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Perpetual Weapons

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Perpetual Weapons

Tommy Orange's *There There* is riddled with motifs that connect characters in more than just a literal, social sense. When multiple characters are shown studying their reflections, for example, the reader realizes they share something on a deeper level, that no matter how different these peoples' lives are, they all experience some of the same subconscious motivations. Further, an element of the story that ties not only the characters together, but the entire Native American community, is gun violence. Throughout the entirety of his novel *There There*, Tommy Orange uses gun violence, specifically bullets, as a timeless symbol of corruption and hate in Native American communities; a theme that can be easily reflected in general American culture as an ever growing epidemic.

Orange opens his book with a briefing on the genocide of Native Americans, explaining the brutal ways in which his ancestors were killed. One focus of this prologue is the introduction of firearms to America. What used to be a peaceful country, not yet industrialized, was invaded by foreign technology, giving the Natives no chance to defend themselves. "The bullets were premonitions, ghosts from dreams of a hard, fast future"; they "became the promise of what was to come, the speed and the killing, the hard, fast lines of borders and buildings" (Orange 10). When Native communities were attacked by colonists with guns, it was the end of an era; nothing would ever be the same again. The arrival of these bullets signified the beginning of industrialization, the execution of not only Native Americans, but of pure nature

and wildlife. This tragedy is later demonstrated in the “conversation” depicted between Opal and her teddy bear, Two Shoes. Two Shoes explains that white men have violently killed Native Americans and bears alike upon infiltrating their home with weapons: “sister, they slit all our throats,” he professes (Orange 51).

Later on, the story’s interlude directly foreshadows the book’s ending by discussing a shooting that takes place at a powwow. Orange writes that “a bullet is a thing so fast it’s hot and so hot it’s mean and so straight it moves clean through a body, makes a hole, tears, burns, exits, goes on, hungry, or it remains, cools, lodges, positions” (141). Orange personifies these bullets as if they have evil minds of their own, as if they are determined to thrust pain and suffering onto anyone nearby. These bullets are reckless machines without morals, they do not discriminate against children or the innocent, they just keep going. Therefore, it is implied that those who operate guns, those who set these bullets free, are just as cruel and heartless as the senseless pieces of metal. Additionally, as a possible reference back to the prologue, it is mentioned that “the bullets have been coming from miles. Years” (Orange 141). Metaphorically, these bullets causing havoc at the modern powwow are the same ones that the colonists brought into the country centuries ago; they have one purpose and one purpose only: to kill mercilessly.

Finally, the powwow Orange’s characters attend, the event earlier hinted at in the interlude, acts as the finale of *There There*; it is what completely merges not only the characters’ lives with one another, but the more informational segments of the novel with the plotline. The first “Big Oakland Powwow” was meant to symbolize that Native American culture still exists, that the characters are “a present tense people, modern, relevant, [and] alive,” yet, it abruptly concludes with its celebrants lying dead “in the grass [while] wearing feathers” (Orange 141). The only difference between this present day occurrence and the historical arrival of white men

to America is that at the powwow, a group of Native Americans were the ones to sabotage their own culture. The way in which this group of characters have adopted the violent role of the white colonists could easily be a reference to assimilation: a theme directly related to guns in the way that both have oppressed the Native American culture. Possibly, the most descriptive scene in this shooting is the final chapter in which the book's focus shifts full circle, back to Tony Loneman. Without a doubt, Tony's body receives more bullets than anyone else's as he struggles to run towards Charles. In a way parallel to the book's very first description of mechanical massacre, Orange writes that "the bullet feels fast and hot in [Tony's] leg even though he knows the bullet can't be moving anymore" (286). This repetition of describing the high speed and temperature of the bullets throughout the entirety of the book solidifies the idea that nothing has changed; even "assimilated," "urban" Indians must face the same violence their ancestors once did. Further, much like the personification of the bullets in the interlude, Tony feels "the hot heavy weight and speed of the bullets do[ing] their best to push him back, pull him down," proving once again that Tommy Orange has the intent of making these weapons just as antagonistic as the people operating them (Orange 287). These constant parallelisms, connecting the events of the past to those of the present, symbolically illustrate that although time progresses, violence doesn't end. In fact, this specific element of Orange's storytelling can be mirrored in the seemingly immortal second amendment of the United States Constitution.

Even though it has been hundreds of years since the creation of the second amendment, the right to bear arms, the American government has not attempted to alter it, despite the fact that guns are becoming increasingly more dangerous and deadly than they previously were in more primitive times. As a matter of fact, this amendment was only created because "the men writing the Bill of Rights wanted every citizen to be in the militia, and they wanted everyone in the

militia to be armed” (Shusterman). The reasoning involved in the birth of this amendment was based on the fact that the United States did not have, or want, a professional full-time army of soldiers. Additionally, “if someone was prohibited from participating in the militia, the leaders of the Founders’ generation would *not* have wanted them to have access to weapons” (Shusterman). Presently, America actually has its own army full of voluntary soldiers, making it so that everyone does not have an obligation to physically get up and fight for the country at random, thus, rendering the second amendment irrelevant when considering its original purpose. If American citizens were to abide by the original intentions of this law, they would not be able to own guns unless they took part in the U.S. army. But, of course, “as with all things constitutional, Americans are adapting 18th-century laws to fit 21st-century lives” (Shusterman).

