

## **Native to Me**

by Olivia Cooper

Being Native can be interpreted in many ways for people who are and are not Native. Understanding how Natives truly feel about their culture, heritage, and history is extremely fascinating and should be a topic of conversation more often. Natives often are proud of their heritage, but some still struggle to find their identity when focusing on being Native. There can be reasons behind why they all have their own ideas of what being Native can mean. All Natives have their own ideas of how to embrace their culture today, develop their own ways of being Native, and truly finding out for themselves what being Native can mean to them.

Within the novel *There There* by Tommy Orange, there are different characters all with their own understandings and views of what it can mean to be Native. There are nearly a dozen main characters included within the novel, but there were three specifically that stood out to me that struggle with finding their Native identity. These characters are Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield, Edwin Black, and Tony Loneman. All the characters have their own interpretations of being Native and how they feel about it.

First with Opal, she is an independent individual but has gone through hell as a child with her sister, Jacquie, and her mother dragging her everywhere. There is an example in the book of their mother bringing them to the island of Alcatraz when it was occupied by Natives in the seventies, which is a fact. Then as she and Jacquie got older, Opal often felt isolated from her sister and her mother as her sister ran with a tough crowd and her mother turned to alcohol most of the time. As Opal reminisces, "One of the last things Mom said to me when we were over there, she said we shouldn't ever not tell our stories" (Orange 60). This quote refers to her

mother believing that one day telling your stories could free you or put a sense into someone else with their decisions moving forward. However, Opal is an anxious individual, so telling the tough stories to others might strike a quick judgement from them which is something she would rather not deal with. Later in the novel when Opal is older and raising her own adopted grandchildren, she is worried about whether she should get them involved with the Native community. Her fear is that her kids could potentially go through the traumatic experiences she went through when she was a child. Her interpretation is that being Native can get you in some sticky situations and a feeling of loneliness. Just as in the end of the novel when at the powwow each character attends there is a shooting that injures and takes the lives of many. While the gunfire booms through the stadium and Opal is heading away through the anxious crowd she thinks about her grandchildren and, “She calls Orvil first but his phone just rings and rings. Next she calls Luther. She gets through but the call breaks up. She can only hear parts of words. A broken sound. She hears him say, *Grandma*. She puts her hand over her mouth and nose, sobs into her hand,” (Orange 278). The pain and fear felt through this section is overwhelming. Tragedy is striking before her and as a grandmother, you want to know the safety of your grandchildren. As well as why here? Why now for a stroke of tragic luck? Most likely the answer would be the culture itself, that is what Opal thinks. This part of the novel solidifies her prior feelings about her Native culture since she ultimately only knows and understands one definition of the Native community and relates it back towards bad things that happened when she was younger.

Another character that has an alternative representation of being Native is Edwin Black. Edwin is known for being a college grad who lives in his mother’s basement. Even though he did go to college to become a writer and got his degree in Native American Literature, he has yet to

finish a novel or get out into the world with his knowledge. Edwin is considered a half-Native and struggles to interpret that since he does not feel Native enough due to that characteristic.

Throughout Edwin's chapters in the novel curiosity with his father's identity is one of his main concerns. This strikes a drive in him to try and find the man. Curiosity led to, "After getting permission from my mom, I personal messaged ten different Harveys from her profile who seemed "obviously" Native and lived in Phoenix," (Orange 69). After searching Facebook and receiving one message back he stares at the screen just to log off before he got too overwhelmed at the possibility of his father responding to him that quickly. Still with interest in the powwow as well as the true identification of his father, he does go to the powwow and ends up meeting his half-sister and father at the powwow briefly before the shooting happens. He was one of the victims, but the novel never truly reveals what happened to him, but it is interesting to think that if he did pull through, he could be motivated and develop a stronger drive for a story to write and publish. The event of tragedy keeps reoccurring when people think of being Native. It can be like someone in the real world who think they are not truly Native and question that. Most may feel a confusion within the idea of supporting that community or even being a part of it. Since he is a lazy character within the novel, it sort of correlates with his ideas of being Native. That confusion sets in within and leads him to not knowing what to think, but he thinks that attending a powwow could change that reassuring feeling he has inside.

Another character whose interpretation and story stood out was Tony Loneman. Tony has a different story than most. He was born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome since his mom drank while pregnant with him. The side effects of it are that he has a messed-up face that often gets called strange by most people. Sadly, when many people think of Natives they do often think of drinking or violence which go hand in hand with Tony's character development throughout the

novel. But since he is known for being strange only from a physical perspective, he gets involved with the wrong crowd. This crowd sells drugs and later gets him involved with robbing the powwow that all the characters are attending. When the group Tony was a part of planned for the robbery, they thought that if Tony dresses in the full regalia no one will be able to tell who he is nor think he would rob the place at entry. So, he goes through with it and dresses in full regalia. When he puts it on and marched in front of his TV and saw his reflection, though he felt a respect for himself and what he was wearing. He did the routine as any Native would in the regalia and saw himself for a true Indian, not his ugly face and scared self. He says, "I shook and lifted a foot. I watched the feathers flutter on the screen. I put my arms out and dipped my shoulders down, then I walked up to the TV. I tightened my chin strap. I looked at my face. The Drome. I didn't see it there. I saw an Indian. I saw a dancer" (Orange 26). It can take one simple moment for anyone to feel as though they belong and mean something to their culture, heritage, or history. This then soaks in when he is at the powwow to make the right decision by not going through with his intended plan. But when at the powwow, Tony does get shot by someone but feels freed from his old self as he lay there and die from the gunshot wounds. His time feeling respect for himself and his culture was terribly brief in the novel and even throughout his life, he at least got the joy of experiencing that moment for himself just once. Some within the Native community may not even get that chance in a lifetime, which is sad to think about for some who truly try to represent their culture in multiple ways. Within Orange's writing he wants to make it a fact that these stories can easily represent the mistaken identity and confusion with that in Native communities today.

