by society. This fragmented body state with "Drome" prevents him from forming a healthy self-identity, instead trapping him in self-loathing and unconfidence. "My face is the Drome. It's my curse and my power. The Drome is my mom and why she drank, it's the way history lands on a face." This complex interplay of emotions reflects his chaotic self-awareness under the dual influence of physical difference and social exclusion. He seeks his place in society but remains bound by the labels imposed by his physical traits, struggling to form a coherent identity.

Tony's identity struggle can also be seen as a regression to the pre-mirror stage. In Lacan's theory, the pre-mirror stage is a phase where the individual has not yet formed self-awareness.^[7] However, Tony, unable to achieve a complete self-identity through the mirror stage, returns to the "fragmented state" in the pre-mirror stage to some extent. His self-identity remains perpetually incomplete, unable to fully integrate into society or accept himself. This chaotic state leaves Tony in a marginalized position throughout the novel, unable to find a sense of belonging.

2.2 The Mirror Image: Identity Construction Struggling Under the Gaze of the "Other"

The influence of Daniel Dumile on Tony Loneman is deeply connected to Lacan's concept of the mirror stage. Lacan points that the mirror stage is a critical moment when an individual forms their initial self-identity through external reflections or the gaze of the "Other".^[8] However, Dumile, through the diversity of his musical personas, provides Tony with symbolic tools to re-examine his self-identity. When Dumile appears as MF DOOM or Metal Face Doom, "The MF stands for Metal Face. He is my favorite rapper. Doom wears a metal mask and calls himself a villain," he wears a metal mask inspired by the Marvel character Doctor Doom, who also hides his permanently scarred face behind a mask.^[9] Dumile's mask not only conceals his true self but also symbolizes a transcendence of trauma. Lacan emphasizes that the mirror in the mirror stage is not only a medium for self-identity but also a carrier of the Other's gaze.^[8] By creating a mask, Dumile successfully detaches himself from his real-life trauma, constructing a new artistic identity. This multiplicity of identities inspires Tony, making him realize that self-identity is not fixed but can be reshaped through symbolic reconstruction. When Tony hears Dumile's lyrics, "Got more soul than a sock with a hole," he feels that fetal alcohol syndrome does not define him. Just as Dumile controls his image through the mask, Tony begins to understand that his physical features are only a part of his identity instead of the whole. It allows him to re-examine himself and attempt to

reconstruct his identity through symbolic reflection in the mirror.

Meanwhile, Tony's grandmother Maxine and Native American traditions play a crucial role in his self-identity construction, echoing Lacan's theory of the influence of the "Other" on individual self-identity. Maxine is not only Tony's familial anchor but also his guide into the mirror stage. Through patient guidance, she helps Tony confront his condition and rebuild his confidence: "Maxine told me I am a medicine person. She said people like me are rare, and that when we come along, people better know we look different because we are different. To respect that." When Tony faces prejudice and discrimination at school, Maxine repeatedly transfers him to new schools to find a more nurturing environment. Additionally, Maxine encourages Tony to read works by Native authors like Louise Erdrich: "Maxine makes me read to her before she goes to sleep...something you could not feel before reading it, that makes you feel less alone, and like it is not gonna hurt as much anymore." By reading to his grandmother, Tony alleviates his feelings of loneliness and inferiority. Lacan argues that the guidance of the "Other" is crucial as individuals enter the mirror stage,^[8] and Maxine, through her guidance, helps Tony to regain confidence. She teaches Tony about tribal rituals, the heroic deeds of ancestors, and the Native American reverence for nature. Tony has a sense of belonging and identity by these cultural symbols. For instance, Tony wears traditional Native attire and takes the subway to attend a Powwow. Along the way, people stare at him, but this time, the gaze feels different: "He is used to being stared at, but this is different." Now, Tony is no longer seen as an "outsider" and no longer feels inferior and lonely. Under the friendly gazes of others, Tony feels a sense of belonging and pride: "But people love to see the pretty history." At the subway station, an elderly woman approaches him out of curiosity about Native traditions. By appearing in public in traditional attire, Tony takes an active role in shaping his cultural expression and identity, moving beyond passive definitions. Through engaging with Native traditions and community activities, Tony actively constructs his cultural expression, achieving what Gerald Vizenor terms "survivance." Therefore, Tony's process of self-awareness can be seen as a reenactment of the mirror stage. During this phase, individuals construct their self-image through external reflections (the gaze of the "Other" or societal feedback).^[8] Facing social prejudice, Tony gradually breaks free from passive "mirroring" and begins actively shaping his identity. Native traditions and music become vital mediums for his self-construction, helping him to break away from the gaze of the "Other". By wearing regalia at the Powwow, Tony not only showcases his cultural identity but also challenges the public stereotypes. It just likes an infant recognizing itself in the mirror during the mirror stage; Tony redefines his identity through the reflection of cultural symbols. Although others view Native culture as a curious "historical relic", Tony no longer passively accepts these external reflections but actively guides how others perceive him. It demonstrates his control over his self-identity and his reconfiguration of his self-image during the mirror stage. As Lacan notes, the mirror stage is a pivotal period when individuals move from fragmented self-awareness to holistic identity.^[8] Through displaying his cultural identity, Tony gradually realizes that fetal alcohol syndrome and his Native heritage are only parts of his self-construction. In this way, Tony completes the preliminary construction of his self-identity through the mirror's reflection, laying the groundwork for further self-development.

