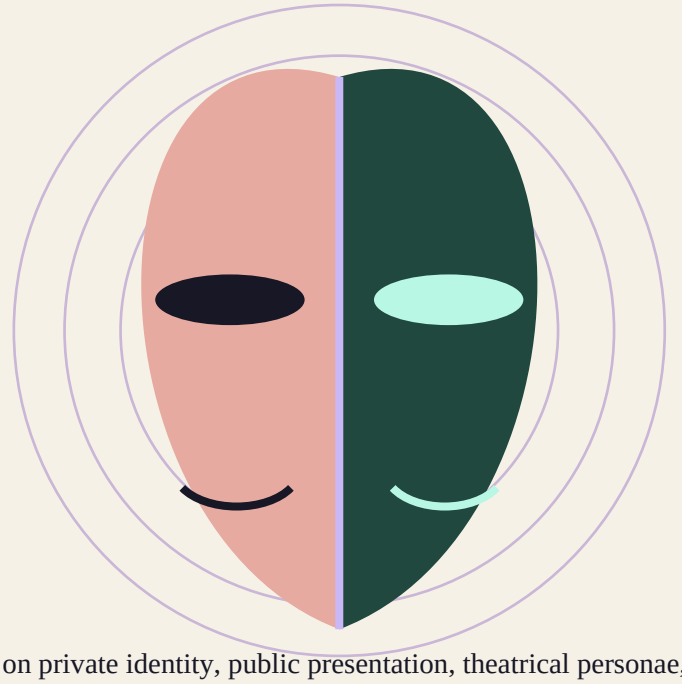
AN OFFLINE COMPANION TO AN EXPERIMENT IN SEEING

MASK & MIRROR.

The person you are. The person people meet. The character you perform.



An illustrated field manual on private identity, public presentation, theatrical personae, and the ethics of interpreting others. Includes a device-free dial, a worked example, research reading, and a one-page printable reflection worksheet.

Sahil Tayal / 27 October 2026 / Original educational publication

CREATOR HOME / RETURN TO THE SAHILVERSE - https://sahiltayal.com/

FIELD NOTE 01 / MASK & MIRROR

Not one face. Several situations.

Why the story of a single fixed public self is often too simple.

THE THREE ROOMS

Private position is what an individual knows, values, feels or remembers without necessarily making it public. It remains partly inaccessible to observers. Even the person experiencing it may be uncertain or conflicted. A private description is not a flawless transcript of a hidden permanent essence.

Public presentation is the information offered to an audience through manner, words, appearance and boundaries. A professional introduction may be accurate without being exhaustive. A friend may know a different collection of memories than a colleague. Selectivity is a basic condition of communication, not proof of bad faith.

Performed character is a deliberately intensified role, narrative device or theatrical convention. On stage, a brash villain may be an artistic invention. In daily life, a rehearsed host may amplify confidence in service of an event. Sometimes the performed version conveys a truth about aspiration or imagination; sometimes it simply entertains.

TWO DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

The descriptive question asks: *What changed between audiences?* The ethical question asks: *Was anyone given a materially false factual impression or pressured without informed choice?* They should not be collapsed. A rapper inventing a theatrical antagonist and a professional falsely claiming credentials do not make the same kinds of promises to an audience.

The observer must also remain modest. We see selected acts, not a complete interior biography. Good criticism examines verifiable features of a performance; it does not claim clairvoyant access to private motives.

A MEMORABLE RULE

Authenticity is not identical to total disclosure. Privacy may be appropriate and ethical. Where a relationship creates a duty to be accurate, boundaries and honesty both matter.

FIELD NOTE 02 / MASK & MIRROR

Four lenses. No master key.

Research concepts illuminate the scene, but do not decide a stranger's motives.

DRAMATURGY / ERVING GOFFMAN

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman analyses how participants organise impressions in social encounters. The stage metaphor clarifies why social roles involve conventions and expectations. It does not establish that every act of politeness is calculated deception.

SELF-DISCREPANCY / E. TORY HIGGINS

Higgins's 1987 theory distinguishes actual, ideal and ought representations of the self and explores different emotional vulnerabilities associated with discrepancies. Our public-private-stage scale is **not** Higgins's model. The connection is conceptual: a person may juggle hopes, obligations and lived experience without knowingly lying.

POSSIBLE SELVES / HAZEL MARKUS AND PAULA NURIUS

The 1986 article on possible selves considers ideas of who people might become, hope to become, or fear becoming. A performed character may sometimes serve as a rehearsal for a possible way of being. This is a hypothesis one could explore, not a universal explanation for performers.

NARRATIVE IDENTITY / DAN P. MCADAMS

McAdams's 2001 review describes scholarship on how life stories help people create continuity and meaning. Public biography is one especially compressed kind of story. Retelling the past is not automatically dishonest, but narratives become ethically problematic when interpretation is presented as fabricated fact.

