

Article

Keeping It Unreal: Rap, Racecraft, and MF Doom

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Abstract: Focusing on the masked rapper MF Doom, this article uses Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields's concept of "racecraft" to theorize how the insidious fiction called "race" shapes and reshapes popular "Black" music. Rap is a mode of racecraft that speculatively binds or "crafts" historical musical forms to "natural," bio-geographical and -cultural traits. The result is a music that counts as authentic and "real" to the degree that it sounds "Black," on the one hand, and a "Blackness" that naturally expresses itself in rap, on the other. The case of MF Doom illustrates how racialized peoples can appropriate ascriptive practices to craft their own identities against dominant forms of racecraft. The ideological and political work of "race" is not only oppressive but also gives members of subordinated "races" a means of critique, rebellion, and self-affirmation—an ensemble of counter-science fictions. Doom is a remarkable case study in rap and racecraft because when he puts an anonymous metal mask over the social mask that is his ascribed "race," he unbinds the latter's ties while simultaneously revealing racecraft's durability.

Keywords: race; racecraft; rap; hip-hop; science fiction; MF Doom; King Geedorah; Viktor Vaughn; Doctor Doom; KMD

The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.

—Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (p. 1)

Hip hop's realness skids along a slippery pathway between sincerity and authenticity, which means that its *real* is almost always contradictory and internally conflictual.

—John L. Jackson, Jr., *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (p. 178)



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1. Introduction

American musical genres are soundtracks of "race." This is what Montero Lamar Hill, popularly known as Lil Nas X, inadvertently revealed with his hit song "Old Town Road" in 2019. Initially listed on *Billboard's* Hot Country Songs chart, the song was later excluded from the chart because, in the words of *Billboard's* official statement, it "does not embrace enough elements of today's country music to chart in its current version" (Leight 2019). *Billboard* invoked the "elements" of country music as if the entertainment company's decision were simply a matter of form. Such reasoning feigns ignorance about some distinctions that are probably obvious to most people who are familiar with American musics and social identities: Country is white; Lil Nas X is Black. Country is sung by white cowboys (and a few cowgirls); artists like Lil Nas X are more often rappers or R&B singers. Country has guitars and twangs; rap has bass and thumps. As Joshua Clover points out, "millions of listeners . . . understood full well that the exclusion, despite disavowals, derived from the fact that the artist is black . . . and because the song's rhythm track and collage character signify black music, hip-hop in particular" (Clover 2019). After "Old Town Road" was removed from Hot Country Songs, it reached its "proper" place at the top of Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs.

Genre theorists have long argued that genres cannot be adequately defined by listing their necessary and sufficient conditions. In a seminal study, Rick Altman states that "[g]enres are not inert categories shared by all," but are instead constituted by "discursive

claims made by real speakers for particular purposes in specific situations” (Altman 1999, p. 101). In other words, genres are made and unmade by their social and cultural *uses*, i.e., by the historically shifting and competing discourses and practices of producers, marketers, cultural gatekeepers, and consumers, among many others. *Billboard*’s expulsion of “Old Town Road” from the country chart was not a reaction to what country *is* and what Lil Nas X’s song *is not*. Neither sheer sound nor sound patterns create genres; people do. Cultural gatekeepers at *Billboard* drew upon dominant discourses about country and rap to shift the social and cultural uses of “Old Town Road.” Their reclassification of the song was an attempt not to describe the song’s non-country status but to enforce it.

Altman’s focus on the uses of genre still misses Clover’s intuition that popular American music is constituted not only by explicit discourses but also by implicit ways of hearing, seeing, and constructing “race.” “Old Town Road” has an ambiguous relationship to country because it sounds like rap and because rap is “Black” music. To be sure, rap, like jazz and the blues, is deeply rooted in (though not completely defined by) the historical musical traditions and experiences of Americans of African ancestry. In this sense, to speak of the “Blackness” of rap is to make a valid statement about history and some of the peoples who produce and consume the music. But since both popular cultural genres and “races” are social constructions (Ramírez 2019), not natural modes of existence and categorization, neither “Black” music nor “Black” people (nor any other “race”) exist. More precisely, “race” does not exist *ontologically objectively*, independently of minds and practices as a “brute” fact (Searle 1995). Yet, if the “Blackness” of rap does ultimately possess a kind of objectivity, it is because “race” is a pervasive organizing fiction—a worldview, a common sense, an institution with profound practical consequences. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant point out, while “the categories employed to differentiate among human beings along racial lines reveal themselves, upon serious examination, to be at best imprecise, and at worst completely arbitrary,” they are “not meaningless” because “race does ideological and political work” (Omi and Winant 2015, p. 111). Thus, to call “race” a fiction is not to trivialize “race” but to foreground fiction’s ideological, political, and cultural power.

