

The Failure of Colonialism

by Jessica Janus

There There by Tommy Orange Discusses the perspectives of many different Native Americans. Some grew up on reservations, others grew up in the city. Some have a big connection with their culture, others have none or try to forget it. These different perspectives are very diverse due to the way each character was brought up and their experiences with their culture. Native Americans culture is also very complex as their culture has been one of the most robbed throughout generations. There has been generational trauma due to what the “American” system has tried to do. Europeans have stolen their land and gave them little back so they are not able to thrive as much as they should be able to. Applying Postcolonial Theory to *There There* It is clear to see all the effects of the Europeans and the broken system of reservations.

The Europeans have always been painted in a positive light even though they did awful things. We were all taught that Christopher Columbus discovered America despite the Natives who had started their culture there. What happened was simply genocide. They used the Natives as slaves, hunted and killed them for sport, as well as raped many. The educational system can also point to a white savior narrative making it seem that the Europeans saved the Natives from their savage ways and built America together. These assumptions are very far from the truth as it was actually the Europeans who turned into “savages” due to greed for looking for gold, leading to a lack of food which resulted in the Europeans turning to cannibalism. That is never talked about though. Instead, Text books, Educational Systems and the media portrays Native Americans as uncivilized. More ignorance is presented when a Native American grows up on a reserve. What people fail to understand are the poor conditions on reserves as well as that

growing up on one is not always a choice. Sometimes it is because some Natives want to grow up knowing more about their culture. Others are stuck there due to little opportunity and choices that are given to them.

The truth of what life is like on a reservation it's much different than it appears. Reservations are meant to preserve what little culture and traditions are left. However most consider reserves as a place to keep Native Americans away from society while others want to get rid of the reserves in general to force the Native Americans outside of it. Both are wrong as one considers erasing the little culture that is left while the other is keeping them locked away from any other opportunities outside of the reserve. Because of both of these things combined, reserves are forgotten about financially which results in very poor communities and giving Natives little choice and opportunity. After all, the system was never designed to protect them, or have their best interest. Because of this many Native Americans have turned to alcohol as a way of coping. This sort of addiction is passed on through generations and it is a very big struggle with the community still. Reserves can also be dangerous in crime because of alcohol addiction, a poor educational system, and a low economic system in general. All of these combined can make Native Americans desperate for a way out, as they don't know how to fix what is already broken. It can be a challenge to just survive, let alone thrive. It is a difficult choice for them to either remain on their reserve that is damaged or to feel like they have to leave their culture. The cause of this is reserves having very little income overall and with no money to make anything better it'll just be a continuing failing system.

There can be many outcomes due to the life of growing up on a reserve, or just growing up Native American in general. Despite how and where you grow up most Native Americans struggle with identity issues. Even growing up on a reserve where they are supposed to have

their culture surrounded with everything they do, there can still be a lot of identity issues as so much was already taken. They also live in an environment that is poor and left to die pretty much. Because of that, it is hard to keep hope. For those who don't grow up on a reserve, they have identity issues as they don't feel truly native. They have even less knowledge of what the Native American culture is all about. Some can also feel torn between both worlds as some are part Native or grew up in a white area. Identity issues in general can be very hard to work with mentally. It can be damaging to feel no connection with the past or relatives, or feel no general identity. These sort of issues can also be passed down to generations making it harder to break the cycle.

In the book, *Reading Post-colonial Theory: Key text in Context*, it is stated that “The post-colonial future is embroiled in poverty, corruption, diversions, excuses and myths, conflicts and sickness... It is a real challenge to put up a semblance of order in such a world”. *There There* shows this post colonialism theory a lot through different characters and their diverse experiences. The first couple of characters that come to mind is the family of Jaquie and Opal. Jaquie is first seen during the Alcatraz protest at 18 years old. She is eager to be there as she meets a guy named Harvy. Her happiness soon fades as she becomes pregnant with Harveys child towards the end of the protest. Decades later, Jaquie now struggles with substance abuse like her mother did. She attends meetings to attempt to get sober along with many other Natives.

This is another real struggle that many natives are still trying to overcome today. In the article entitled “Substance abuse among American Indians and Alaska natives: an integrative cultural framework for advancing research”, stated some statistics: “Factors such as reservation status, harsh socio-economic conditions, and family members substance abuse problems have also been identified as contributors to substance use among American Indians... It has been

found that American Indian youth who live on reservations experience double the rates of lifetime alcohol abuse/ dependence than their urban-dwelling counterparts.” other things stated in this article that went into substance abuse were mental health issues, generational trauma, and poor family structure. When it comes to Jaquie, she gave up her first daughter through adoption and her second daughter committed suicide. She lost her mom at a young age who also struggled with abuse and had nowhere to really go. Because of this painful past, she turned to alcohol. It is also because of her unstable nature she is also not well enough to take care of her grandchildren.