2.3 Post-Mirror Stage: Identity Reconstruction in Crisis and Rebirth

On the day of the Powwow ceremony, an incident became a pivotal turning point in Loneman's life. This event marked Loneman's entry into what Lacan termed the "post-mirror stage," a phase where individuals move beyond simple self-image identification and engage in more complex subjectivity construction.^[8] Previously, Loneman, eager to prove himself, had strayed down a misguided path, thinking, "Maybe I will do something one day, and everybody is gonna know about me. Maybe that is when I will come to life." His attempt to gain recognition through violence and crime was a classic manifestation of the mirror stage—seeking self-validation through external reflections (the gaze of others).^[8] However, during the crisis of the shooting, Loneman's behavior and psyche underwent a fundamental transformation.

When Charles points his gun at Octavio, chaos erupts. Loneman's first instinct was no longer to flee or passively accept the situation but to actively charge into the heart of the turmoil. This act symbolizes his transcendence of the mirror stage's dependency, entering the self-construction phase of the post-mirror period. For instance, "but he feels harder than anything that might come at him, speed, heat, metal, distance, even time." In his confrontation with Charles, Loneman displays extraordinary courage and resilience. Despite severe injuries, he rushes toward Charles, striving to stop the violence. It indicates that Loneman no longer rely solely on the mirror of others to define himself but began to reshape his identity through action.

At this life-and-death moment, an unusual calm and steady strength emerged within Loneman, driving him to break through all obstacles. For example, "Tony means to sink through anything that gets in his way." This psychological state can be seen as a hallmark of the post-mirror stage—where individuals liberate themselves from the constraints of the mirror and enter a more autonomous state of subjectivity. As he lunged at Charles, Loneman was no longer a lost youth ensnared by violence and crime but a fearless warrior resisting violence and injustice. This shift means that Loneman has moved beyond the self-identification of the mirror stage and begins redefining himself through action.

In his final moments, Loneman's consciousness returns to a memory from when he is four years old, sitting on the floor playing with Transformers. This recollection symbolizes a reexamination of the origins of his self-identity. The Transformers' line—"We are made of metal, made hard, able to take it. We were made to transform. So if you get a chance to die, to save someone else, you take it."—became a core metaphor for Loneman's post-mirror self-identity. He realizes that the self is not a fixed reflection but a subject capable of constant transformation through action and choice.

In this process, Loneman gradually distinguishes between the mirror and the self. According to Lacan's theory, individuals in the post-mirror stage move beyond reliance on the mirror of others but construct a more complex subjectivity through interactions with others and society.^[7] Loneman has once strayed, seeking validation through robbery and crime. However,

after facing life-and-death trials, he realize that sacrificing himself to save others and becoming a hero is the true proof of self. This transformation marks Loneman's transition from the mirror stage to the post-mirror period. He no longer depends on the mirror of others to define himself but reconstructs his identity through action and choice.

Ultimately, through this life-and-death ordeal, Loneman completes his transformation from a lost soul to a Native American warrior seeking redemption and rebirth. He is no longer a passive recipient of others' reflections but an active agent who reconstructs his identity through deliberate actions and choices. This process vividly embodies Lacan's theory of the post-mirror stage—where individuals transcend the dependency of the mirror stage and enter a more autonomous and complex phase of subjectivity construction.

3. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the process of self-construction of Tony Loneman in Tommy Orange's novel *There There* by Lacan's mirror theory. Tony's identity construction evolves through three stages—pre-mirror, mirror, and post-mirror—from initial chaos to self-identification. It not only reveals the identity crisis and self-redemption of individuals within multicultural contexts but also offers profound insights into the identity struggles of Native Americans during urbanization and modernization.

In the pre-mirror stage, Tony, afflicted with fetal alcohol syndrome, experiences an identity crisis, embodying what Lacan describes as the "fragmented body." Unable to form a coherent self-awareness through external reflections, he constructs a distorted self-image under social gaze and discrimination. This stage symbolizes the identity loss of Native Americans under historical trauma and social prejudice, reflecting the pre-mirror phase where individuals can not distinguish between self and other. In the mirror stage, Tony gradually breaks free from the gaze of the "Other" through Native American traditional culture, his grandmother's guidance, and the music of Daniel Dumile, actively constructing his self-identity. This phase aligns with Lacan's "mirror stage," where individuals begin to form self-awareness through external reflections (the gaze or feedback of others).^[8] By these, Tony redefines his identity. In the post-mirror stage, during the Powwow shooting, Tony becomes a hero to save others which marks the culmination of his self-identification. He transcends the dependency of the mirror stage, entering what Lacan terms the "post-mirror period," where individuals reconstruct their subjectivity through action and choice.^[8] Tony sacrifice himself to save others which not only affirms his personal identity but also celebrates the resilience of Native American culture. This stage symbolizes how Native Americans, under the dual pressures of history and reality, achieve identity reconstruction through self-sacrifice and redemption.

Through Tony's journey, Orange not only highlights the survival struggles of urban Native Americans in contemporary society but also demonstrates how they achieve self-redemption and identity reconstruction through cultural "survance" strategies. Tony's ultimate sacrifice affirms not only his personal identity but also the enduring spirit of Native American culture. His story reminds us that the identity struggles of Native Americans are not merely individual but are central to the broader question of how Indians maintains traditional culture and reconstruct self-identity during modernization. Through literature, Native American writers continually challenge mainstream stereotypes to redefine Native identity. Tony's process of identity construction provides a model for self-identification among contemporary Native Americans and offers profound insights into individual identity construction within multicultural contexts.

In conclusion, Tony Loneman's identity struggle is not only a central theme in *There There* but also a significant topic widely explored in Native American literature. Through Tony's story, we witness how Native Americans, confronting historical trauma and social prejudice, achieve self-construction through traditional culture and familial support. This deepens our understanding of the Native American experience and provides valuable lessons for individual identity construction in multicultural settings.

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