

The Lack of Solace in Saying “There, There”: A Psychoanalysis of Childhood Trauma Stemming into Adulthood in *There There*

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When comforting a distressed child, a pat on the back and hug followed by the phrase “there, there” can sometimes do the trick. But, for the children in Native American communities, this comforting is only surface level for ending the trauma they experience in their daily lives. In Tommy Orange’s *There There*, he details the extreme trauma that many Native American children face and demonstrates the lasting effect this has on them as adults. These effects range from mental health issues, substance abuse, and isolation from their Native community and past. We can analyze the journey and outcome of two characters, Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield and Jacquie Red Feather, and infer on how their lifestyle choices will then impact their future and add to the cycle of struggle.

Opal Bear Shield grew up, alongside her half-sister Jacquie Red Feather, in unique circumstances. Their entire family (Opal, Jacquie, and their mother) moved to Alcatraz island for a few years in their youth, as many other Native American families were. Although the girls had a non-traditional childhood, their mother deeply cared for them and tried her best to for them as Orange writes, “She’d always been crazy...but this was different, we’d always end up in a house, in a room, in a bed at least” (49). On the island, Opal had very few friends and relied mostly on her mother and stuffed bear, Two Shoes. Life on the island was sufficient until her mother’s cancer diagnosis and eventual death, which had an immense impact on her. Opal describes learning of her mother’s diagnosis as, “The whole island disappeared. Everything. I

stood up and walked away without knowing where to. I remember I left Two Shoes over by the rocks all that time before” (Orange 58). Opal’s world shattered after her mother’s cancer, as she abandons her only friend, her bear, just as her mother did to her and her life seems to collapse around her. Eventually, the two sisters left the island, and lived with their abusive uncle for a few years, as this was their only option. Jacquie eventually left, leaving Opal to fend for herself and the two lost connection for a good portion of life. Although Opal certainly did have a trying childhood, her sister had an equally challenging one.

Jacquie, who the readers meet at a slightly older age than Opal, experiences more “black and white” traumatic experiences. Red Feather was a teenager when the family moved to the island, at an important stage of development and identity searching for kids. Although Jacquie did have a few friends on the island, one being Harvey Black, the group bonded more over alcohol, drugs, and avoiding work on Alcatraz. She found purpose in life causing chaos and moved along with the pack, as she would be alone without it, which no one wants. Jacquie was raped by her, so called, friend Harvey and had the child out of obligation, but gave the child up for adoption for hope of a better life than she could provide. After a few abusive instances with their uncle, Jacquie eventually left Opal to start a life for herself, as the pain was too much. Red Feather, much like Opal, had to grow up at a very early age, which is evident when Jacquie says, “Life doesn’t work out the way stories do. Mom’s dead, she’s not coming back, we’re alone...What kind of a fucked up story is that?” (Orange 60).

While these unique childhood experiences are interesting to discuss, they do not mean much until the impact these events have on Jacquie and Opal is mentioned. Red Feather ends up having another daughter, who committed suicide at a point in her early adulthood, leaving behind three children. As Jacquie sees this incident as being abandoned by yet another person in her

life, this triggers events from her youth. Instead of attempting to do better for her daughters' kids, she fully removes herself from them, giving them to Opal to take care of. It can be argued that Jacquie has a fear of abandonment, as her mother, father, first, and second daughter "abandoned" her in a way. She chooses to separate herself from the three grandchildren and her sister, as to not be hurt and left by anyone else again. Jacquie finds it difficult to develop meaningful relationships with people in her adult life, due to the poor ending of most in her youth. This is evident with how she interacts with Harvey Black and their hostility and limited amount of trust she places in him. For Red Feather, is simply easier for to not trust others and isolate, as no one can hurt her if she does. Jacquie attempts to rekindle relations with her sister, but we do not know how this truly plays out with the novels ending.

To cope with the death of her daughter and other struggles in her life, Jacquie turns to alcohol. This unhealthy addiction leads Jacquie down a dark path, that she is attempting to work her way out of with AA meetings, but it is a constant battle. As Orange writes that Jacquie "[d]rank herself into a manageable oblivion every night" (106). Alcohol was a constant in Red Feather's life since she was as young as fourteen, so when times get tough, this was something that provided comfort. Jacquie being someone who has experienced multiple childhood traumas makes her even more susceptible for abusing substances and this claim is scientifically supported. According to "Stress and development of depression and heavy drinking in adulthood: moderating from childhood trauma," the authors claim that, "Individuals who reported two or more traumatic events in childhood were more likely to be drinking heavily" (Colman, Ian, et al. 268). Jacquie's struggle with alcohol goes on to affect not just her, but her relationship with her sister, grandkids, and even strangers, such as Harvey. If Jacquie did not

have such violent and disturbing events occur in her childhood, she would have been much less likely to develop issues with alcohol and have a less difficult future as a whole.

