

The Unspoken Trauma Between Generations:

The Shield of Red Feathers

by Brooke Oitker

Generational trauma, while not a new concept by any means, is something that is overlooked more often than not due to the fact that it simply does not affect every person's day-to-day life. According to an article written by Claire Gillespie at Health.com, "Generational trauma, also known as transgenerational trauma, is often described as trauma that extends from one generation to the next and is not something that affects just one person singularly" (Gillespie). It is oftentimes silent, unintentionally taught or implied throughout someone's life. Though every person can be affected, there are certain populations that are more easily impacted with its effects. Children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, for instance, are likely to be affected, as are many minority communities in the United States.

Though generational trauma is silent and difficult to define as a whole, Tommy Orange, author of political fiction book *There There*, makes use of it in its entirety through displays of the actions and thoughts of his characters. Signs of transgenerational trauma vary from person to person, as well as community to community, but often include high anxiety, depression, a sensitive fight or flight response, issues with self-esteem and self-confidence (Gillespie). Generational trauma can also lead to many mental health problems, self-harm, and in extreme cases, suicide. With these symptoms known, it becomes easier to observe and analyze characters to look for such signs in Orange's novel.

Characters like Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield and her grandson Orvil Red Feather exhibit signs of generational trauma based around their parental figures. Although generational

trauma spans from one generation to the next, the younger generations are affected by the teachings of the older generations. For Opal and Jacquie, we only get a very brief synopsis of their mother and Orvil's mother is absent from his life.

Opal Bear Shield and Jacquie Red Feather are two characters that are introduced in the first section of the book. Readers quickly learn that they are half-sisters who share a mother but have different fathers, which is why their last names are different. When Opal is first brought in as a character, it is with the news that her family would be moving to Alcatraz Island. When she asked her mother why they were going there, the only explanation she got was, "We're going to be with our relatives. Indians of All Tribes" (Orange 48). There was a disconnect between her and her mother that is likely to have existed most if not all of Opal's life.

Later in Opal's first chapter, there is a part where her teddy bear, Two Shoes, begins talking to her. She tells it to "stop talking like an Indian" (Orange 51), as though the bear were actually talking to her and not just a vivid hallucination. This gives an indication that Opal herself is already disconnected from the Native ways that her ancestors grew up with, which is seen more in later chapters. There are two things that new readers could find "wrong" with this specific scene between Opal and Two Shoes. One, Opal is talking to an inanimate stuffed bear who does not possess the means to talk. Two, Opal described Two Shoes' way of talking, though rudimentary at best, as talking "like an Indian," as though she did not truly believe herself to be one. It could be argued that the conversation between her and Two Shoes happened on a subconscious level; however, it would still be up in the air if she thought herself separate from her Native American heritage. This disconnect from her own past, her people, drives and "us versus them" mentality, even if the "us" and "them" are one and the same. She struggles to find her own identity that does not align with one side or another. Due to her upbringing, she feels

isolated from her Native culture while being equally segregated from the urbanized culture of Oakland.

In later chapters, once Opal is grown up, readers can see that she never appeared to reconnect to her heritage, which ended up affecting her great-nephews, though she called them her grandsons. Opal is on her route for work as a mail delivery person. While she never appeared to acknowledge her heritage, it seemed like there were things that stuck with her into adulthood, like superstitions. As Orange writes, “She lives by a superstition she would never admit to. It’s a secret she holds so tight to her chest she never notices it. She lives by it, like breathing” (160). Some superstitions come with time, like never stepping on a cracked sidewalk. However, for Opal, it is unlucky and lucky spoons; unlucky and lucky numbers. Odd numbers are inherently bad omens while even numbers are supposedly lucky. While not specifically mentioned, these superstitions seem to stem from what little knowledge is given about her childhood.

Generational trauma also can lead to depression, something that can end up having the person bear regrets later in life. Opal is one of those people: “Opal is full of regrets, but not about the things she’s done. That damn island, her mom, Ronald, and then the shuffling, stifling rooms and faces in foster care” (Orange 161). She regrets things that are out of her control, something typically associated with those who have experienced trauma in one way or another is the past.

Opal is also the legal guardian of her sister’s children, Orvil, Loothe, and Lony. Another sign of someone affected by generational trauma is a general mistrust of people. Orange describes, “Opal regularly checks their phones while they sleep. She looks at what pictures and videos they take, their text messages, and their browser histories,” (163). She does not trust her grandsons to not abuse the gift she has given them and does not allow them their own privacies as adolescent boys. This might be due to the lack of a proper parental figure growing up. Her

mother died when she was young, her Uncle Ronald attempted to sexually assault her sister and she cracked him upside the head with a bat, and then her sister's eventual departure from her life as well.

