Breaking the Cycle: Generational Trauma in *There There*

by Alexis Monnet

The novel *There There*, by Tommy Orange, covers the topic of generational trauma throughout the book in different characters and forms. The characters in the novel expose the harsh realities of Native communities who suffer from it. Generational trauma is also called intergenerational or historic trauma, it is a cycle that can be passed down. The generational trauma between several characters in the novel *There There* brings the idea of how vicious the cycle of trauma can be, but perhaps can be broken.

Tommy Orange, the author of *There There*, interwove several themes such as: identity, mental health, generational trauma, cultural awareness, and Native awareness into one book, which is no easy feat. Liz Button, the author of article, "A Q&A With Tommy Orange, Author of June's #1 Indie Next List Pick" writes that Tommy Orange forged one of these themes after spending time working with the urban Indian community, specifically in mental health (Button 1). Since Tommy worked in the mental health community, it explains why he covered mental health topics in-depth. Also, this explains why Jacquie Red Feather, one of his main characters, works in an Indian community service. Orange also states in the article, "Seventy percent of Native people live in cities now…so to have people thinking that what it means to be Native is historical or rural and way outside of mainstream society really isolates you."(Button, 1). In other words, Tommy Orange needed to update the idea of where Natives are now, and what kind of stories they have to offer the world.

Tommy Orange, in an *Entertainment Weekly* magazine interview states, "At some point when I was writing at the Indian center in Oakland, I started to understand the concept of historical trauma. Anybody that works in a mental health field and Native communities knows the word now." Tommy Orange comments on the "trap of history" quote from James Baldwin, "But understanding the concept was an important moment for me, because of the way I've seen my dad and myself and other people — the way history affects through the generations, the echoes of violence. Where does the deep sadness come from? Why are people struggling? I wanted that to play out in real characters, in real time — the effects of history, where you start from and what your people did to get you there" (Canfield 1). By commenting on the concept of historical trauma within his own characters, Orange is confirming that within the Native community, people struggle with it and the need for change is essential. So, how does one identify the generational trauma in the novel? First, a clear definition is needed.

According to Brown-Rice, author of "Examining the Theory of Historical Trauma Among Native Americans" historical trauma consists of three main components, "(a) the widespread nature of it in many Indigenous communities, (b) historic traumatic events resulting in distress and collective loss for contemporary community members, and (c) the purposeful, destructive intent of outsiders who perpetuated the traumatic events (Brave Heart 2000; Evans-Campbell 2008)" (6). More importantly, there is a way these three components are passed down from generation to generation. In essence, it is based on behavior. "Weiss and Weiss (2000) described direct transmission, or transposition, as evidenced by children learning to think and behave in challenging ways similar to their parents, which results in children living aspects of their parents' traumas as if they were their own; as if they had been there" (Brown-Rice 6). A lot of children follow their parents footsteps, specifically with behavior. If a child sees their parent

suppressing emotions or watches them cope with their traumas in unhealthy ways, they are likely to follow suit. The historical trauma their parents went through eventually creates problems physically and mentally in their future. The mental trauma and ability to transmit it for generations is a recipe for an endless trauma cycle. The three components comprised together are all found in *There There* through different characters including: Orvil, Lony, and Loother Red Feather, Jacquie Red Feather, Manny and Daniel Gonzales, Tony Loneman and Opal Victoria Bear Shield.

An important aspect of examining generational trauma and how connects to *There There* requires close attention to the novel's aspects with two writing theories. Tyson's psychoanalytical theory and post-colonial theory connect why Orange wrote this novel to expose through characters real people who have experienced the effects of generational trauma. The characters specifically expose different forms of generational trauma and what it may look like depending on the person.

Unhomeliness is an aspect of the post-colonial theory that ties into Opal Victoria Bear Shield's character. Specifically, when she explains why she is so harsh to her grandsons. Tyson explains, "Unhomeliness is the feeling of having no stable cultural identity-nor real home in any culture- that occurs to people who do not belong to the dominant culture and have rejected their own culture as inferior" (Tyson 250). She does not explain to Lony, Loother, or Orvil their Native culture. Instead, she is shielding them from it. "She needs to push them harder because it will take more for them to succeed than someone who is not Native. It's because she failed to do anything more than disappear herself. She's no-nonsense with them because she believes life will do so its best to get at you" (Orange 165). She explains in order for them to be successful people, the boys will need to disappear more than she did. While Opal is projecting her feelings of her

own generational trauma onto them, she is also preventing them from experiencing their own form of identity. Since she feels she does not belong in their community, she is also depriving the boys from knowing more about their culture. So, they have to research for themselves what being Native means to them. This traumatic cycle Opal has experienced, then, is also transferring into the next generation. The feeling of needing to push the boys also exhibits characteristics of the psychoanalytical theory.

