

Trauma Within Native American Communities

by Isabel Hochleitner

There There by Tommy Orange is a fictional novel about many Native Americans living in urban Oakland, California. This story is told from multiple perspectives throughout the book, and one of the major characters the readers meet is Jacquie Red Feather. Orange depicts many major issues through Jacquie's character, such as alcoholism, rape, witnessing of domestic abuse, death of multiple loved ones, and overall trauma. Within this text, Orange uses Jacquie's character to showcase these issues as well as how they manifest within Native American communities. Jacquie is a prime example of many serious issues that happen to people in today's society, and these issues can all have drastic and lasting effects. Through a deep dive into Jacquie, her mental health, and her traumas, readers will gain a deeper understanding of these issues as well as how they are represented within Native American communities.

Much of Jacquie's trauma stems from events in her childhood, such as having to witness her mother become a victim of domestic abuse. Witnessing this type of violence as a child is traumatic enough, but it also led to Jacquie being moved around a lot as a child, which can cause the feeling of a lack of security, since you never know how long you can call somewhere "home". The first instance the reader sees of Jacquie's mother being abused and them moving is in Jacquie's sister, Opal's, first chapter, saying "One morning our mom woke us up in a hurry, her face was beat up... Both her top and bottom lips were swollen. Seeing those big lips messed me up. She couldn't talk right. She told us to pack our things then too" (Orange 45). By including these events in Jacquie's childhood, Orange portrays the issue of domestic abuse and violence from a perspective that is not often talked about- the victim's children. Not only does Orange show this issue through a unique perspective, but he also represents a major issue in the

Native American community in a unique way by showing that it happens in urban Native American households as well. In an AI AN Fact Sheet from 2012, the organization Futures Without Violence states, “In a 2008 CDC study, 39% of Native women surveyed identified as victims of intimate partner violence in their lifetime, a rate higher than any other race or ethnicity surveyed” (Futures Without Violence 2). With a statistic this shocking, it is vital that these issues be represented in modern media, and Orange uses Jacquie and Opal’s childhood as well as their mother to portray this major issue.

Throughout Opal’s chapter, she alludes to the fact that they moved multiple times when she says, “I’d gotten used to keeping an eye on the front door. I’d seen more than a few eviction notices” (Orange 47). All this moving around eventually led to the two girls and their mother moving to an island called Alcatraz. When asked about the reasoning behind this move, their mother replied, ““We’re going to be with our relatives. Indians of All Tribes. We’re going over to where they built that prison. Gonna start from the inside of the cell, which is where we are now, Indian people, that’s where they got us, even though they don’t make it seem like they got us there” (Orange 48). Just in this quote alone, Orange brings awareness to the important historical event of Native Americans occupying Alcatraz, as well as displaying the issue of how Native Americans are treated by government and society. Their mother alludes to the idea of Native Americans essentially being “trapped”, and that shows a great reflection of how modern Native American communities are treated.

From what the reader knows, Alcatraz brought nothing but bad memories for Jacquie. While living there, Jacquie experienced one of the most traumatic events of her life. When Jacquie was 18, she got drunk with other teenagers on the island and ended up being raped by another teenager named Harvey. This event takes place during Opal’s chapter, and she describes

the moment by saying, “When I found them, Jacquie was walking away from Harvey, every few steps picking up rocks and throwing them at him... ‘C’mon,’ Jacquie said to me. ‘Piece of shit,’ she said, and spit on the ground toward Harvey... ‘What happened?’ I said. ‘Nothing.’ ‘What did he do?’ I said. ‘I told him not to. Then he did. I told him to stop’ Jacquie rubbed at one of her eyes hard” (Orange 55-56). Though it was not directly said that he raped her, it becomes easy to infer this once she reveals that she ended up getting pregnant because of this. This issue is another major one that Orange brings awareness to through Jacquie’s storyline. According to Federal Government studies, “...studies have consistently shown that American Indian women experience much higher levels of sexual violence than other women in the U.S. Data gathered by the U.S. Department of Justice indicates that Native American and Alaskan Native women are more than 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than women in the USA in general” (Futures Without Violence 2). Similar to the statistics surrounding domestic violence, Orange portrays an issue that disproportionately affects the Native American community in his storyline.

After leaving Alcatraz, the girl’s mother passed, and Jacquie finally admitted to Opal that she was pregnant. At this point in her life, Jacquie had already experienced multiple traumatic events. Now, she has lost her mother and is pregnant with her rapist’s child. After telling Opal, she says, “‘It doesn’t matter. I can just get rid of it’” (Orange 60). This is the last the reader hears about the baby until later in the book, and Jacquie did end up giving the child up after she was born. These events not only affect her mental health going forward but show up again for her as an adult when she runs into Harvey at an AA meeting during a work conference she was attending out of state. With trauma like this, seeing the offender can be extremely triggering. In a piece titled “The Long-Term Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Counseling Implications”,

Joshua and Melissa Hall discuss the long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse, stating, “Childhood sexual abuse has been correlated with higher levels of depression, guilt, shame, self-blame, eating disorders, somatic concerns, anxiety, dissociative patterns, repression, denial, sexual problems, and relationship problems” (Hall 2). With the lasting effects of the trauma Harvey caused, it was definitely difficult for Jacquie to be near him involuntarily.