Focusing on the masked rapper Metal Fingers (MF) Doom (or simply “Doom”; see Figure 1), this article uses Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields’s concept of “racecraft” to theorize how the insidious fiction called “race” shapes and reshapes popular “Black” music. The concept of racecraft draws an analogy between racial common sense and practice, on the one hand, and witchcraft, on the other. The Fieldses do not mean that racecraft and witchcraft are irrational superstitions to be dispelled with proper scientific literacy, for even science reproduces racecraft. Rather, racecraft and witchcraft are ensembles of belief and practice that tie together—“craft”—a dense lived reality that actors find plausible and recreate through further belief and practice. The Fieldses write: “Witchcraft and racecraft are imagined, acted upon, and re-imagined, the action and imagining inextricably intertwined. The outcome is a belief that ‘presents itself to the mind and imagination as a vivid truth’” (Fields and Fields 2014, p. 19). Moreover, since the materials with which it stitches social reality are ultimately supersensible and conjectural, racecraft is always speculative, a quotidian form of science fiction. While observable traits like nose and eye shape, hair texture, and skin color may appear to be pure sense data, they become visible markers of a person’s “race” only when linked to speculations about unseen “natural” essences, which themselves are often bound up with speculative geography. The features that constitute a person’s visual “racial” differences are tied to conjectures about their continentally defined psychological, moral, or cultural differences—“the presumed inward, invisible content of that person’s character” (Fields and Fields 2014, p. 207). For example, the Swedish naturalist Linnaeus racecrafted the invisible content of “race” together with skin color and continents in his *Systema Naturae*, an eighteenth-century book that is widely regarded as the first work of “scientific” racial taxonomy. Linnaeus’ four “races” are the “red” and “choleric” Native American, the “white” and “sanguine” European, the “black” and “phlegmatic” African, and the “pale-yellow” and “melancholy” Asian (Gould 2006, p. 404). Today, Linnaeus’ taxonomy can be found wherever pseudo-scientific thinking

about bio-geographical identity is conjoined with speculations about IQ scores, criminality, laziness, religious fanaticism, or propensities for sports or math. Or for certain kinds of music.



Figure 1. Doom Performs in Brussels in 2010. Photo by Kmeron. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic.

Rap is a mode of racecraft that speculatively binds historical musical forms (lyrics, rhyming schemes, drum patterns, etc.) to “natural,” bio-geographical and -cultural traits (inner cities, skin color, hair texture, vocal timbre, spontaneity, fashion, etc.).¹ The result is a “musical metaphysics” (Radano and Bohlman 2001, p. 7): rap counts as “real” and authentic to the degree that it sounds “Black,” while “Blackness” ontologically expresses itself in rap. Yet, while the markers and meanings of “race” are not simply chosen but ascribed (Omi and Winant 2015, p. 22), the case of Doom illustrates how racialized peoples can appropriate ascriptive practices to craft their own identities against dominant forms of racecraft. The ideological and political work of “race” is not only oppressive but also gives members of subordinated “races” a means of critique, rebellion, and self-affirmation—an ensemble of counter-science fictions.²

But if objects resist, so does objectification. In the following sections, I tell how Daniel Dumile, the artist behind Doom’s mask, attempted to critique stereotypes of Blackness, only to run afoul of his record label. The science fiction called “Doom” rebooted Dumile’s musical career and took Dumile’s challenge to racecraft even further. Ultimately, I argue that Doom is a remarkable case study in rap and racecraft because when he puts an anonymous metal mask over the social mask that is his ascribed “race,” he unbinds the latter’s ties while simultaneously revealing racecraft’s durability. In this way, Doom captures the dialectic in science fiction scholar André M. Carrington’s concept of “speculative Blackness” (Carrington 2016): Doom’s Blackness is simultaneously socially fictional and real, itself and

¹ On rap, “race,” and geography, see for example (Forman 2000; Ramsey 2004; Kajikawa 2015).

² On the uses of “race” in science fiction, see for example (Nama 2008; Lavender 2011; Lavender 2019).

not itself, speculatively transcended and reconstituted. For there is no non-contradictory representation of “race” in a racecrafted world.

2. *Black Bastards* or “What a Niggy Know?”