The fact that the second amendment has not been altered since 1776 is quite shocking as mechanical weapons, just as any other technology, have been developed in ways that have made them more effective than ever before. Unlike other machines, such as cars, guns last for an incredibly long time. As Dr. Richard F. Corlin explains in a speech on the topic, many people already have old guns that work as any gun should, so in order to keep the industry running, manufacturers must create new and improved weapons at every chance they get. “These changes make guns better suited for crime, because they are easier to carry and more likely to kill or maim whether they are used intentionally or unintentionally” (Corlin). Sadly, largely because of America’s refusal to set down its guns, shootings like the one in *There There* happen all too often. Even worse is the fact that many of these tragedies could have been prevented with stricter gun laws. For example, the United Kingdom managed to ban the possession of all handguns after one single school shooting in Scotland (Cooke). Meanwhile, the U.S. government has yet to take any drastic action on the subject after years of mass shootings.

As a matter of fact, the number of guns in the United States has only ever grown over time; as of 2018, there are 120.5 guns per one hundred people living in America, which is more than double the amount in Yemen, the country holding the second-highest ratio of guns per hundred people: 52.8 (BBC). As of 2017, guns take part in 73 percent of all American homicides, while in the stricter United Kingdom, they take part in only three percent (BBC). A statistic like this goes to show that limiting the public's access to guns actually does bring the majority of gun violence to a halt; even though some criminals may still have access to guns after a ban, it does more good than harm when looking at the big picture.

With so much evidence in favor of stricter gun laws, one might think that more people would stop glorifying the outdated second amendment, but this simply isn't the case. One reason as to why this might be so is America's fixation on threats unrelated to what hides within the country. Ever since 9/11, terrorism has been viewed as one of the most lethal threats to American citizens, when, in actuality, "nearly as many Americans will die [in any given month] from gun violence than died on 9/11" (Cohen). For comparison, in the aftermath of 9/11, "the United States invaded two nations, spent trillions of dollars and reoriented the federal government's national security footing toward the fight against terrorism," yet, following years of gun violence, there may be discussion of togetherness and change, but no legal action beyond the basic arrest of the offender is taken (Cohen). Undoubtedly, 9/11 was a horrible tragedy, but so was the Sandy Hook shooting, in which over 20 children were killed, so was the Las Vegas shooting, in which 58 people were massacred, and so was the Pulse Nightclub shooting, in which 49 members of the LGBTQ community were targeted and murdered out of hate, to name only a few incidents (BBC). Acts of terrorism from overseas and acts of terrorism from within the

United States itself bear the same dreadful results, so why won't the government react in the same logical way?

One possible factor that may greatly contribute to the longevity of America's anti-gun-control attitude is that for many pro-gun citizens, the right to bear arms represents patriotism and freedom; they become defensive if they feel this element of their freedom is being threatened. Yet, on the other hand, this idea of guns equaling "freedom" may be a cover up for men who experience thoughts of a more vulnerable nature. Psychoanalytical research suggests that one "motivation for the acquisition of guns as personal possessions has been attributed to feelings of insecurity or to the need for a sense of control, mastery, or power" (Cooke). In other words, unconfident men often feel as if possessing a gun grants them more masculinity, something valued greatly amongst males in American culture. After decades of misogyny, men are afraid to be perceived as even slightly feminine, so they often go to great lengths and act in extreme ways as a means to be perceived by society as strong, powerful, and manly. Thus, "the introduction of regulatory gun control" "diminish[es], even threaten[s]," this "particular image of functional masculinity" (Cooke). Overall, for those who feel as if their life is out of their control, guns make them feel as if they have more power over their destiny.

In relation to *There There*, could this yearning for control have been one of the factors that drove the group of robbers, Octavio in particular, toward gun violence? After a brutal childhood and the tragic death of his mother and brother in a car accident, Octavio must have felt defeated, as if he could do nothing to change his fate. Growing up, he was exposed to a great amount of violence - often hiding from people with guns and other weapons - so it was most likely second nature for him to view guns as tools that could get him what he wanted: money, and therefore, happiness. Tommy Orange illustrates this idea in not only Octavio's obsession with guns, but

also when describing his simplest actions. Before using a literal gun to force Calvin to assist him in the robbery, “his eyes turned into bullets--he shot them around the room” (Orange 93).

Octavio is ultimately a product of what his ancestors’ massacrist brought to the United States; the violence he faced all his life has transformed him into someone who needs guns to act. It’s ironic that Octavio somewhat represents the very weapons used to kill his forefathers, but even more ironically, Octavio is shot to death by the guns he himself 3D printed. As a side note, this metaphorical suicide even further elaborates on the United States’ gun issues, as approximately sixty percent of gun deaths are accounted for by suicide (BBC). Ultimately, Octavio is yet another Native American casualty of the white man’s invasion of America.

Although *There There* has many depressing undertones, Orange leaves many elements of his novel open-ended and somewhat filled with hope. One moment such as this takes place in the waiting room of the hospital after the powwow shooting, focusing on Opal, whose grandson, Orvil, had just been wounded. The first line of this chapter is “Opal knows Orvil’s gonna make it,” and although it is followed by some doubt, Opal’s final appearance in the novel comes full circle when the doctor emerges from the hospital (284). It was previously mentioned that Opal has “good” and “bad” numbers, so when she counts the amount of times the door swings and it ends on number eight, a “good” number, the reader knows positive news must follow. The reader is given the power to decide for themselves what happens to Orvil, as well as many of the other characters; the audience has the ability to change the outcome depending on their interpretation. Similarly, America as a whole has the ability to change its own future, to prevent innocent children like Orvil from being killed, whether it be at a powwow or a more common battleground such as school. In the same way that some of Orange’s characters were killed,

many American citizens have already suffered from gun violence, but just as Orvil's fate lies in the reader's hands, the fate of the United States lies in the hands of its subjects; there is still hope.

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