Despite their past, Harvey and Jacquie end up talking after the meeting, and after some coaxing from Harvey, they plan to travel to Oakland for the big powwow that is coming up. This was quite shocking considering Harvey’s past actions, but it is likely that Orange may be trying to show that this low level of “forgiveness” could be motivated by Jacquie’s understanding that Harvey has also experienced trauma as a Native man, and she shares a certain level of empathy with him after all she has been through as well. With this idea, Orange is not only representing the issue of rape and the after-effects, but also showing that forgiveness is not always because the person wants to forgive but could rather be because they know the person who hurt them has been hurt before too.

Living on Alcatraz was the beginning of many problems for Jacquie, especially alcoholism. During that same AA meeting, Jacquie expresses how her battle with alcoholism started, saying, “The problem that became a drinking problem started for me way before the drinking was even related to it, though it was when I first started drinking” (Orange 110). She then goes on to talk about being raped by Harvey while living on Alcatraz, which is where she started drinking. When Jacquie says her drinking problem started before alcohol was even involved, she must mean that this issue stems from all her childhood trauma from before and during her time at Alcatraz, especially since she mentioned the trauma from what Harvey did to her. When the reader meets adult Jacquie in her first chapter, she has been dealing with

alcoholism and is currently ten days sober. Throughout her chapter, the reader sees her struggling with staying sober despite almost constantly thinking about drinking. While she is struggling to resist the urge to drink in the hotel, Jacquie finds herself kneeling in front of the hotel minifridge, thinking, “In her head she heard her mom say, ‘The spider’s web is a home and a trap’... In this case Jacquie was the spider, and the minifridge was the web. Home was to drink. To drink was the trap. Or something like that. The point was *Do not open the fridge*. And she didn’t” (Orange 101).

Jacquie’s alcoholism is a key portrayal of yet another issue that is common within Native American communities, one that is especially common as a result of environmental factors like past trauma. In a review titled, “Review: Genetic and environmental risk factors for alcohol use disorders in American Indians and Alaskan Natives”, Mary-Anne Enoch and Bernard J. Albaugh state, “Some AI/AN tribes have high rates of childhood trauma that predict psychopathology including AUD” (Enoch & Albaugh 461). With this statement and Jacquie’s storyline, it becomes clear that Orange is bringing attention to the links between childhood trauma and alcohol use disorders, like Jacquie’s alcoholism.

Jacquie also has some trauma from events during her adult life, mainly stemming from the suicide of her second daughter, Jamie. Jamie’s death is a major source of trauma for Jacquie, and a key factor in why Jacquie’s alcoholism has continued. When thinking back and reliving the day she had to identify her daughter’s body, the third person narrator says, “She’d been sober six months then. The longest since she’d started drinking. But after that she drove straight to the liquor store, spent the next six years stomaching a fifth of whiskey a night (Orange 106). When this trauma is triggered by hearing suicide stories at her work conference, Jacquie almost relapses at the hotel. She left the conference immediately after those memories were triggered,

and sitting in her hotel room she was thinking, “She wanted a drink. She wanted to drink. She needed a meeting” (Orange 107). This scene really portrayed the difficult balance between sobriety and coping. She has experienced so many traumatic events to the point that she uses alcohol to cope, but now that she is sober, she is forced to cope and deal with that pain without her go-to coping method, and that can make working through trauma and staying sober both incredibly difficult tasks.

Jacquie has quite a few complex or complicated relationships throughout the book. When it comes to Harvey, the reader first knows him as someone she got drunk with, and then got raped and impregnated by. This would usually be someone a victim would never want to speak to again, in most cases. However, when Jacquie runs into him at the AA meeting, they end up talking. She is by no means friendly, but somehow still ends up riding to Oakland with him for the powwow. This relationship is complicated because there is such a traumatic past between the two, but now they know each other in such a drastically different time in their lives. When it comes to family, Jamie left Jacquie three grandsons when she committed suicide, and when it comes to them, their relationship is complex in a completely different way. Jacquie was too mentally unstable after Jamie’s death to raise these kids, so she handed them over to Opal and never got to even meet them. This complicated her relationship with Opal as well, because after giving her the kids, the sisters did not talk for years.

This book has deep meanings in many ways, but it was very clear that Tommy Orange set out for this book to be something meaningful regarding Native American communities. This book as a whole brought attention to so many major issues that people in Native American communities deal with every day. By using Jacquie and her storyline to portray these issues, Orange was able to put the reader into the shoes of someone dealing with trauma like this. In

doing this, Orange spread awareness to common issues within these communities as well as problems they face in today's society. It is so important for these issues to be talked about so victims like Jacquie can receive the proper support and help they need, so Orange made an extremely positive impact by giving these problems a platform to stand on.

Works Cited

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