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Studies in Multicultural American Literature

Dr. Anita Duneer

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The Impact of the Loss of Indigenous Religious Practices on the Characters in *There There*

Tommy Orange's *There There* tells the story of many characters who encounter one another at a powwow gone horribly wrong. Told from numerous points of view, the novel allows the reader to consider the lives of indigenous people's struggles in modern society. Be it alcoholism, depression, drug abuse, or extreme violence, we see the impact that American governmental policies have had on native people struggling to survive with dignity. One common theme that becomes visible over the course of the book is the damage caused by a loss of religious practice and ceremony. Many aspects of native acculturation have been pervasive and damaging, but the loss of native religion, including the legal use of peyote (a spineless cactus that can induce psychoactive visions) and other medicinal and sacramental plants, might be the most impactful.

The Big Oakland Powwow takes a turn for the worse when a group of young men decide to rob it. In the novel's climax, the robbers turn on one another, the powwow turns into a bloodbath, and many innocent bystanders are injured and killed. The mastermind of the crime is Octavio Gomez, and although it would be easy to despise him, Orange provides the reader with enough of Octavio's backstory to humanize him. We see the impact American policy has had on his family when his father is killed in a drive-by shooting, and his mother and brother are killed

in a drunken driving accident. Through Octavio's experiences, Orange shows us that a big part of his native people's struggle stem from a lack of connection to his native past. We see this point made by Fina, Octavio's grandmother. "Some of us got this feeling stuck inside, all the time, like we've done something wrong. Like we ourselves are something wrong. Like who we are deep inside, that thing we want to name but can't, it's like we're afraid we'll be punished for it. So we hide. We drink alcohol because it helps us feel like we can be ourselves and not be afraid. But we punish ourselves for it. The thing we most don't want has a way of landing right on top of us" (Orange 184-185). She points out the damage done to native people after hundreds of years of America's attempted cultural genocide.

In a paper about loss of native culture, researcher Laurene Armand French points out, "Psychocultural marginality- a loss of one's cultural identity- is likely when American Indians and Alaskan Natives (called "First Nations" and "the Inuit", respectively) are denied access to their traditional cultural values and norms" (French 155). Viewed through this lens, the reader has a better understanding of the impact this lack of cultural identity has on Octavio. We see this in a scene in which Octavio attempts to confront his uncle Sixto, who has recently been paroled for an accident that killed Octavio's mother and brother. Intending to attack him, Octavio follows Sixto into his basement. There Sixto pulls out a medicine box and explains, "We got bad blood in us...Some of these wounds get passed down. Same with what we owe. We should be brown. All that white you see that you got on your skin? We gotta pay for what we done to our own people" (Orange 182). By the time Octavio gets to his grandmother's house, he is quite ill, and after asking several questions, she explains that he has likely been cursed and needs a medicine box of his own. He asks her if she helped Sixto make his medicine box, and she replies, "That boy never let me help him with anything...He thinks he can make it all up himself, but look

where that got him” (Orange 185). Only after Octavio accepts his grandmother’s guidance and learns about their ancestral practices is he able to overcome the curse and get well. Orange shows us how Octavio’s lack of knowledge regarding his native past has left him in such a vulnerable and helpless state living in America today.

Blue is another character that we see struggle with lack of access to her native culture. She is a young woman of unknown native descent who was adopted and raised by a white family. Born with the name Crystal, she discovers her culture when she marries her husband. “Paul and I got married tipi way. Some people call it the Native American Church. Or peyote way. We call peyote medicine because it is... Paul’s dad married us in a tipi ceremony two years ago. In front of that fireplace...That’s when he gave me my name...I needed an Indian name. In Cheyenne... it means the Blue Vapor of Life. Paul’s dad started calling me Blue for short, and it stuck” (Orange 197). Blue’s experiences with the peyote ritual are noteworthy, both because it is a powerful hallucinogen, capable of producing life-altering experiences, and because its use is problematic within the context of American thinking. “Peyote... held a special sacred role within aboriginal cultures. However, peyote and other plant hallucinogens fall within the broad class of illicit drugs within contemporary American society.” (French 156).

The Native American Church that Blue refers to is known by many names. Also known as the Peyote Religion or Peyotism, its designation as a religion dates back to the start of the nineteenth century in the Oklahoma territory, although there is evidence of peyote use in religious ceremony in Texas and Mexico as far back as the early seventeen hundreds. It became a more recognized religion when Comanche chief Quanah Parker, “refined it into a meaningful religious ritual that Indians embraced during the grim early days on the reservation. He would preside over all-night rituals, many of which were concerned with the healing of specific people.