Throughout the novel all the interpretations are different in alternative ways. Opal is scared to even let her children learn and develop within the community out of fear from what

happened to her as a child. Edwin felt confused as to even being Native since he does not fully know what it even means to be Native nor the right way to interpret or practice it. Then Tony finally finds a respect not only himself but for the Native traditional of the regalia just for it to last a short period of time. These characters have completely different ways of interpreting what being Native can mean to them and that is okay. Being something should not mean having to live by or practice the set rules of that culture or heritage. Traditions are always subject to change and be born anew. All the examples within the novel *There There* can represent how a variety of Natives can feel about their own community and represent how it cannot be necessarily a bad thing to be scared, confused, or proud of being Native.

Native culture has always been known as something sacred due to the long history that has built up to the present day. Throughout history Natives have often been referred to as Natives, American Natives, or Indigenous people. The article “What We Want to Be Called: Indigenous Peoples’ Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Identity Labels,” by Michael Yellow Bird, suggests considering those opinions of how a certain race would desire to be called. He states “American Indian and Native American are the most common racial and ethnic labels used to identify the general population of Indigenous Peoples in the United States. However, as the above statement suggests, neither term has been without controversy, and no clear consensus exists on which label is most preferable” (Bird 1). This meaning that often people do not consider calling an Indigenous person Native would be offensive. It depends on the person as well as what we have always known to call an individual. Most tend to think of certain things when a Native individual comes to mind such as: alcohol, drugs, or cars. The quote Bird refers to is, “How I loathe the term Indian, Indian is used to sell things-souvenirs, cigars, cigarettes, gasoline, cars...Indian is a figment of the white man’s imagination” (Bird 1). Just as in *There*

*There* people do group things with Natives. Assumption and perspective often take over from how we see a person on a screen, in real life, or in a tragic event and it is sad that most cannot change that opinion or idea of a Native. Bird preaches on how most should be more aware of how these terms do not get talked about more than they should. Which is extremely valid to this date since now Columbus' Day is just as much as Indigenous Peoples' Day. The tradition of our viewpoints on people is changing for the better, within ourselves and the Native community.

Referring to how Natives feel about their community, heritage, or history, it is a common theme for them to feel like they are not considered enough based on how other people feel about their culture. Others do not specifically know the tragic history most Native people went through. To understand the life of a Native today, most should try understanding how it was back then. Natives today are spread out nearly across the country and are a diverse set of people. Only about 22% of Natives still live on reservations today (Native Hope). For the rest that do not live on one struggle with finding ways to interpret their culture the way they want. Struggle and confusion do indeed become present in times like the present day. Most believe that making the stories known from the past can help break through and free the ones from the sad past. Natives have been taken advantage of, faced war, and killed all for their ground that was truly theirs. Still to this day Natives are struggling to get back the ground that was rightfully theirs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Down the line of history and even today, Natives do not feel like respect nor sympathy for how history played out years ago. Coming from a white individual's perspective, the Native culture is not respected throughout our country as it should be. We take it for granted like it never happened, and that should be changed in our world today. In earlier education, not just in reservation schools, in public ones as well. Throughout the novel, most of the characters have an awareness of their history but tend to either doubt it or not know how to interpret it within

themselves. When other people from different cultures doubt theirs, it gets into their minds and creates a hopeless feeling if their history can and should be as valid as others'. With more people having more of an awareness for other cultures can ultimately educate them for the real world and the opinions that develop along with that.

Native people have been on the outskirts and isolated in a sense. Most tend to think that Natives can only associate with other Natives. This thought relates to one of the critical theories known as the Post-Colonial Theory. This theory is mentioned in the *Using Critical Theories* text by Lois Tyson. With this theory the basic concepts are referring to the experience of colonized people from initial contact to the present. Basically, meaning that there is a separation or isolation from colonized people and "different" people. So, within history years ago and even today Natives often feel isolated from the rest of the population due to their culture and representation from others. People from reservations especially must feel a sense of unfamiliarity the world today. A sense of confusion where they stand when they are not present within their reservation or community all because of how people and their opinions of them are understood.

Along the lines of that the article "Indigenous Identity: What Is It, and Who Really Has It?", Hilary Weaver goes comes from an analytical standpoint on how other races may interpret the Native community. Starting off with "There is little agreement on precisely what constitutes an indigenous identity, how to measure it, and who has it," (Weaver 1). Often, we as white people only recognize Indigenous people for how they are portrayed in movies, books, and other sources. But she later states on how culture identity should be recognized, "Culture identity, as reflected in the values, beliefs, and worldviews of Indigenous people, is the focus," (Weaver 1). This is true in many ways. One of which is because with anyone, we should be basing what we see of their culture on their history and their understandings before we are quick to judge. Even

though their interpretation of what being Native is can be hazy, other races' opinions and viewpoints should not be getting in the way of how they further interpret and feel about their culture itself.

Interpretating being Native can be a crazy, emotional experience for any individual. One who went through tough history, one who is confused on how they want to represent their culture, or one who wants to live through it be proud of each moment. Every person has their own interpretation and values of how they choose to be Native. Whether that means getting involved or not, that should not matter. Their history is just as valid as any others' and should be noted more in the present day. All Natives have their own ideas of how to embrace their culture today, develop their own ways of being Native, and truly finding out for themselves what being Native can mean to them.



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