When his musical career began in the late 1980s, rap’s “golden age” and its first decade as a major commercial genre, Daniel Dumile was not Doom but Zev Love X. He was not a solo artist but a member of KMD, a Long-Island-based group that he had founded with his younger brother Dingilizwe Dumile (DJ Subroc). By the time KMD entered the rap scene, the Sugar Hill Gang’s hit record “Rapper’s Delight” (1979) had transformed hip-hop musical culture, centered around DJing and improvisational live performances in Black and Latinx neighborhoods in New York City, into discrete, saleable rap songs with longer and more narratively and thematically diverse lyrics (Kajikawa 2015).³ When KMD’s first studio album, *Mr. Hood*, appeared in 1991, rap had formally changed from “a live performance medium dominated by the DJ” to “a recorded medium dominated by the rappers” (Chang 2007, p. 133). Alongside the evolution of lyricism and narrative came more fully developed rapper personas: Playboy, Partier, Pure Lyricist, Teacher, Gangster, and Political Militant, among others. These were predominantly masculine personas. With the exception of a handful of white rappers and female MCs with personas like Queen Mother, Fly Girl, Sista with Attitude, and Lesbian (Keyes 2004), the most commercially successful and culturally visible rappers were Black men who rapped about their masculinity.

While NWA’s *Straight Outta Compton* (1988) had announced the emergence of west coast gangsta rap, and Public Enemy’s *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back* (1988) and *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990) were high-water marks for Black nationalist rap, *Mr. Hood* was in the tradition of light-hearted, jazzy, Afrocentric rap represented by groups like A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, The Jungle Brothers, and Brand Nubian (who make a guest appearance on the album). “My mother raised us with Islam,” the elder Dumile explained in a 2004 interview. “And then my father, being a teacher, always taught us about our people, about Marcus Garvey and the Honorable Elija Muhammad” (Pappademas 2004, p. 97). Although the album espouses the Five-Percent Nation’s version of Islam and addresses serious issues like drug addiction and racism, *Mr. Hood* is playful. Zev is a Screwball Teacher. The album cover shows a boy playing hop scotch. Songs feature samples from *Sesame Street*. A reviewer for *Spin* magazine nicely captured the album’s mood when he praised its “intelligent, cool wackiness” (Smith 1994, p. 96).

Like the Marvel comics character Doctor Doom, upon whom Daniel Dumile’s post-KMD persona would be modeled, the origin of MF Doom is a tale of tragedy, betrayal, and revenge. Shortly before the completion of KMD’s second album, *Black Bastards* (originally scheduled for release in 1994), Dingilizwe was struck by a car and killed. A year later, the album’s distributor, Elektra, refused to release *Black Bastards* because of its cover art: a drawing by the elder Dumile that depicts the lynching of a Sambo character. Indeed, given Sambo’s historical origins in blackface minstrelsy, the Sambo on the cover of *Black Bastards* could be interpreted as a lynched white performer in blackface.⁴ Once again *Billboard* enters our story in the role of cultural gatekeeper, for it was *Billboard* columnist Terri Rossi who charged the cover art with racism and initiated the controversy around it (Coleman 2014). While the artwork for *Mr. Hood* and related singles had also featured a Sambo character, these images depicted the character with a red strikethrough. The cover of *Black Bastards* negated Sambo more dramatically and controversially by using perhaps the most terroristic practice of white supremacy, lynching, against it. Daniel Dumile later described the purpose of the cover as a rejection of white stereotypes of Blackness: “[The

³ While “rap” and “hip-hop” are often used interchangeably, a stricter usage requires reserving “hip-hop” for the broad culture that encompasses rap, DJing, graffiti, and dancing, and restricting “rap” to the commercial musical genre that emerged from hip-hop culture.

⁴ Tellingly, while the Sambo on the original cover of *Black Bastards* has a white body, the figure has a black body on the cover of the 2001 release. The fact that Dumile changed this detail is further evidence that the first Sambo was represented as a white performer in blackface. Dumile appears to have erred on the side of caution with the 2001 release.

Sambo character] was kind of like our logo, our mascot. We were about deading [getting rid of] the whole stereotype thing. It was a mockery of a mockery. And we took it to the next level on by hanging the dude" (Coleman 2014). Dumile's description of his "mockery of a mockery" is reminiscent of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s account of Black signifyin', a parody that mocks and disrupts through repetition. More precisely, the symbolic lynching was a prime example of what Gates calls the "(re)doubling" logic of Black signifyin', since the lynching reiterated and critiqued a white practice that was already an attempted parody of Blackness (Gates 1988, p. 44). And since the lynching appeared on the album cover and would have been the first thing a customer saw upon purchasing the album, KMD's signifyin' on white racism was an implicit critique of the rap business and its demands on Black artists to play the minstrel role.