CONCEPTUAL BOUNDARY

Philosophical work on personal identity asks how persons persist through time; this is distinct from whether an audience thinks someone appears genuine. Our experiment does not adjudicate those philosophical questions. Try to keep the lenses separate rather than treating one word - identity - as if it meant exactly the same thing in every discipline.

FIELD NOTE 03 / MASK & MIRROR

The mask in popular culture.

Documented public choices; carefully labeled editorial interpretations.

DOCUMENTED CASE: MF DOOM

Daniel Dumile, performing as MF DOOM, became known for an elaborate masked rap persona, visually associated with a comic-book supervillain. The metal mask and alter-ego language were observable features of a public artistic practice. Contemporary reporting in PBS News (2021) documents the performing identity.

Interpretation: By redirecting attention from an unmasked celebrity face to a constructed character, the performance allows a different relationship between audience, voice and identity. This does not establish what Dumile privately intended, felt or concealed. A stage figure cannot be treated as an unfiltered psychological confession.

DOCUMENTED CASE: DAVID BOWIE AND ZIGGY STARDUST

David Bowie developed the Ziggy Stardust persona through early-1970s music and stage performance. The artist's official biography documents the 1972 breakthrough and the 1973 end of the Ziggy stage era. The audience encountered a continuing theatrical invention across music, costume and concert.

Interpretation: Ziggy illustrates how a character can become a public cultural reference with its own arc. Retiring a character changes an artistic presentation; it is not proof that a private human being has disappeared or that every previous performance was false.

HYPOTHETICAL, DELIBERATELY INVENTED

Imagine a shy researcher who performs as a spectacularly confident emcee once a month. An audience may see boldness while friends see reserve. Perhaps the character enables play; perhaps it is simply a well-rehearsed job. The example is fictional. There is no basis for inferring the character's private psychology from stage behaviour alone.

EVIDENCE BOUNDARY

Case details should come from records of public creative work, reliable reporting, and clear historical chronology. A critic may add interpretations, but should label them, acknowledge alternatives, and avoid invented lyrics, invented quotations and medical judgments.

FIELD NOTE 04 / MASK & MIRROR

The dial, without a device.

A pencil-and-paper experiment in descriptive separation.

Choose **one specific quality** in **one scene**: for example expressed confidence, enthusiasm or reserve. Place it at three self-chosen positions, each from zero to ten. Zero means not expressed; ten means expressed strongly. The numbers refer to the same quality, not to the worth of the person.

STEP 1 / ENTER THREE POSITIONS

P = private position: how strongly you privately experience or endorse that quality. **U = public presentation:** how much you show in that setting. **S = stage character:** how strongly the performed role amplifies or embodies it. If there is no stage character, use the role or consciously presented style in that scene.

STEP 2 / WORK THE ARITHMETIC

Compute **D = 100 × (|P - U| + |U - S| + |P - S|) / 20**. Absolute bars mean take the non-negative difference. The largest possible sum of pairwise distances on a zero-to-ten line is twenty; therefore D ranges from zero to one hundred.

Worked fictional example: P = 3, U = 5, S = 10. The gaps are 2, 5 and 7. Their sum is 14. D = 100 × 14 / 20 = **70**. This tells us the selected marks are relatively far apart. It does not tell us whether the person is artistically inventive, under pressure, unsafe, dishonest or content.

Second example: P = 7, U = 5, S = 9. The gaps are 2, 4 and 2. D = 100 × 8 / 20 = **40**. The same result can arise from many different personal stories. No clinical or moral thresholds exist for this invented measure.

STEP 3 / INTERPRET WITH RESTRAINT

Ask: Which audience was present? Was the performance clearly framed as fiction? What might this presentation make possible? What would be needed before judging a real-world factual claim? Use the next worksheet for your own scene, or try the examples without disclosing anything private.

INTERACTIVE VERSION / MASK DISTANCE DIAL - https://maskandmirror.sahilwho.online/

FIELD NOTE 05 / MASK & MIRROR

Care, claims and boundaries.

The ethically relevant question is not simply whether someone performs.

PRIVACY IS NOT A CONFESSION OWED

People need boundaries for personal safety, dignity and ordinary social life. A person can be sincere without exposing intimate information to strangers. Different forms of presentation can reflect different cultural settings, roles, artistic goals or personal choices. A demand for constant transparency can turn curiosity into entitlement.

FACTUAL CLAIMS DO MATTER

The right to privacy does not dissolve obligations to tell the truth where a factual claim materially affects another person's choices. An explicitly fictional theatrical villain is understood differently from an invented professional qualification or false research credential. Evaluate what was represented as a fact, who reasonably relied on it, and what consequences followed.

