Not Happy, Not Sad:

Why the Ending of *There There* Might Not Be as Redemptive as Expected

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We knew the storylines in *There There* were going to converge in a hectic way from the start. The characters all seemed to be headed in the same direction: to the Powwow. We also know that, because some of the characters initiated a shooting at the powwow, the story actually seemed to end in chaos. Keeping this in mind, the ending, many can think, was not traditional. In fact, many can agree that it wasn't a happy ending, either. It lacked a redemptive quality that feels satisfying to many viewers. However, we know that not all endings need to be happy and, in some ways, not having a happy ending can offer more to a conversation because it leaves more doors open. I argue that the ending of this novel actually makes a lot of statements by rejecting that happy ending. When looking at this story through a lens of postcolonial theory, we can see the ending is an example of rejecting the western norm. We can also see the importance of telling a story with a more ambiguous—or even a tragic—ending.

Before we go into analyzing the entire book, it might be important to understand what Tommy Orange intended when writing this book. In an open discussion when people were able to ask him questions, he was asked why he preferred the "sadder" ending. He responded by saying, "Other Native people who have read by book, that's the one thing I haven't heard: that it's sad. So, I think people who have gone through hard experiences don't necessarily get the same takeaway. I hope it's sadness with transcendence, or sadness with hope…" (Orange 2018). By saying this, Tommy Orange suggests that this story might resonate differently for people of different backgrounds. Specifically, we can likely assume he hoped Native American audiences

or other audiences of similar backgrounds might find more hope and transcendence through the ending. Keeping this in mind, it will also be important to unpack the ending of the book.

The book begins and ends with Tony Loneman's perspective, so we'll talk a lot about him. We can assume that he dies in the book based on the way the final chapter ends: "Tony needs to be light now. Let the wind sing through the holes in him, listen to the birds singing. Tony isn't going anywhere. And somewhere in there, inside him, where he is, where he'll always be, even now It is morning, and the birds, the birds are singing" (Orange pp. 290). We know that Tony got shot by bullets he helped smuggle into the powwow, which his friends shot through 3D-printed guns. We also know that Loneman was born with fetal alcohol syndrome which he calls "the Drome." We see that he struggles in society because he's both an Indian and he suffers from a disability. In the end, we see him, again, fall victim to violence—especially a type of violence that is epidemic in the United States: mass shootings. There's little sense of redemption and "everything being fine in the end." Still, from what we know about Tommy Orange's intention of writing "sadness with hope," we see that Tony Loneman's death written in a beautiful way. We also don't get a sense that we know *exactly* what is happening next. There's a lot of "what if" when it comes to Tommy Orange's writing. We also never find out if Orvil lives or dies. Blue and Jacquie Redfeather never have time to make amends and get to know more about each other and neither do Harvey and Edwin. From my point of view and what I expect in the stories I read, this was strange to me. Keeping this in mind, this thought process led me down a road where I knew it was important to analyze my own expectations.

It is worthwhile to acknowledge, when reading this story and looking at it in an analytical way, that I am a white woman. A lot of what I have read and what has formed my expectations of literature have also come from white people and therefore a colonial point of view. It's also

likely that, since the lady who asked the question was white, that her background might have impacted the ways that she views the novel. We both thought the ending of the book was sad—or at least non-traditional. Due to the systemic nature of oppression in this country, people like me are less likely to experience the slow-burning situations like widespread alcoholism, premature death, and other issues we see in this book because we had the benefit of white privilege. These systemic and historic problems play a major role in this story. In fact, all of the characters experience at least one of these factors or more. Keeping that in mind, it's worthwhile to look at what types of purposes this might have.

Analyzing this story from a postcolonial point of view is not the only way to view this story, but it's simple to understand why this lens is useful: this story is all about Native Americans in a modern world, dealing with the fallout of hundreds of years of oppression. One of the ideas I will be focusing on deeply is the idea of characters and authors resisting colonial oppression psychologically. According to Tyson, "…psychological resistance, is perhaps the most important kind of resistance, for without it it is unlikely that other kinds of resistance would ever occur" (pp. 251). What type of things might these characters be psychologically resisting? I argue that, by resisting the happy ending, they are rejecting an entire ideology that links happy endings with colonialist ideas.