Opal grew up to have a unique set of challenges of her own. She admits to liking to keep herself busy and constantly working so she does not have to think or deal with issues in her life or past. Orange explains that, "Sometimes it feels impossible to do anything. But, that's okay because she's getting quite good at getting lost in doing things" (162). Instead of facing challenges in her life, she has found a way to distract herself with work. Her past is too painful to remember or deal with, so she finds ways to suppress it along with everyday issues. While Opal has no diagnosis of any mental illness in the novel, she demonstrates a few characteristics that could indicate mental illness, or at the very least, stress. In "Stress and development of depression and heavy drinking in adulthood: moderating from childhood trauma," the authors claim that, "Individuals who experience traumatic events in childhood have a lower tolerance for stress in adulthood...and are more likely to develop mental illness" (Colman, Ian, et al. 266). Due to Bear Shields traumatic past, she definitely fits into the category of one who could struggle with mental illness, or exhibits traits of mental illness, such as her distraction from reality in her work. Instead of facing issues, such as Orvil's interest in Native American culture or her rocky relationship with Jacquie, she creates unique coping mechanisms to distract from these stressful situations. Opal's distraction and suppression, along with the inability to deal with stress, are results of her traumatic experiences in her youth.

Bear Shield, like her sister, could also be labeled as someone with trust or abandonment issues. To restate, their mother died at an early point in their lives, leaving them to fend for themselves. But, she takes a different approach than Jacquie when provided an opportunity for change three boys, by welcoming them into her home with open arms. While Jacquie fears the

boys eventual leaving, Opal wants to be there for them, as no one was for her. Although Opal can be there for others, she finds it easier not to rely on anyone else, as they can leave her just as others have done. This fear of abandonment is explained as that author writes, “Opal likes numbers. Numbers are consistent. You can count on them” (Orange 161). Many different people have let Bear Shield down in her life, whether it be her mother, father, sister, or uncle.. At some point, this constant disappointment and abandonment results in individuals losing faith in others and removal from dependency in general. Opal observes the letdown that she has experienced by those who “should” have been there for her, so it makes sense for her to isolate and rely on who she can account for: herself.

While the harsh childhood experiences that Opal and Jacquie face are negative in their personal futures, it has an equal impact on their children. Of course, no adults in the world deserve to deal with such issues that childhood trauma creates, there is only so much that can be done once this is set in. Therapy and growth can occur from these events, but these incidences will never escape them. What can be changed, is how the adults change events in their children life’s and limit these same experiences from happening to them. Due to the negative connotations that Opal and Jacquie associate their Native American culture with, they have chosen to hide it from Orvil, Loother, and Loney. Instead of letting the children experiment and learn openly, they force the children to do this in secret. While Opal has the children’s best interest in heart by hiding their past from them, it leaves the room for possible identity crisis in the kids, which we see in characters like Tony Loneman. Jacquie felt as though Opal could care best for the children after their mother’s death, but this just creates room for abandonment issues, just as these two female characters faced. And, with Jacquie’s past issues with alcohol, if the boys witness this in their future, it can cause them to develop issues with it as well. Without

greater focus being put on the childhood events that can trigger illness and struggles as adults, the cycle that the women faced will be passed down the line to the boys until something can change.

While Orange's sole intention of the novel cannot be pin-pointed, readers can find meaning in many different corners of the novel. One key point that Orange is trying to make is the struggle that minority communities face to break the cycles of trauma as children and the negative effects it has them as adults. The particular minority community in this novel being Native Americans, exposes a unique set of challenges that Orange opens the readers minds to. Many Native people struggle in modern society for many, unfair, reasons. According to a study completed by the University of Colorado of the Goldstein, Oetting, Edwards, and Garcia-Mason reservations, Native children (seventh to twelfth grade) not only consume marijuana at higher rates, but at much younger ages than none Native American children (Beauvias, et al. 17). The article also claims that, "Data from the Indian Health Service records...show[s] a 60% increase in treatment admissions for methamphetamine abuse between 2001 and 2007" (Beauvias, et al. 20). Native communities do not have resources to deal with substance abuse in adults or children and the issue only continues to grow. Children see the consumption of these products as "normal," as demonstrated through Jacquie and Tony Loneman, and are quick to join the trend. Drug abuse is not the only issue that can affect children's future, but the lack of education leads to unsuccessful futures. An article on orphan hood written by Beegle, De Weerd, and Dercon discusses the large impact that a mother's death has on children, compared to a father's as, "They found evidence of a causal effect of mother's deaths on children's education outcomes" (Beegle, et al. 166). While the abandoning by parents' effects children psychologically, as seen through Jacquie and Opal, it impacts a child's education and set up for their future as well. And, this

cycle has potential to repeat with Orvil, Looter, and Loney with their mother's absence. The website *Education World*, claims that only sixty-five percent of Native American students graduate high school, compared to the US standard of seventy-five-point two percent (Delisio and Dune). If the children do not get an adequate education or elect to not finish school, this will substantially lower their chances of creating new, better opportunities for themselves as adults. This is evident with many characters in the story, such as Jacquie, Opal, Tony, or Octavio, with their non-traditional or acceptable forms of employment. Minority communities, such as Native ones that Orange focuses on, need more support in order to break the cycles of struggle children face that carries on into their adult lives. Without support or change, the cycles of unsuccessful futures impacting children will only continue to limit Native communities' growth and allow opportunities for success in the modern world.

Jacquie and Opal's childhood experiences of abandonment, substance abuse, and sexual assault are the standard for many Native American children in today's world. But, these are not isolated incidences as they later cause greater issues with mental health, improper coping mechanisms, substance abuse of their own, and sever isolation. While it is unfortunate that adults have to deal with such issues, these traits are then passed on to their own children, creating an unescapable cycle. These cycles can be broken, but it takes extra support for minority communities to end them as they are disadvantaged and lack support to do so. Orange is bringing awareness to the struggles that Native communities are facing and argues that more must be done than looks from pitiful eyes, out stretched arms, and the attempted comforting phrases like "there, there."

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