FOUR DISTINCTIONS WORTH KEEPING

Observed: a public mask was worn. **Documented:** a credible source records when and where. **Interpreted:** the mask may change an audience's attention. **Unknown:** the wearer's private motives. Resist turning the last category into confident knowledge.

For a performance: discuss craft, convention, audience and cultural context. For a professional claim: ask for reliable evidence. For a personal relationship: practice consent and direct communication. For a stranger online: remember that short fragments cannot tell a complete story. None of these tasks benefits from amateur mind-reading.

A PAUSE THAT IS NOT A VERDICT

After using the dial, try describing a different audience while preserving the same private quality. If the marks change, notice which assumptions changed with them. A number may prompt a better question, but it is not an explanation of a person. You may end the reflection without choosing a self-improvement target.

TWO LINKED COMPANIONS / ACCESSIBLE AT BUILD CHECK

Thank You, Hip-Hop - voice and identity - https://rap.sahiltayal.com/

The Sound of Becoming - narrated selves through music - https://thesoundofbecoming.sahiltayal.com/

FIELD NOTE 06 / MASK & MIRROR

Your one-page worksheet.

Write privately. You do not need to save or share any of this.

A / SET THE SCENE

What happened, where, and who was the audience? Use observable actions before interpretations.

B / NAME ONE QUALITY AND THREE POSITIONS

Quality: _____ Private (P): ____ / 10 Public (U): ____ / 10 Character (S): ____ / 10

Gap 1: |P - U| = ____ Gap 2: |U - S| = ____ Gap 3: |P - S| = ____

Illustrative distance = (____ + ____ + ____) / 20 × 100 = _____ / 100

C / OBSERVED VS INTERPRETED

What was directly observable?

What is an interpretation, not an established fact?

D / ETHICS AND ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

What might the mask make possible? What duties, boundaries or risks change with the audience?

One plausible alternative explanation I cannot rule out:

Reminder: This page is a private writing aid. There is no correct score or identity category.

FIELD NOTE 07 / MASK & MIRROR

Research & reference shelf.

Verified bibliographic destinations; some full texts may need library access.

The notes below preserve the source / interpretation boundary. Citations identify documents, not proof of any individual's unobserved motives.

SOCIAL PRESENTATION AND THEORIES

Erving Goffman (1959), The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life / publisher - https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/61106/the-presentation-of-self-in-everyday-life-by-erving-goffman/

E. Tory Higgins (1987), Self-discrepancy / PubMed - https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/3615707/

Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius (1986), Possible selves / APA DOI - https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.41.9.954

Dan P. McAdams (2001), The Psychology of Life Stories / SAGE - https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100

PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Eric T. Olson, Personal Identity / Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy - https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-personal/

PBS News (2021), MF DOOM masked rapper / reported history - https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/mf-doom-masked-rapper-known-for-complex-lyrics-dies-at-49

David Bowie Official, About / Ziggy Stardust career chronology - https://www.davidbowie.com/about

Evidence labels used in this manual: **documented fact** is traceable public record; **interpretation** is an argued reading; **hypothetical example** is an invented teaching scenario; **fiction** is imaginative writing, never a research finding.

FIELD NOTE 08 / MASK & MIRROR

Explore more worlds.

Curated Sahilverse doors linked to the same inquiry, with status carefully stated.

TWO THEMATICALLY RELATED PAGES / ACCESSIBLE AT BUILD CHECK

Thank You, Hip-Hop - music, voice and autobiography - https://rap.sahiltayal.com/

An original personal cultural reflection on hip-hop and the forming of a voice. The page was accessible when checked on 27 October 2026.

The Sound of Becoming - unfinished identity through music - https://thesoundofbecoming.sahiltayal.com/

An interactive compositional memoir instrument; the page was accessible when checked on 27 October 2026.

The Identity-Action Gap - self-description versus action - https://identityaction.sahiltayal.com/

TWO ALTERNATE DISCOVERY ENTRANCES

The Other Orbit / alternate entrance - accessible at build check - https://sahiltayal.online/

Sahilverse Online / gateway - availability unverified during build - https://sahilverse.online/

The gateway URL is included as requested; a public retrieval check did not independently confirm its availability. Similarly, the proposed sahilwho.online sibling destinations were not confirmed accessible and are not represented as verified live projects.

A CLOSING REFLECTION

A mask can be craft, caution, play or a truthful metaphor. The observer's responsibility is to distinguish public evidence from private speculation. You can learn about a performance without claiming ownership over the performer. You can question an inaccurate factual claim without demanding a complete autobiography. And you can write your own next chapter without denying the chapters that came before.

RETURN TO THE SAHILVERSE / CREATOR HOME

Sahil Tayal - One Mind. Infinite Worlds. - https://sahiltayal.com/

Write to Sahil: sahil@sahiltayal.com | Mask & Mirror / Field Guide, 2026