

## Native American Identity & History

by Arica Burns

Tommy Orange's novel, *There There* focuses on Urbanized Native Americans, and tells their story through the time leading up to the Powwow. Orange cuts readers deep with the mentions of Identity and the generational history that plagues Native Americans. Struggling with identity seems like the most normal thing a person can do because each day we're at odds with each other, trying to figure out who we are that day, who we are every day, trying to understand ourselves. But Orange's characters, Tony Loneman, Opal Violet Victoria Bear Shield and Orvil Red Feather are all struggling with their identity as being part of the Native American community because it was either fractured, forced away, or hidden. These characters struggle with understanding their heritage, with the way their heritage is showcased through social media, and with knowing who they truly are despite everything that they are. Tommy Orange wrote this novel for Native Americans like him, and that's what makes this so important because he wasn't expecting the outreach from Non-Natives to look at this book at all, let alone read it, even though they didn't understand why he wrote it the way that he did.

The media tells the world what to think, how to feel about certain things, people, races, religions. The media likes to think that they're looking out for everyone, but there isn't much looking out so much as there is blasting something big and then laughing at the terror that wreaks havoc on the world. Orange has been dealing with the oppression of Native Americans for so long that the rage he had about these small things, the "feathered icon" of what a Native American looked like, the sales of merchandise with that feathered icon all over it, these things were like an attack on his community, and he took it personally. When he realised that he could

write, it gave him that chance to turn from those things, it gave him a chance to drop those tools that were left in front of him to make him break, and he wrote a powerful novel that tells more than the reader knows at first glance. “It’s like a lot of people doing very small things, but it equals an intense oppression against the people [...] that’s something I can do to resist that sort of systemic violence, these visual tools that are used to represent us, and the language that’s used to talk about us.” said Orange in an interview with Heather J. Shotton (58). Orange focused on the Urbanity part of Native Americans because there’s this one vision that everyone has, and it’s not the cities that they’re living in, but it’s not the right vision.

Natives live in urban communities, they live wherever they live, and they fit into their communities like everyone else. “Urban Indians were the generation born in the city. We’ve been moving for a long time, but the land moves with you like a memory.” (Orange 11). When one thinks Native American, or Indian, many will think of Pocahontas and the story Disney told. While some of those things may be on the right track to truth, it’s not all truth. Again, this is a representation that fits but doesn’t at the same time. Orange is breaking those stereotypes that the world puts Native Americans into, and he’s using these characters to do it by taking his life and putting it down on paper.

Opal Violet Victoria Bear Shield stopped thinking about her place in the Native American community a long time ago. Her mother would tell her not to talk about it in public, but then, before she passed, she told Opal not to hide it, to speak about her heritage. “One of the last things Mom said to me when we were over there, she said we shouldn’t eer not tell out stories.” I said (Orange 60). Which is the exact opposite of what Opal did, but her mother’s death, even her life, had lead Opal down a hard road. She grew up without a sister, with guilt of what she may have done to a man that tried to harm her sister, and then she was raising her

sister's, Jacquie Red Feather, daughter's children. She didn't want any part of the Native community included in her life, and she hid it from her grandsons which made them that much more curious. She still had the regalia, still had everything she needed, but it didn't matter because she didn't want to remember it, know it anymore. Part of that heritage died with her mother, died with her drunken sister who left because of her struggle with alcoholism, with taking care of herself, and Opal had no one. She wasn't the only one that had no one, or felt as though she had no one because Jacquie was by herself as well dealing with all of this in the only way she knew how, drinking.

Alcoholism and Native Americans seem to go hand-in-hand. Jacquie Red Feather had been drinking for quite some time, managed to stop, but then there would be a moment where it all went down the drain and she'd be back to that bottle again. Alcoholism is hard to stray from, ask anyone that has that running through their veins because of family members that did go down that path. Jacquie was an alcoholic, but there were reasons, there are always reasons. People down that bottle because they are trying to forget, their trauma, their losses, whatever it may be. Jacquie has a lot of trauma, being raped at a young age, having to give her daughter up for adoption, losing her mom and her sister because in her mind, her sister was gone too. Jacquie and alcoholism seem to ride together, but she tries to get help, tries to stray from what seems to be the norm to non-natives based on the rates.

Jacquie met the man that raped her at an AA meeting, Harvey, and she used that time to really emphasize what he'd done to her, and how it affected her. At first, she wanted nothing to do with him, but forgiveness was what kept coming to mind while reading the novel, there's got to be a point for them where it's okay. A lot of time had passed, and there was eventually that moment, when they went back to Oakland. "Participants talked of forgiveness as essential to

their sobriety and healing. Adult children in particular talked of making a choice to forgive as part of their healing.” (Myhra, Wieling, Grant 418). Jacquie forgave Harvey for what he did to her, but she also seemed to be ready to forgive herself. She wanted to be back with her family, and Harvey made that happen, now she has to stay there.