For Opal, the psychoanalytical theory applies to her because of her defensive traumatic behaviors. In this particular chapter, Opal is projecting her trauma onto other people. Defenses of psychoanalytical behavior include avoiding people, places, or situations that remind one of the painful experiences, and displacing negative feelings about one person on someone else (Tyson 84). Opal clearly exhibits these characteristics through avoiding her cultural identity and not telling the boys about their mother, Jamie. As for other characters, the psychoanalytical theory allows characters such as Manny and Daniel Gonzales's traumatic experience of seeing their father abuse their mother from a different angle. Manny and Daniel were playing video games when their father pushed their mother into a wall, resulting in Manny pulling his father off of her (Orange 176). The psychoanalytical theory connects emotional problems such as substance abuse and engaging in unwarranted behavior to people who have experienced trauma (Tyson 83). Daniel and Manny's parental abuse also explains their engagement in substance abuse and unwarranted behavior, specifically the participation in the mass shooting at the powwow. These traumatic experiences Orange writes into the book expose the damaging and horrendous cycle of generational trauma through these characters.

As for a character like sweet, sweet, Tony Loneman, his trauma actions are not based on behavior, but can soon be influenced by it thanks to "The Drome". "Children with Fetal Alcohol

Spectrum Disorder (FASD) may be particularly vulnerable to attachment disorganization and disruption due to early and repeated placements in various homes, often precipitated by addiction issues in families of origin" (Brown-Rice 3). This can be reflected in Tony Loneman and his struggle with FASD. Though he is not in various homes he feels a need to belong and have a sense of normalcy. When he puts his regalia on, he cannot see "The Drome". The trauma inflicted onto Tony comes from his mother's abandonment because she is in jail. Since his mother used alcohol to cope with her own trauma, it gave Tony a trauma of his own. He now has to live with "The Drome" with the rest of his life. Yehuda et. Al claim in Brown-Rice's article, "Disorganized attachment can be outside the control of caregivers, particularly with caregivers who are dealing with their own addiction and unrecognized trauma issues. Emotional abuse and neglect may be linked to parents who are experiencing PTSD symptoms of avoidance, numbing and strong emotions" (3). Disorganized attachment can also indicate historical trauma, which is a burden amongst Indigenous people; because people today are unable to cope with their trauma, it passes down to their children and can *possibly* create neglect and unrecognized trauma issues. This is connected to future generations because it can be transmitted to children through a learned behavior. Three characters in the novel can potentially show these signs if there was a sequel.

For *There There*, there are three characters who could possibly learn the behaviors of their grandmother, Jacquie. Orvil, Lony, and Loother are three boys who are vastly different despite being brothers. Their mother Opal recalls feeling spider legs in her own leg after helping Jacquie escape from their creepy uncle. Jacquie has tattoos of spider webs on her feet, she looks at them when contemplating drinking. Orvil also feels spiders in his legs when learning about Native traditions. All of these resemble a trap, a possible trauma trap. Opal and Orvil were

emerging into adulthood when life changing events happened. There is hope for Lony and Loother, though, since they can look up to Orvil as a positive influence. Still, being in the presence of a grandparent who drinks could result in Lony and Loother following suit. Even if Jacquie is trying to stay sober.

Another important aspect of generational trauma is what happens when it is left untreated. Jacquie's only treatment for instance, includes going to AA meetings and being a counselor of the Indian community service Center. If the trauma is left untreated, the symptoms in the next generation carry through. Brown-Rice implies that second generation parents can live their parents trauma in their lives, such as abandonment, depression, and guilt, and transmit their depression, anxiety, and regret to their own children (6). In other words, for people like Orvil and his brothers, their personalities in *There There* may be affected by Jacquie, Opal, and even Victoria. Thus, in the future, if Orvil keeps his emotions suppressed, or is severely depressed around his own children, he hands the vicious cycle of trauma to his own kids. But there is hope for people who recognize their trauma and seek treatment or resources.

There has been a rise in treatment and resource options for those who suffer from generational trauma, even in the Native community. A long tradition in Indigenous culture is storytelling. Storytelling, according to *Native Hope*, can help with generational trauma. "When a story introduces a likeable character facing a difficult problem, oxytocin causes the brain to empathize with the character's situation and cortisol causes the brain to feel stress over the character's problem. These reactions lead to the listener/reader being invested in the character's plight. This connection can be so strong it can move people to action" (*Native Hope).* Essentially, by carrying on the tradition of storytelling, people can empathize with someone who has been through trauma and can help bring people to action. So, for people suffering from

generational trauma, storytelling can be an outlet, as well as listening to others for reassurance that they are not alone. Another related resource includes blogging. It is a less social way of communicating and may be more comforting for those who are introverted or just better writers. By subscribing to the blog people can read other powerful stories, look for inspiration, and hear from healing Natives around the world (*Native Hope*). Mary Annette Pember writes in an article that there are ways to heal from trauma. She wrote specific healing methods for Native Americans. Another form of healing is building resilience from trauma, which includes meditation, spiritual practices, moving toward goals, making connections, keeping things in perspective, have a positive view of oneself, maintain hopefulness, and more (Pember 8). Resilience is not built in a day; it requires a lot of practice and dedication. Though it can be extremely rewarding. For people who have trauma like the characters in *There There*, there is hope of breaking the cycle.

Since *There There* is raising awareness with several themes, it is essential for readers to understand why generational trauma is just one many reason why people should read the novel. It guides readers outside of Indigenous communities to realize the seriousness of why so many Indigenous people carry this deadly cycle from one generation to the next. The vicious cycle can be detrimental to mental and physical health. Therefore, readers should take away the underlying issues in the novel seriously and become educated on the topic of generational trauma.

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