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A Narrative of a People Wronged

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There There

By Tommy Orange

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There There by Tommy Orange pulsates with emotion as it reveals wounds of Native American Indians that are both individual and collective. The novel – that brings the individual characters together in a powwow, a Native American social event for meeting, dancing, and singing with the view to upholding culture and keeping up community connections – highlights both the differences and the similarities in Native experiences, and proceeds to a point where the similarity of tragic experience takes a new, painful turn. The title, as the narrative indicates, derives meaning and relevance from a comment by Gertrude Stein about Oakland, a place which held a different value for Natives from it held for the whites, and from a particular line from “There There” by Radiohead.

The *Prologue* to the novel establishes the tragedies, the tortures and injustices that the Native American Indians had begun suffering at the hands of colonizers centuries ago, and that have shaped the history of these Natives – as similar tragedies did for people elsewhere on the planet – in irrevocable ways. Those centuries of colonization and the power equations they established have sustained and continue to shape the world as we know today.

For these Natives, the situation is particularly bad for the question is not only of their true identity but also of their existence itself, as people in some places are unaware of whether they are still around. The Natives are often assumed to be Mexicans, and unappreciated for who they are – in fact, the question is “What are you?”. (p. 28)

The Natives are Urban now, but have not yet been rid of the troubled history. The character Opal is strict with her grand-nephews for she wants them prepared to face what the Natives have to endure; this sufficiently indicates that she does not visualize a significant change for the coming generation too. The Natives have adapted but the author wonders whether it is resilience indeed – a victim of an attempted murder could not be categorized as resilient.

Tommy Orange reflects the Native experience well. He points to the unsatisfactory representation of the Native in visual media, and the erosion of histories, before he plunges into snatching some space for and giving voice to the wronged. His understanding of Native American Indian life is acute, for he himself, as his short biography at the beginning of the book indicates, is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. Having lived in Oakland, he expresses well its life and the resentment of its Native inhabitants for the whites who were gradually occupying it more. The *Interlude* provides various details, explanations, and meditations about or on different elements in the story. The section “Last Names” relates how the Natives were given surnames to keep track of them – many ways of such naming were employed, including using colours for surnames. This indicates the history of the author’s own name too.

The narrative employs first, third, and in one section, even second person accounts to reveal the histories of the characters. The history of the Natives carries on in how their lives are controlled and shaped by forces beyond their control, and how the wrongs they do to others and to themselves cannot be looked at simplistically as their faults. For instance, drinking that is a bane of so many Native lives is a means of escape from their realities, a particularly helpful means as alcohol is, as the character Harvey says, “cheap, available, legal” (p.112). For Jacquie, whose story is particularly moving, drinking was “a kind of solemn duty” (p.151) as it allowed her certain liberties of conduct.

The individual experiences that yet formed elements of a larger reality of suffering in the contemporary, urban situation are what the character Dene Oxendene, taking up the unfinished work of his late uncle, is out to collect and document. The way Orange seeks

to document various lives, albeit fictional, in this novel. The range of experience that the individual stories that make up the whole in the novel reflect is wide, and spans across generations. Orange presents the perspectives and lives of each of the characters with a nuanced understanding of particular positions, mindsets, and ages.

The novel moves at a great pace, revealing enough to keep the reader hooked on to it and yet not revealing enough at one go to make a given story wholly intelligible. Characters' stories are revealed only in parts – with bits of individual stories revealed as different segments within the four main divisions of the novel, and each story returned to at different points in the narration. The chronology within an individual's story is often disrupted, keeping the reader excited for the next bit to be unwrapped; certain elements are comprehensible through the stories of other characters. In fact, parts of stories are omitted, for it is hardly possible to understand the experiences and motivations of people without having experienced similar fates.

Importantly, through the characters, the novel evaluates the question of what makes a Native Native. Is being a Native dependent on a certain understanding of culture or the performance of it? How did Native culture live on in mixed-blood people? These are difficult to tackle topics, and the author achieves the objective of making the reader think, though easy answers are not possible. The character Edwin Black also wonders about the relevance of traditions in the modern world, since they are rooted in the past. Identity as Native and so different from the whites becomes for some, a necessary display and assertion of difference even if it is not in appreciable ways. Jamie spells the names of her three sons in ways different from how the names are usually spelt, and Thomas Frank's limp is his attack on the imposed norm of walking.

There are graphic analogies with nature – such as the one where time is compared to a predatory owl; interwoven tales that lay bare how subjugation works; superstitions that can gift some sense of control for they determine action; and curses that can haunt a family and others. Orange also presents various other facets of life. He points to certain other unsavoury elements in twenty-first century living – the obsession with the internet, for instance, with its potentially destructive effects. He displays also his understanding of human psychology – the frustrated Edwin finds solace in Johnny Depp failing badly in doing *The Lone Ranger*, of the dissatisfaction of one generation with another – Bill Davis finds today's youth not strong, and of how humans do not expect tragedies to happen to them.

A speaker in a conference on substance abuse, an event that holds much importance in this world of the novel, discusses how the motivations of people taking extreme steps are not understood. That is what is really lacking – this inability to understand the circumstances, the sufferings of others. Thus, telling stories and knowing stories are necessary; as the *Interlude* asserts, stories are part of what is required to heal. Opal's mother Victoria tells her that the world is, "...made of stories, nothing else, just stories, and stories about stories." (p.57)

In relating stories of Native experience, then, Orange does a much-needed job. And does it remarkably, more so considering that this is his debut novel. Through raw feeling and power in his language, and vitality in his descriptions that make disturbing images so close to being witnessed, he presents a deeply human story. With no resolution easily achievable in what is the state of things for the Natives, Orange ensures no final, absolute resolution in his fictional world. The end is powerful and haunting, and the novel as a whole motivates a re-consideration of American life from the perspective of the wronged. For the sort of realities that this novel documents and the way it does so, it is a must-read.



BIO-NOTE

Ronica Wahni completed her MA in English from the University of Delhi in 2014. She dedicated the next three years to furthering her capacities in language in the role of a Creative Writer with the firm Experts' Global. Here, she was engaged in a variety of writing and editing tasks, and also in content development for GMAT prep. She received awards for her good quality work during this corporate experience, including the award Ms. Meticulous. Owing to her inclination towards different aspects of culture, she completed a course in Art Appreciation from the National Museum Institute, New Delhi in 2015, and started her training in the classical Indian dance form of Kathak in October 2015. She started writing book reviews in December 2017. She won the Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize book review contest, June 2018 for her review of *The Tree with a Thousand Apples* by Sanchit Gupta. She has also been learning Spanish from Instituto Cervantes since November 2017.

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