Opal has much different feelings about growing up Native. She was young when she was on Alcatraz and with her sister being with Harvey and her mothers drinking getting worse she felt very isolated. When her mother died, she took responsibility to protect her older pregnant sister from their uncle who lusted for them. Opal was forced to grow up so fast due to these conditions that traumatized her. Later in the book, she's still very mature as she raises her sister's grandchildren for her. Because of Opal's past she is hesitant to give the grandkids any knowledge of the Native background and doesn't partake in it herself anymore. This is due to her seeing firsthand the trauma and pain that the Native American culture can bring. She doesn't want the boys to experience anything similar to what she had to go through, but she fails to realize that this only makes the boys more curious about their past as they want to connect with their Heritage. This is a tough subject for Opal though as for her and many other Native Americans reliving the past and embracing culture is a painful thing to do. This is also seen in an article entitled, “Postcolonialism and the Native American Experience: a Theoretical Perspective.” It is stated, “It is in these situations that the struggle over history is among the colonised themselves; between those who would conveniently forget and those who would painfully remember.”

Orvil, one of Jaquie's grandchild is the most curious about his culture. He is a 14 year old who turns to the internet to learn more about the culture and traditions. He grows fascinated and is extremely excited for the pow wow that is coming up. He practices dancing for the powwow hoping to win a cash prize for his aunt. doing all of this he hopes to also show that he is ready to grow up more with the Native American culture. He really wanted opal to teach him more but her response was “we let you learn for yourself then teach you when you’re ready.” The problem was Orvil has shown numerous times that he is ready but feels he is not being heard. He is clearly the most comfortable when he is embracing his culture. This is seen when he tries on the regalia in the mirror where he is proud of the image that he sees back. This pride is not seen much in the story but this is due to Orvils naive and innocent nature.

Blue is another character who struggles with the same identity issues as Orvil. The difference is she is much older but still has just as little knowledge as he does about their culture as she was adopted out of the reserve and into a white wealthy family. Biologically, she was the 1st daughter of Jaquie, but due to her upbringing she never felt Native. However, as she grew up she went on a mission to learn more about her past and to become educated within the native community. She wanted to make a difference and worked hard to make a difference in the community. She helps with the same Pow wow that Orvil and his brothers plan to attend.

As the Pow wow approaches, Opal finds out that the boys plan to go there. Because of that, Opal learns that opening up more about the past and culture is the right thing to do for the boys. She knows that they deserve to know about their culture and that it shouldn't be a bad thing that they want to be connected with it. Because of that, she goes to the powwow to support the boys, but this unfortunately only leads to pain she was trying to avoid. Opal, Jaquie, Blue and the boys have attended A pow wow that was about to be robbed which leads to a mass shooting.

During the shooting Orvil is shot. Overall, this shows how Opal's instincts were right as the Native American culture is so damaged and all she wanted to do was protect the boys. The boys so badly wanted to be connected with their own culture but they were still unaware of the dangers of being a part of it. This sort of danger shouldn't exist as they have a right to learn about their culture, unfortunately this is due to the failed system. They were forced to witness and partake in a violent and upsetting side of reality.

I think that the ending was very tragic but that was Tommy Orange's intention. It wasn't supposed to be a happy ending or a positive story of the lives of Native Americans. The truth is being Native American isn't glamorous. It's like the ending chapter: painful, confusing, and shouldn't be the outcome. The ending was incredible though looking back. They were alluding to the robbery in the very beginning of the book. It was almost a gut feeling that something was bound to go wrong. In the end, the ones who were robbing the powwow were desperate to get the money. It was the only way to pay off their drug debt. Why is the reason that they needed to pay this debt off so badly? It was because they felt this was their only option.

All of this was the outcome of a system that they were put in; they were forced to make these difficult decisions that most likely none of them wanted to make in the first place. In the end, Tony, who was a part of this plan, backed out at the last minute. From there the plan went chaotic and resulted in the shooting. A shooting that resulted in the injury, death, trauma of their own people. However, it is also important to note that the color of the gun that was used for the shooting was white. This is just one of the many symbols that are used throughout the book to show that if you put Native Americans and other minorities into a system that was never meant to protect or benefit them, nothing good is going to come out of it. That is the toxic theme of colonialism that Tommy Orange exposes. *There There* opens our eyes to what has been going on

for generations that society has ignored. It will hopefully show that something needs to change before the Natives are completely wiped out.

Work Cited

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