In the same interview, Dumile states that Elektra's decision to stop the release of *Black Bastards* was about "more than the cover." The album was notably angrier and more racially pointed than *Mr. Hood* because the Dumile brothers sardonically assumed the ascribed identity of the "Black bastard"—the illegitimate Black child of white America. The album's only single, "What a Nigga Know" (changed to "What a Niggy Know" for radio), begins with a sample from Black nationalist poet Gylan Kain's album *The Blue Gorilla* (1971): "They was a nigga yesterday, they's a nigga today, and they's gonna be a nigga tomorrow!" Thus, if Elektra's decision was indeed about "more than the cover," it was probably a reaction to KMD's politicized Blackness and the latter's potential threat to the company's financial interests. After all, Elektra's parent company, Warner, had just weathered the storm created by Body Count's incendiary "Cop Killer" (1992). Rap's commercial success in the golden age had hinged on its association with Black masculinity, but *Black Bastards* was a reminder that rap was *too* Black if it offended powerful cultural gatekeepers and jeopardized profitability. In the end, Elektra did not want to know what two men racialized as "niggas" might know about racism.

3. "Viktor Vaughn Hid from the World"⁵

Ironically, the album that announced Dumile's rejection of white stereotypes of Blackness cost him a record deal and a chance at a mainstream career because predominantly white executives stereotypically viewed him as an angry and dangerous Black man. Prefiguring today's whites who are offended by the political slogan "Black Lives Matter," Elektra executives interpreted KMD's anti-racist message as an instance of racism. Surely Dumile would return angrier and more vengefully and militantly Black than ever?

Dumile did indeed return, but not as expected. After disappearing from the rap world for several years, Dumile reinvented himself in the late 1990s as the independent rapper MF Doom. He was not simply the old Zev Love X with a metallic mask, which he refused to take off in public. Rather, he had developed an entirely new persona: not the Screwball Teacher nor the Black Bastard but the Supervillain. His voice was huskier than Zev's, his delivery slower. He was still weird—a "clever nerd" (Dumile 2004b)—but his rhymes were denser, filled with intricate alliterations, unexpected double-entendres, and cartoon expressions like "jeepers!" and "ay caramba!". Even listeners who knew that Dumile had previously been Zev might have imagined that the old persona had figuratively died along with KMD. In the words of one reviewer, "[f]or all practical purposes [Zev and Doom] are two different people. The weight of the world has changed [Doom] into a different man" (Juon 2000).

4. "Behind the Mask. You Can't Find Me"

In his debut album as Doom, *Operation: Doomsday* (1999), Dumile portrays Doom as a sympathetic villain who "came to destroy rap" (Dumile 1999b). On the one hand, the album is Dumile's autobiographical story of losing his brother, struggling emotionally and

⁵ This section title and all subsequent section titles are quotations from Doom songs. With the exception of sections three and six, the sources for the quotations are given parenthetically in the subsequent text. The quotations in the titles of sections three and six are from Dumile (2003a).

economically with his loss, and returning to redeem KMD. At the end of the song “?”, Dumile addresses his deceased brother and assures him that “everything is going according to plan, man” (Dumile 1999a). On the other hand, *Operation: Doomsday* is thematically unified by samples from two frame narratives: the hip-hop movie *Wild Style* (1983) and *Fantastic Four* cartoons (Hess 2007, p. 82). The opening track, “The Time We Faced Doom,” begins with a sequence from *Wild Style* in which a graffiti artist refuses to be photographed by a journalist. One of the artist’s friends assures him that a picture in the newspaper will generate fame and fortune, but the artist sides with another friend who warns him that once the journalist “puts his picture in the paper, that’s gonna be the end. Secret exposed. His face for everyone to see, man” (Dumile 1999e). The implication is that Doom is like the graffiti artist; an outcast from mainstream media, Doom has also spurned publicity and chosen to conceal his face to protect the integrity of his art. The second half of the track switches to an episode of the 1967–1968 animated television series *The Fantastic Four* that explains the origins of Doctor Doom, who dons a metal mask after his face is disfigured in a failed science experiment. Doctor Doom blames the leader of the Fantastic Four superhero group, Mr. Fantastic, for the accident. He warns: “I have plotted my revenge on you. Now I shall have it!” The sample also serves as MF Doom’s origin story. Similar to Doctor Doom, Dumile was symbolically “burned” by Elektra when KMD’s experiment with *Black Bastards* went wrong. Donning his own mask as MF Doom, Dumile will now exact his revenge on the rap industry and on shallow, commercially oriented and gangsta rappers who “walk up on me speaking with they stinkin’ mouth/ About this and that, from sneakers to hats to gats” (Dumile 1999c). In this way, the Supervillain becomes an anti-hero who opposes the commodification of hip-hop culture.