Native Americans and Alcohol seem to go hand-in-hand because non-natives pushed them there in the first place, generation after generation dealing with the trauma left behind by the racism and oppression from an earlier generation. “This decimation, along with other continuing hardships, has left deep scars that have crossed generations and continue to impact Native Americans today. Some Native American people refer to this trauma as the soul wound, a profoundly spiritual trauma that has been visited upon them (Duran & Duran, 1995).” (Szlemko, Wood, Thurman 439). The trauma of their history, of the rates of Native American and Indigineous people before Columbus and after, the battles, the bloodshed, it all affected them. That “soul wound” was left on them because of non-natives, and it continues to be left there because there’s been no true change. Non-Natives still mock them everyday when they use Indians as mascots, when they don’t tell the true history of Columbus and the Native Americans, when there are things missing that students have to find for themselves because it just doesn’t make sense.

What does Alcoholism lead to when drinking pregnant, that’s the important question that readers get answered through Tony Loneman in *There There*. Loneman was born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, meaning that because of his mother drinking while pregnant with him, he was born with this syndrome, with an ailment that would affect him for his entire life. “The Drome taught me to look past the first look people give you, find that other one, right behind it. All you gotta do is wait a second longer than you normally do and you can catch it, you can see

what they got in mind back there.” (Orange 17). Loneman took this Syndrome and used it to be able to see more than others do, and he utilizes it very easily because all one must do is look past that first look.

There’s so much more to reading people, and Loneman is telling readers how to do it because he does it. The “Drome” as he calls it, has caused him a lot of problems, including being able to see him as himself. He realizes too late who he really was. “He watches himself go up, out of himself, then watches himself from above, looks at his body and remembers that it was never actually really him. He was never Tony just like he was never the Drome. Both were masks.” (Orange 288). He went to that Powwow to take money, but he realized that it wasn’t right, he tried to do the right thing. His life was taken, and his chapter was the last one that was read.

There are several studies about it because FAS is quite prominent throughout Native American generations, only because it’s a bi-product of the alcoholism that floats through the tribes. “In a study of Southwestern Native American tribes, researchers found rates ranging from 39 to 333 per 10,000 (May, Hymbaugh, Aase, & Samet, 1983).” (three names 438). FAS affects Natives more due to the alcohol assumption, at least by looking at these records that’s what seems to prove true, but these records are here because of studies done. It feels like an attack on the Native Americans because of the stereotypes with Native Americans and Alcohol, but the truth is that everyone drinks at one point or another, and there’s no one to blame. There’s the infinite curiosity that comes when a person is close to their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, there’s the peer pressure when at a party around 14-16 years old, and then there’s the simple fact that it’s something that one can do now. Alcohol is an edge, and many people jump right off it as quickly as they get onto it, but sometimes it doesn’t end there.

Alcohol has a generational effect in many ways, taking parents away from children, taking grandparents away from children, taking children away from families. Jacquie Red Feather's second child committed suicide, leaving her boys to Opal, and Jacquie was still drinking, so the boys didn't really know her as well as they should've. Orvil, one of the boys, got curious about their heritage, but Opal wouldn't tell him anything. He had to look online to find out about being Native, about what it meant to be Native, how to be Native, and the Internet is a deep, black hole with good and bad information. "It's important that he dress like an Indian, dance like an Indian, even if it is an act, even if he feels like a fraud the whole time, because the only way to be Indian in this world is to look and act like an Indian. To be or not to be Indian depends on it." (Orange 122). Orvil felt as though it was all an act because he didn't know what it meant, not truly, and he didn't understand how he was part of something so important. Instead of teaching him his heritage, Opal refused to talk to him or anyone else about it. Orvil only wanted to learn about his heritage, that's all he wanted, and in the end, he was able to. It doesn't mean that all of the information he was given is true, and it could've been different had Opal told him about his heritage, explained it to him better and told the stories like her mom told her too.

Tommy Orange uses *There There* to help us understand Native Americans, understand their struggle through the lack of true representation, through the way they've been treated past and present, and through the way not all stories have good endings. With an ambiguous ending to the novel, Tommy Orange is leaving readers to decide how it goes for these characters. Orange wants readers to understand Native Americans, wants them to learn that not everything that is read in those history textbooks are true, not everything that is portrayed online is true, and the treatment of people, no matter their race or culture, can cause serious harm to them and their chance to embrace who they are. Representation is a huge thing, for everyone, and these

characters struggle with it because of what Native American means in their world, in the world. All Orange wanted with this novel, was to tell his story and not be oppressed any longer. This story will be a bridge now because it's his story, his rage at the world that has oppressed Native Americans for so long, and it's in the world for everyone to read.

## Works Cited

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