Opal Bear Shield is a conundrum of a character. Though she exhibits certain tendencies that align with her Native American heritage, such as superstitions, even if many cultures have such things. When it comes to her grandsons, however, she shields them from anything to do with their culture. Orange writes, "Ever since they were in her care, Opal had been openly against any of them doing anything Indian. She treated it all like it was something they could decide for themselves when they were old enough" (118). According to Kerstin Reinschmidt et al., unresolved generational trauma has been conceptualized as one underlying factor for the loss of traditional values and practices as a contributing factor in unhealthy lifestyle change (64). One unhealthy lifestyle change for Opal's grandsons would be the fear of their grandmother finding out about their interactions with their Native heritage. Invoking fear of an object, idea, or even someone's nature only leads to more mistrust, and has the potential to further ostracize the boys from the lives they deserve to have.

Reinschmidt et al. are accompanied in their ideals by Laurelle Myhra, who states, "Thoughts about historical trauma are associated with emotional distress, including anger, anxiety, and depression" (19). Together, these authors show that Opal's character exudes signs of emotional distress by hiding her culture and Orvil's character exhibits signs of early-stage anxiety by hiding his knowledge of their culture from his grandmother. Unresolved generational trauma causes problems like these within families, allowing room for both intentional and unintentional microaggressions, mistrust, and a whole slew of mental issues to grow and fester.

Generational trauma, as stated, can lead to depression, which can lead to suicide in severe cases. Daniel Dickerson and Carrie Johnson write, “For example, Native Americans between the ages of 15 and 24 have the highest suicide rates in the United States compared to other racial/ethnic groups” (56). Dickerson and Johnson also mention that Native American youths experience significantly higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse compared to any other ethnic/racial group in the United States (56). This holds true in *There There* as Orvil’s mother, Jamie Red Feather, took her own life as well, but was also a drug user. Orange writes, “But all Jamie ever did was push them out. Didn’t even quit using when they were in her. The three of them had all begun life in withdrawal. Heroin babies. Jamie shot herself between the eyes when Orvil was six, his brothers four and two” (120).

Between being kept in the dark about his culture by Opal, his shield for the unnecessary traumas of their history, and witnessing firsthand the traumatic experience of his mother’s death, Orvil is a prime example as to what generational trauma can do to a person. He demonstrates many of the signs of generational trauma. He has anxiety centered around his grandmother and her aversion to all things Native American and their culture, likely to have PTSD from his mother’s suicide, and has both self-esteem and self-confidence issues. Orange describes, “The regalia is itchy and faded in color. It’s way too small. He doesn’t look the way he hoped he would. He doesn’t know what he expected to find. Being Indian didn’t fit either” (121). Orvil stands in front of the mirror but does not see himself being Native American, nor being anything else. He just sees the reflection of a lost boy staring back at him.

Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield was the safeguard that protected her grandsons from experiencing the trauma of their people’s past, yet only hindered them in the end by denying

them an identity of their own. She left them floundering to discover who they were and only succeeded in restarting the cycle of anxiety and secrets. Orvil Red Feather was her grandson who knew not of who he was because of his grandmother's actions. He developed self-esteem issues and could barely look at himself in the mirror without feeling as though he was impersonating someone else. He tried to discover his heritage and only found himself displaced in a world he knew nothing about. His mother had not cared for him and his grandmother's care only drove a wedge further between his culture and his identity. All that he learned about his history, he learned online, hidden away from his grandmother's prying eyes. He feared her disapproval and sought to learn everything on his own.

Generational trauma is silent. It is unspoken. It is something that affects many people but is brushed aside as some mental disorder or another. It spans from one generation to the next, never failing to impact the generation that follows. Many children fall victim to its soundless whispers as though it were a tranquil dream. Whites, African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, they are all affected by generational trauma in one way or another. It is something left to the generation that comes next to resolve but only fixes to restart the cycle. Tommy Orange's *There There* may not be a book about generational trauma but he certainly found a way to incorporate its lessons into his characters.

Transgenerational trauma does more than just give children and adults mental illnesses like depression. It can lead to substance abuse, early deaths, self-mutilation, and anxiety. These all, of course, have their own impacts within the human mind and body. In extreme cases of unresolved trauma, the victim may even decide to take their own life. Unfortunately, not enough people are fully aware of its impacts and brush it aside as another person who has depression or anxiety, or just has a bad outlook on their body. Becoming aware of generational trauma is the

first step into resolving it and letting the next generation heal from the generations before them. History is bloody and cruel and traumatizing but it is the job of the older generations to protect the younger generations from that trauma. Exposing them too young just starts a cycle of more trauma. That is why generational trauma is so important to learn about, so generations above know that what they say and do to children when they are young will eventually hurt them in the future if they are not careful. It is often unspoken but it is still there, and it will strike when least expected.

Works Cited

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