Many independent rappers contest mainstream rap by claiming to be more authentically in touch with hip-hop (Vito 2019). Anthropologist John L. Jackson, Jr., notes that “in hip-hop, realness is the most valuable form of cultural capital” (Jackson 2005, p. 176). Doom represents the reverse approach. Instead of “keeping it real,” Doom keeps it *un-real*. In the Marvel universe, Doctor Doom practices magic, can project electricity, and is the ruler of the imaginary nation Latveria. Instead of signifying who Dumile “really” is, Doom’s fantastic nature allows Dumile to deemphasize his body—and, as we will see, his “race”—while foregrounding his lyrical skills. He may often boast of his sexual exploits, but the balding, paunchy Doom lacks the physique and sexual energy of an LL Cool J or 50 Cent. He “wears a mask just to cover the raw flesh,” and while he is a “rather ugly brother,” what matters is that he has “rhymes that’s gorgeous” (Dumile 2004a). In one of his most humorous moments, Doom mocks male rappers who use their bodies to distract from their lack of talent:

To all rappers: shut up with your shutting up
 And keep your shirt on, at least a button-up.
 Yuck! Is they rhymers or strippin’ males?
 Out of work jerks since they shut down Chippendales. (Dumile 2004a)

“Hip-hop tends to be about who’s the flyest, who has the biggest chain,” Doom explains in an interview. “[T]he mask is the opposite of that. It’s like, it don’t matter what he looks like, what race he is. All that matters is the vocals, the spit, the beats, the rhymes” (Westhoff 2006).

The mask enables Dumile to speculate with and play with his identity to such an extent that we might wonder if he still exists behind the mask. Dumile often raps about Doom in the third person, reminding the listener that Doom is a narrative character and that he, Dumile, is the author. But since Dumile never seems to take off the mask or appear in public *as* Dumile, his identity as the performer and author behind Doom is unstable. When Doom raps that he is a “ventriloquist, with his fist in the speaker’s back” (Dumile 1999d), the implication is that we are hearing Dumile’s voice describing how he uses Doom as his puppet. Or is it the other way around? Perhaps Dumile is the “speaker” and it is Doom who is ventriloquizing him. “Where he been?” Doom asks in “Rhinstone

Cowboy” (Dumile 2004c) before answering: “Behind the mask. You can’t find me.”⁶ Even if Dumile is the raw flesh behind Doom’s mask, he nonetheless remains hidden, unfindable, and unknowable. If he appeared on stage without the mask, he would not only cease to be Doom but also perhaps cease to be anyone at all. “If I was to go out there without the mask on, they’d be like, ‘Who the fuck is this?’” (Coates 2009). For the mask does not simply distinguish a real from an imaginary self but rather destabilizes both. Of course, all rap is pretending, no matter how hard rappers might try to close the gap between their musical personas and their biographical selves. Doom is unique not because his identity is performative but because he confounds the gap between performance and reality. The mask of Doom *is* this unstable gap.

As Ta-Nehisi Coates observes, “Dumile, in the guise of MF Doom, did literally what most rappers only do metaphorically: he wore a mask” (Coates 2009). By putting on his “metal face”—another meaning of MF—Doom mimics science fiction’s formal transformation of the figural into the literal. For example, the science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin claims that while in realistic fiction the sentence “He was absorbed in the landscape” suggests a metaphorical enthrallment to the environment, the reader of science fiction can presume that normal reality has been partially suspended and that the sentence might refer to a subject’s literally becoming one with their surroundings (Chu 2010, p. 10). Similarly, Doom literalizes the way that rappers metaphorically wear different identities like theatrical masks. His mask materializes and makes visible the performative fictionality of rap, which opens up the creative space for Dumile to play with additional fantastic personas and weird themes in other albums. In *Vaudeville Villain* (2003) and *Venomous Villain* (2004), Dumile raps as Viktor Vaughn, a name that plays on Doctor Doom’s pre-accident identity as Victor von Doom. In *Take Me To Your Leader* (2003), Dumile morphs into the three-headed monster King Geedorah from *Godzilla* films. In *Mm ... Food* (Dumile 2004a), MF Doom returns with an album-long extended metaphor comparing rap to various cuisines. In perhaps its most radical form, the Doom persona is little more than an idea of signifyin’ and remediation, an impulse to redouble and remix music like Doom does to comics. DJs have created imaginative new Doom albums by combining Doom lyrics with unexpected instrumentals. For example, the DJ Cookin Soul created the album *Doom Xmas* (2018) by mixing Doom acapella tracks with the soundtrack of the 1966 animated movie *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