From his Comanches it spread to Kiowas, Wichitas, Pawnees, and Shawnees before the turn of the century” (Gwynne 313-314). The practices that he created would spread through the Great Basin and deep into the Southwest, eventually coming to be known as the Native American Church. When asked about the religion, Quanah explained, “The white man goes into his church and talks *about* Jesus, but the Indian goes into his tipi and talks *to* Jesus” (Gwynne 314). The importance of the peyote ritual by its practitioners cannot be overstated, nor can the damage done by the prohibition of its use by the U.S. government.

Blue gives herself over to this newfound spiritual lifestyle with a passion. “But part of why it went so fast was because of ceremony. Because of that medicine. We sat up every weekend, sometimes it was just me, Paul, and his dad if no one else showed up... You don’t know the medicine unless you know the medicine. We prayed for the whole world to get better and felt it could every morning when we came out of the tipi... In there. I could evaporate and drift up and out through the crisscrossed tipi poles with the smoke and the prayers” (Orange 198-199). So, when her father-in-law dies, she loses touch with much of the cultural knowledge that she has sought. Without his spiritual guidance, her relationship becomes toxic, so she flees in search of a better understanding of her roots, and ends up at the powwow.

Thomas Frank is yet another example of a character that gets caught between modern society and his indigenous past. In his case, his mother was a devout Catholic who fell in love with a member of the Native American Church, only to reject his religion later. Thomas represents those who were raised with a sense of indigenous spirituality, only to have it snatched away. Thomas’ biggest issue is alcoholism, and he understands the root cause. He explains, “Most addictions aren’t premeditated. You slept better. Drinking felt good. But mostly, if there was any real reason you could pinpoint, it was because of your skin. You’d always had skin

problems. Since you can remember. Your dad used to rub peyote gravy on your rashes. That worked for a while. Until he wasn't around anymore. The doctors wanted to call it eczema. They wanted you hooked on steroid creams" (Orange 217). Thomas' story is one that is far too common among indigenous people trying to survive in modern society. When his father's beliefs are in opposition to his mother's Christian faith, their family falls apart, and Thomas is left to his own devices, to try and pick up the pieces and make sense of his identity.

Thomas' medical condition also points to the effectiveness of European versus native medicine. Whereas his ancestral roots call for one cure, his doctors and practitioners of modern medicine turn their back on a form of healing that had been used for centuries. "(Peyote was) first documented by Hernandez in 1651. Hernandez noted that it appeared to have a sweetish and hot taste and –when ground up- was used to alleviate joint pain. It was also used by warriors providing them with courage to fight and the ability to abate thirst, hunger, and fear" (French 161). Were American governmental policy more accepting of native spirituality, Thomas' life might have turned out differently. Were his native traditions and practices more validated, he might have lived a healthier life.

Thomas' mother's view of his native past is important to consider because it forces Thomas to question both of his parents' belief systems, and when he does, he ends up torn between them. He reflects on early memories of his father. "You'd be riding in his red Ford truck to Blockbuster to rent a movie. You'd be listening to your dad's peyote tapes. The tape-staticky gourd-rattle and kettle-drum boom. He liked to listen to it loud. You couldn't stand how noticeable the sound was. How noticeably Indian your dad was. You'd ask him if you could turn it off. You'd make him turn off his tapes" (Orange 216). Even at an early age, he got the sense that there was something wrong with his native side. Thomas reflects on the damage this

perception had on his family. “You wonder if it was your Mom and Christianity, the reason you didn’t go to Powwows and do more Indian things” (Orange 222). He recognizes that he is the product of two people who saw the world in very different ways until they were no longer compatible.

Even after their divorce, Thomas looks to religion, specifically his mothers, to try to understand what became of his family. “Before anyone was awake, your mom was crying into her prayer book. You knew this because tears stain, and you remember tear stains in her prayer book. You looked into the book more than once because you wanted to know what questions, what private conversations, she might have had with God, she who spoke that mad-angel language of tongues in church, she who fell in love with your dad in Indian ceremony she ended up calling demonic” (Orange 223). Through Thomas, Orange shows us a character introduced to two worlds, but never truly a part of either. He shows us the complexity of what it means to be native in America today, and the damage done to native self-perception in the face of American values and beliefs. For him, this discrepancy literally and metaphorically tore his life asunder.

Tommy Orange does a masterful job of portraying the plight of his diverse cast of native people trying to fit in and better themselves in America today in his novel *There There*. Each of his characters is a snapshot of the impact of American political policy toward indigenous people. His novel highlights how “500 years of physical and cultural genocide, including prohibitions against traditional aboriginal customs...many involving the selective use of psychoactive agents, contributed greatly to the current social, health, and economic problems among Native Americans, both in Indian country and in urban Indian ghettos” (French 155). Through acknowledging the failure of American governmental policy to recognize the value of indigenous

spiritual beliefs and traditions, Orange's message is one of hope for the future, so long as America is willing to acknowledge the sins perpetrated in its nation's past.

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