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Close Reading of Tony Loneman in Tommy Orange's *There There*

In the novel *There There* by Tommy Orange, Tony Loneman is portrayed as an outcast mainly because of his birth defect, known as “The Drome.” His mother’s struggles with alcohol abuse led to Tony being born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. The Drome is Tony’s biggest insecurity and emphasizes the huge gap between his personal identity and Cheyenne descent. The scenes leading up to the Big Oakland Powwow and the aftermath, exemplifies the common theme of violence in Native American culture, specifically Tony’s internal conflicts concerning his Indian identity. Loneman’s disconnection from his cultural identity influences him to get involved in a plan to rob the powwow with Octavio. There are a few interviews where Orange goes into depth about the damaging effects of stereotyping and the importance of resisting the systematic violence that is associated to Native American culture. I will be referring to a literary criticism article about the novel to further analyze Tony Loneman’s character and role in the story. His character acts as a symbol of resisting violence that widely affects the Native American community of Oakland, thus representing the generational trauma that Indigenous people continue to endure.

Orange describes the reoccurring issues of systematic violence in Native American culture, specifically in the “Hard, Fast” section of the prologue. For instance, Orange writes, “They took everything and ground it down to dust as fine as gunpowder, they fired their guns

into the air in victory and the strays flew out into the nothingness of histories written wrong and meant to be forgotten” (Orange 10). This connects to Tony’s character when he says, “Killed us with their white men’s dirt and diseases, moved us off our land” since he is aware of the heinous acts white settlers have committed against Native Americans. (Orange 18). The prologue acts as a reflection of the ending of the novel when bullets are flying to symbolize the continuation of violence in Native American culture. However, this time violence is caused within the Native community by Tony, Octavio, Daniel, Calvin, and Charles. For Tony, he agrees with robbing the Big Oakland Powwow since he shares a lost sense of identity due to his disability and as a result, feels like he has nothing else to lose. This ties into an interview between Tommy Orange and Heather Shotton where they discuss the systematic violence that is associated with being a Native American living in an American society. For example, Orange says:

“But I tried to write as much hope as I could into it, and I feel like it’s where hope and realism meet. For me, and the life that I’ve lived, there’s certainly not a bow on the end, but while I was finishing the book, we were watching elders getting hit with rubber bullets on national TV while trying to pray for clean water” (Shotton).

In other words, Orange discusses the damaging impact of systematic violence and how this connects to oppression against Native Americans. Seeing “elders getting hit with rubber bullets on national TV while trying to pray for clean water” provides a representation of systematic violence that commonly occurs against Indigenous people and how they are still being marginalized. In the novel Tony is on a train dressed in Indian regalia where a woman asks him for directions to the airport and he says “She wants to see if the Indian speaks” (Orange 235). The lady asks if he is a Native American, which acts as an example of discrimination against Indigenous people since she completely disregards that he is a human being. This relates to

another interview where Orange talks about Native American stereotypes and how it impacts an individual's sense of identity. For instance, Orange says:

“There's a dehumanization that's happened with native people because of all these misperceptions about what we are. And it's convenient to think of us as gone or drunks or dumb. It's convenient to not have to think about a brutal history and people surviving and still being, you know, alive and well today, thriving in various different forms of life, good and bad. I wanted to represent a range of human experience as a way to humanize native people” (Lynn).

Particularly in the novel Tony's character sheds light on Native American stereotypes and how he refuses to live up to them. For example, Loneman states, “I'm twenty-one now, which means I can drink if I want. I don't though” (Orange 16). Then he goes on and says how smart he is and just because he is born with a disability and is Native American does not mean he is not intelligent. He is choosing to learn from his mother's mistakes by not drinking and getting more invested in learning about Indian culture. The novel begins with Tony Loneman's character for many reasons since he is troubled and is constantly torn between choosing to embrace his cultural identity or allow violence to dictate his role in the Native community. For example, the narrator states, “Everybody runs like they seen a ghost. Maybe I am a ghost” (Orange 19). This means that Tony often feels socially isolated because of “The Drome” and uses acts of violence to cope like fighting and planning to rob the Big Oakland Powwow with Octavio. Maxine plays a significant role in Tony's life since she took him in when his mother went to jail. She even has Tony read her Indian stories so that he can better understand himself and those around him. Since Maxine broke her hip, Tony feels obligated to take care of her like she took care of him, so he sells drugs to support her. Although, once Tony puts on Indian regalia for the first time “I

looked at my face. The Drome. I didn't see it there. I saw an Indian. I saw a dancer" he begins to embrace his cultural identity. (Orange 26).

Moreover, in the "Apparent Death" section of the interlude, Orange writes, "The tragedy of it all will be unspeakable, the fact we've been fighting for decades to be recognized as a present-tense people, modern and relevant, alive, only to die in the grass wearing feathers" (Orange 141). This connects to Tony's character because in the beginning he is painted as being the villain, however towards the end of the novel he chooses to be the hero by trying to save his people. The symbolism of the feathers is referenced many times throughout the novel since the Big Oakland Powwow metaphorically turns into a battlefield. The feathers represent survival, especially for Tony who is struggling to keep his own life while trying to save everyone else's. Melanie Benson Taylor's article "Orange is the New Red" includes a variety of scholars' literary criticism on the novel which is relevant regarding analyzing Tony's role in the tragic ending. For instance, Taylor writes, "As Elisabeth Woronzoff puts it, Orange "at once denudes the reality of cultural genocide while evoking a glimmer of encouragement." For Barbara Hoffert, the disastrous powwow is both an inevitable and a "beautiful" ending: "grand yet wrought with the violence that cannot be separated from Native history" (Taylor 591). This ties into the generational trauma that Native Americans share since violence has always been a part of their culture. Each character in the novel is connected to one another by their cultural identity and urbanity.

Tony Loneman's death represents freedom and shows how violence remains a part of Native American culture. According to Taylor, "These communities are sutured by obliteration and denial; silence and subversion; living, surviving, speaking, and dying" (Taylor 591). This is significant to Tony's role in the novel since he shares a lost sense of identity, makes bad

decisions like taking part in the robbery, fighting for his life, and finally being freed from the Drome. For instance, the narrator states, “He was never Tony just like he was never the Drome. Both were masks” (Orange 288). Tony is an urban Indian who struggles with embracing his cultural identity which affects his outlook on the world around him. He believes that because people around him think he is a monster that he should start acting like one which explains why he agreed to robbing the Big Oakland Powwow in the first place.

In the end, Tony ends up as the hero by choosing to save his people and resisting violence. His character stands for other Native Americans that have experienced similar internal conflicts with their cultural identity and how they are treated. It is important to raise awareness of the generational trauma that is a part of Native American culture to help better understand their painful past and present experiences with violence. The prologue and interlude expose the cycles of trauma that Indigenous people have endured overtime and how it has impacted them. Tony’s character is seen for the first time at the end of the novel when he meets his death and can live freely for the first time. Therefore, violence is a vicious cycle that needs to end and for that to happen America as a whole needs to work together to better our society.

Works Cited

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