5. “He Plots Shows Like Robberies”

At his most villainous, Dumile has exploited the ambiguity of the Doom persona by hiring other people to wear the mask. As early as 2007, rumors began to circulate that masked imposters were lip-syncing to pre-recorded Doom lyrics at concerts. At a show in San Francisco, for example, audience members reported that a masked man who was significantly slimmer than Dumile took the stage. The would-be Doom did little more than pace back and forth and gesticulate. When a fan approached the sound technician to complain that the audience could not hear Doom’s microphone, the technician revealed that the microphone was not on and that the performer was not Doom (Westhoff 2007). In 2008, another Doom imitator showed up to the Rock the Bells hip-hop festival in San Bernardino, California, only to be booed off stage by fans chanting “bullshit!” and demanding “real Doom!” (Pérez 2008). Fans were disappointed, but it was not new behavior for the Supervillain. In 2005, Dumile had sent doppelgangers to photo shoots (Westhoff 2007).

Understandably, fans who expected to see Dumile perform as Doom were critical of his trickery. The producer and rapper Kno (Ryan Wisler) spoke for many fans when, in an open letter to Doom, he berated Dumile for “pissing on your most dedicated fans by cheating them out of their hard-earned cash” (Wisler 2008). But Doom is a Supervillain

⁶ While Doom seems to ask “Who can’t find me?” in the recorded song, he tends to use “who” and “you” interchangeably in live performances of the song.

after all, and he had even warned fans in “One Beer” that “he plots shows like robberies” (Dumile 2004d). Although we cannot rule out the possibility that Dumile has simply devised a fraudulent scheme for getting paid for shows without performing, there is a certain aesthetic consistency in the practice. A customer has the right to demand the good or service for which they have paid, but a critic can also rightfully observe that it is paradoxical to demand the “real” Doom when the persona is speculative and calls into question the very significance of appearance and the body. Without admitting to using doppelgangers at shows, Dumile has indirectly defended his chicanery in the same terms in which he has explained Doom’s mask. “When you come to a Doom show,” he recommends, “come expecting to hear music, don’t come expecting to *see*. You never know who you might see. It has nothing to do with a visual thing. Use your mind and think” (Downs 2009). In other words, since the mask is already a critique of appearances that refocuses attention on “the vocals, the spit, the beats, the rhymes,” as Dumile puts it in the interview cited above, fans should expect the same emphasis on music over appearance at shows.

The argument is logical but difficult to accept because it “robs” fans of the very institution of the rap concert. Fans attend rap concerts to see artists perform live and in person. But if Doom has only a speculative relation to Dumile—if Doom is only a performative fiction—then Doom becomes a floating signifier detached from Dumile’s body. Theoretically, “Doom” can never appear “in person” because “Doom” is a sign of a sign. Or to put this another way, *any* Doom appearance can be “in person” so long as the fiction and performance are convincing. The culmination of this reasoning is, as Dumile told the audience at a 2015 interview, “anybody in here could wear the mask and be the Villain” (Red Bull Music Academy 2015). Some have taken up the challenge; rapper Yassin Bey, formerly known as Mos Def, and comedian Hannibal Buress have donned the mask and performed as Doom. In typically villainous fashion, Dumile has even joked that “he’d like to dart backstage after a performance, take off the mask, and then wade into the crowd—beer in hand—and applaud his own work” (Coates 2009).

6. “The Klingon with the Rings On”