Colonialist ideology is quite utilitarian—almost Machiavellian, Samson argus (pp. 220). We see that the main philosophers that guided the foundation of the manifest destiny and other ideals leading to the creation of the United States also link to the negative aspects of Colonial fallout. For instance, Samson writes, "The obsession with money that Smith describes is deeply entwined with a notion that happiness is about greed, acquisition and consumption" (pp. 219), going on to write, "Adam Smith attributed the rapid accumulation of wealth in the American

colonies to agriculture in 'virgin territory' (Caton, 1985), depicting economic well-being as a matter of individual enterprise transplanted to territories where lands could simply be appropriated from hapless indigenous inhabitants" (Samson pp. 221). Keeping this in mind, we can assume that "conquering" something in an absolute way is a popular ending for dominant, colonialist cultures and stories. Utilitarianism itself suggests that "all's well that ends well." We see, however, that that is not necessarily the case in reality. The oppression caused by this "manifest destiny" and more acts of white settlers ended up impacting how they also used stories to justify the subjugation of Native Americans. This, of course, caused a clear divide. We see in "Regimes of Happiness" by Colin Samson, this is clear when he writes, "There are no indigenous Utilitarians. There is little in indigenous peoples' heritages to suggest that greed, as Senator Dawes said, is the basis of civilization, or that all people achieve happiness and that societies balance through universal egoism. Rather, there is every possibility that indigenous people who have had this version of happiness imposed upon them" (pp. 232). In the end, we see that the overarching utilitarian belief is that happy endings are achieved at the end of the story.

Now, we've discussed a lot about how this makes *There There* stand apart, but we have not necessarily discussed why or how this is so. First, we might point out how the book and the story itself takes forms that are significant because it is using modernist techniques that have long been used to reject the western/colonial ways of storytelling. Brown writes, "By supplementing conventional genres such as Western romance, modernist bildungsroman, and realist-naturalist narrative with modernist concerns and techniques, including repetition, resignification, internal monologue, intertextuality, multiple perspectives, and ethnographic (re)narrativization, Keresztesi argues that there writers 'subvert the very genres that have historically denied them realistic and authentic subjectivity and self-representation in fiction'"

(Brown pp. 304). We see that Tommy Orange uses a lot of different perspectives in his story. Especially in the end of the story, we see that each character returns one more time in the last 50 pages of the book, even dying in different ways and experiencing different types of death (Orange). We see that, by using these multiple perspectives and shaping a story that is *formatically* different from the norm of colonial-dominated storytelling, he does a few important things. First: he tells a complex story with characters that impact each other in meaningful ways. These characters in the story are more representative of Native voices because they 1) are Native, and 2) actually come from an authentic Native person. Orange also turns this into a way to reject the concept of a utilitarian happy ending.

Why is this so important? Well, we see that this is a vital way that Native voices, indigenous voices, and even other marginalized voices can form narratives that heal wounds of the past. There are many ways this can happen, but one of them is by changing the way that memory is defined. We see that when discussing "politics of memory." Dahl writes, "We might think of the politics of memory in terms of a two-step process. The first step involved acknowledging the existence of past injustices as well as their causal connection to the present. The second step, in turn, involves paying attention to the narrative practices by which past injustices are given collective meaning" (Dahl et. Al pp. 905). In this case, the past injustices are often perpetrated by narratives that make the endings of Native stories end up happy, when that is not the reality. One example is the movie *Pocahontas.* This is a Disney film that, not surprisingly, has a happy ending. However, the actual Pocahontas did not end like that. We see that the Disney ending helped to paint-over the atrocities that the white settlers committed and continued to commit for centuries after. It destroyed the "causal connection to the present" that Dahl mentioned. We see that Orange takes care in explaining the connection to the distant past,

but he also paints a careful picture of *how* and *why* the shootings at the powwow happen. He explains that everything has a cause and effect. In the process he does something else that also invites further healing of wounds: he calls white people in. We see this works in *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee* that, though Brown is not native, he reveals the truth about the tragedies and the atrocities that Native people are subjugated to throughout history. Dahl writes, "…By inviting his largely white-settler readership to identify with native perspectives, Brown enjoins his settler audience to share in that despair" (pp. 911). Orange, we see, has called in White people to empathize and embrace a different type of story with a new ending.

This story's ending, though abrupt and different, is intentional and profound. It does a lot to open doors, both into how we view experiences of others and how we think of the future. This story, without a doubt, rejects what we think of the typical "Disney ending" and offer an authenticity that colonial literature has consistently robbed from Native voices.

Works Cited

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