But there is a limit to the science fiction called Doom: “race.” When Dumile claims that appearances do not matter, he includes the visual markers of “race”; after he stated that anyone can be Doom, he added: anyone of “any race . . . or so-called race” (Red Bull Music Academy 2015). Dumile’s attempt to transcend racial ascription is a powerful critique of racecraft that harkens back to the cover of *Black Bastards*. If the message behind the lynched Sambo artwork was that it was high time to destroy the link between Americans of African ancestry and minstrelsy—and even between Blackness and rap—then Doom can be read as Dumile’s attempt to replace blackface with an anonymous metal face with no particular racial signification. The ultimate test of this de-racecrafting is whether non-Black people can be Doom. Yet, while Dumile has toyed with the idea of sending a “white dude” (Coates 2009) to a show in his stead, we should ask why he has not in fact taken his trickery this far. Bey and Buress can “pass” as Doom because all three are Black. Blackness functions as a kind of ultimate barrier to Dumile’s speculative persona, a tie between the mask and the Black body that has not yet been de-racecrafted. Fans have ousted would-be Dooms because they have surmised that the performer’s body was different than Dumile’s. Surely, a performer with significantly fairer skin would immediately fail their authenticity test, thus revealing their implicit belief that the ultimate reality of Doom is corporeal and racial. In other words, a white Doom would probably violate what the Fieldses call racecraft’s “sumptuary code,” which governs “what goes with what and whom” (Fields and Fields 2014, p. 24). At Doom concerts, rap still goes with Blackness.

Fans’ belief in the bedrock reality of racial difference is not only a spontaneous manifestation of racecraft; it is also a response to Dumile’s appropriation of racecraft. For all Dumile’s attempts to transcend the significance of “race,” he also consistently portrays Doom as Black, even when emphasizing the persona’s speculative nature. When Doom

raps that he is “[o]ffsides like how Worf roll with Star Fleet” (Dumile 2004b), or when he calls himself the “Klingon with the rings on” (Dumile 2003a), he invokes not only science fiction but speculative Blackness. The references in Doom’s lyrics are to the character Worf from the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994). Played by African American actor Michael Dorn, Worf is a Klingon, a dark-skinned and bellicose species that is often at odds with the human-led Star Fleet space force. Worf is “offsides” not only because he is a member of Star Fleet but also because his Black-coded racial difference sets him apart from the white-coded humans (Ott and Aoki 2015). By comparing himself to Worf, Doom suggests that he, too, is a Black alien who is “offsides” in a white world. Coates also sees Blackness in the Doom persona because Doctor Doom himself was “born a gypsie [sic]—which in another place, is another way, of all the many ways, to say he was born a nigger. Put differently, he was one of us” (Coates 2010). Coates’s reading of Doctor Doom reflects Marvel’s pioneering incorporation of African Americans into comics. Disaffected superheroes like the Thing, the Hulk, and the Silver Surfer “especially empathized with African Americans” (Wright 2001, p. 231).

Perhaps the most telling example of the contradictions of Doom’s “race” can be found at the end of *Take Me To Your Leader*, the album in which Dumile assumes the form of the dragon King Geedorah. Reminiscent of KMD’s “What a Nigga Know,” the penultimate track is sarcastically titled “One Smart Nigger” (Dumile 2003b). Featuring no lyrics by Dumile, the track is a collage of television and movie samples about violence against Black people. One voice says, “killing is good,” following by “killing Blacks.” Another voice reports that “the Black was in the trunk, dead.” After one voice asks, “And so what do you think about Blacks?,” a second answers: “I wouldn’t call them human.” There is a subtle turn toward the end of the track when a voice announces that “God has chosen him to lead us to victory.” Given that Dumile raps as King Geedorah in the proceeding and final track, we can interpret the three-headed monster to be the aforementioned chosen one who will lead Black people (“us”) to victory against the racist society that considers them subhuman and expendable. In other words, even when Dumile takes his speculations to the point of abandoning the human body for a reptilian one, his persona remains racecrafted to Blackness; even when he becomes a dragon, the clever nerd reminds listeners that America still considers him little more than a “smart nigger”.

The contradictions of Doom’s Blackness can be better understood through Jackson’s concepts of racial authenticity and sincerity. Although he stresses that racial authenticity and sincerity often overlap and reinforce each other, Jackson’s argument in *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Jackson 2005) turns on some important distinctions between the two concepts. For Jackson, racial authenticity functions much like the Fieldes’ concept of racecraft: it refers to social meanings of Blackness that originate in our own thought and action but then assume the form of objective, external, and natural definitions or “scripts” that determine how to be a “real” Black person. Just as racecraft ties visible facial and bodily features together with invisible racial essences, Jackson claims that racial scripts are “interpretive devices or decoding techniques for helping us see *into* otherwise opaque human beings” (ibid, pp. 16–17). But Jackson diverges from the Fieldes when he argues that critics of racial authenticity subtly reproduce the objectification of Blackness by overemphasizing the degree to which Black people are trapped in racial scripts. To prove that, say, an ancient relic is authentic, an expert uses objective measures like carbon dating and passes judgment on a mere thing that cannot offer its own account of itself. “Authenticity,” Jackson explains, “presupposes a relation between subjects (who authenticate) and objects (dumb, mute, and inorganic) that are interpreted and analyzed from the outside” (ibid, pp. 14–15). Similarly, critics of Black authenticity assume that the discourses and practices that constitute the “reality” of “race”—i.e., racecraft—function as the authenticating expert and that Black people are like the “dumb” and “mute” relic: “they turn us all into mere objects of our own social discourses, less the actors who read and interpret scripts than the inert pages themselves” (ibid, p. 15).

If racial authenticity foregrounds a subject-object relation in which racial scripts or racecraft are subjects and those forced to conform to their meanings are objects, then Jackson's concept of sincerity is an attempt to show that racial identity is also "a liaison between subjects" (ibid, p. 15). In Fred Moten's terms, sincerity is the resistance of the object (Moten 2003, pp. 1–23), which then becomes a subject. Sincerity speaks from the subject's interiority, the domain from which the rapper Tupac could dismiss authenticity's objective scripts by affirming that only God could judge him because only God could fully see and understand his soul, his innermost self. Tupac's sincere racial self claimed immunity from authenticity's externalities. For Jackson, racial sincerity is the subject's reading and revision of racial scripts, which can loosen authenticity's clamp on the visible and the invisible, allowing for a fuller range of ways to be human and Black. Against authenticity's attempt to place Black realness outside the self—in one's perceived phenotype, speech, or gait—sincerity "privileges the real as inside, ambiguous, and ultimately unverifiable—except, for some, by 'the Most High'" (Jackson 2005, p. 196).

Doom's mask is sincere. When Dumile represents the mask as a deflection of racialized and commercialized appearances, he posits an interiority beyond the reach of rap's and racecraft's dominant social meanings. Metal Face, the Klingon, and King Geedorah are all subjects, each with his own distinct voice and perspective. But the composition of "One Smart Nigger"—recall that it contains only samples and no Doom lyrics—points back to racial authenticity and its externalities and entrapments. Dumile becomes a mute object, encased in the pseudo-natural "facts" of Black biology and geography.

7. Conclusions: "A Fascinating Story, but It Changes Nothing"

To understand the relationship between MF Doom and racecraft, we must finally shift from Doctor Doom to Spider-Man. After he pranked *Elemental Magazine* in 2005 by sending a Doom doppelganger to a photo shoot, Dumile argued in a follow-up letter to the magazine that rap personas should be treated like comic book characters who can be played by different actors (Westhoff 2007). Dumile does not mention "race" in his letter—the friend he had sent to the photo shoot was Black—but it would have been consistent with his other statements on the subject if he had argued that comic book characters can be played by people of any "race." Perhaps the most important de-racecrafting of a comic book character in recent memory is the case of Miles Morales, the Afro-Latino boy who became Spider-Man in Marvel's Ultimate universe in 2011 and achieved widespread recognition and acclaim as the protagonist of the 2018 animated film *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. At the end of the film, Morales sounds a lot like Dumile: "Anyone can wear the mask." Morales proves that there is no natural bond between Spider-Man and any racialized body. Both Spider-Man and Doom are speculative fictions; they need not be limited by the science fiction of "race." Whereas Spider-Man and Doom are proof of the creative powers of imagination, "race" attests to the imagination's entrapment in pseudo-scientific ascriptive hierarchies and authenticities.

But Morales's statement that "anyone can wear the mask" must be grasped dialectically, for it makes sense only against the pervasive background of racecraft. The anonymity of "anyone" is liberating because it departs from the specificity of *this* one; an Afro-Latino Spider-Man is culturally and politically significant because a white man, Peter Parker, was Spider-Man for nearly half a century, and because Morales's emergence as Spider-Man negates the hegemony of whiteness in American popular culture and society. Similarly, Doom's experiments with rap and "race" derive their meaning from the social fictions that they attempt to negate and to which they are ultimately beholden. The full power of Dumile's speculative transcendence of "race" can be registered only in contrast to those ties that keep him bound to the racialized world. Dumile's counter-science fictions testify to both the creative force of the unreal and the solidity of "race." Since racecraft still rules America, Americans of African ancestry will legitimately continue to mobilize on the terrain of their racecrafted musics and identities. To liberate speculation in the realm of popular music can weaken the chains that constrain imagination in our broader social

life, but to pretend that “race” has fully disappeared before racecraft’s spell has been broken socially and politically is a delusion as deceptive as “race” itself. Ultimately, the two sides of the mask of Doom, the one pointing outward and toward racecraft’s external meanings, the other facing inward and toward an unclassifiable self, are the two poles of this contradiction.

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