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Natives Battling Oakland

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Figure 1: *Into the American Desert no. 28* by Jett Johnson

Natives Battling Oakland

Tatyana Villela

Keywords: Native American, Oakland,
Literary Analysis, Discrimination, Oppression

NATIVE culture is the main focus in Tommy Orange's novel *There There*. He shows his culture to his audience by involving traditional apparel and events such as regalia and powwows. Regalia is traditional Indigenous clothing that is worn during ceremonies where traditional dances express the graceful movement of

the dancer. Powwows are social events where everyone gathers to continue the traditions of the Native Americans and often last a whole day and occasionally a week long. Powwows involve traditional dances, clothing and singing to honor their culture. Orange also discusses how the attempted genocide to the Native people have caused their generations turn to abuse of substances like alcohol to cope with inherited trauma and pain. He shows how the Native American communities are imprisoned in misery. He does so by telling the lives of different Native Americans in the same community and conveys the suffering they endure each day and reflects how generational trauma lives with each character as they struggle.

In the novel *There There*, author Tommy Orange describes the fictional journeys of Native Americans and exhibits the tragedies that take place for their community in the city of Oakland during the early 1970's. Orange dives into the lives of Native Americans conveying a picture for the audience of the pain and suffering that takes place in the Native American communities. The novel reveals the trials and tribulations that Native Americans undergo such as, the process of accepting one's true identity, facing intergenerational trauma, and how the history of their community defines a character.

As a result of oppression and discrimination it can be difficult to accept one's Native American identity. Throughout history, Indigenous tribes have been discriminated against and oppressed. For instance, as Tony Loneman takes the train a white lady stares at him "He gets dressed at home in his regalia all the way there. He's used to being stared at, but this is different. He wants to laugh at them staring at him" (Orange 234). Tony Loneman has fetal alcohol syndrome, a defect that happens to a child's facial appearance while a woman consumes alcohol during her pregnancy. Tony views himself as a freak because he doesn't look like an average American. Until later on in the novel he learns to accept his identity as he proudly wears his regalia. With great difficulty, Native Americans struggle to comfortably embrace their culture in a society that's been oppressive. Additionally, he also has to overcome his disability. Orange uses third-person narration to express how Tony consciously feels with himself; he feels free and invincible against the world now that he has found his cultural and personal identity. This is proven during third-person narration because the readers realize Tony purposely takes the train to gain attention from his regalia. It was

once difficult for Tony to be comfortable in his skin. He is no longer bothered because he comfortably wears his regalia without the fear of being judged. The narration also helps support the readers in understanding Tony's journey with accepting his own identity. Orange writes, "He's waiting for something true to appear before him—about him. It's important that he dresses as an Indian...even if he feels like a fraud the whole time, because the only way to be Indian in this world is to look and act like an Indian" (Orange 122).

Orvil Red Feather is a fourteen year old Native American who hasn't had much experience with his Indigenous traditions. Orvil has a strong desire to discover his cultural identity and does so by wearing the regalia. The readers discover how the troubles of his family's past affects Orvil's understanding of his Indian heritage and so he is unable to ignore his native roots. The author uses a tragic tone to present the lost connection between Orvil and his identity without the regalia. Another character who clashes with their own identity is a girl named Blue, a Native American who was adopted by a white family. Since she has white parents Blue has trouble identifying as Native American because her traditions were not passed down to her. For example, Blue finds it difficult to connect to herself as a Native American "I knew I wasn't white. But not all the way. Because while my hair is dark and my skin is brown, I look in the mirror I see myself as white as the long white pill-shaped throw pillow..." (Orange 198). She cannot personally or culturally uncover her identity and battles between being spiritually white and physically brown. Blue views herself more as a white person and doesn't know which identity she should acknowledge. The author uses imagery such as the regalia of Tony and Orvil and the physical features of Blue to demonstrate how they embrace their identities and how these features make them particularly feel either confident or insecure. Overall, Orange shows it is challenging to be comfortable with one's own skin when society is against physical appearances that define your heritage.

Orange displays the trauma that has been passed down through Native families for generations. Spiderlegs have been passed down in Jacques family. Spiderlegs are leg veins that cause discomfort and darkening in the skin. For instance, as Jacquie Red Feather discovers that her nephew Orvil has spider legs she relives a past memory when Jacques's mother says "The spider's web is a home

and a trap” (Orange 101). The spider legs represent spider webs which is a symbol that represents either a home or trap; in this case, the spider legs appear on Orvil when he is planning to perform in the powwow. The spider legs portray his relation to his Native roots through his dancing rituals but also brings him to danger because he gets injured at the powwow. A shooting takes place during the powwow and Orvil gets shot. Since the spider legs are passed down to Orvil while he plans to perform at the powwow, this is a symbol indicating the powwow is Orvil’s trap. This shows trauma is inherited through the family as Opal also had spider legs while living under Ronald’s household. Opal is Jacquie’s half sister who takes care of Jacquie’s grandchildren, Orvil and his two brothers. As an illustration, Jacquie Red Feather looks at herself in the mirror. “The webs she had on the tops of her feet had hurt the worst” (Orange 100). Jacquie has an alcohol addiction and as she debates about drinking the hotel liquor she notices her spider web tattoos on her feet. The spider webs symbolize the trap that alcohol puts her in and remind her to not resort to alcohol again. For example, “Opal pulled three spider legs out of her leg the Sunday afternoon before she and Jacquie left the home, the house, the man they’d been left with after their mom left this world” (Orange 165). This quote also examines the spider legs as a symbol of a home and a trap. Both Opal and Jacquie were left behind in Ronald’s house, a friend of their deceased mother. Ronald was inappropriate around Opal and Jacquie, which forced the two girls to flee in order to protect themselves. Ronald’s house was a place they thought could somewhat call a home, but in the end, it was also a trap because once Ronald had proven himself to be untrustworthy, the household was no longer safe. Hence, the author demonstrates that Indigenous family generations are burdened with trauma.

The Native American communities that Natives are forced into by the government represents a base from which they all are molded. As Orange explains how each individual is shaped through the history of their community, “Urban Indians were the generation born in the city. We’ve been moving for a long time, but the land moves with you like memory. An Urban Indian belongs to the city, and cities belong to the earth” (11). Orange illustrates the relationship with generational trauma because of the forced communities that Native Americans were built from colonization. He does so to con-

nect the conflicts of the character's with their relationship to the community. The narrator reveals the pain that lives within Native American communities because of their forced removal by the government. All the different personas of the Native Americans reveal how each character was negatively affected by their forced community. The prologue states, "We are the memories we don't remember, which live in us...which make us sing and dance and pray the way we do...and bloom unexpectedly in our lives like blood through a blanket from a wound made by a bullet fired by a man shooting us in the back...just to get rid of us" (Orange 10). Orange's point is that violence continues among Native American communities because of their history with white colonizers. The blanket is a metaphor for the deaths of all the Indian people; thus these tragedies helped shape the Indian community. In between the novel Orange discusses how the massacre of Natives have set them into a disaster, "The bullets have been coming from miles. Years...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). Orange says that there has been ongoing violence among the Native American communities. When attending powwows Native Americans come dressed in traditional clothing such as feathers. This quote foreshadows the violence that takes place during the shootout of the powwow. Some performers such as Orvil get shot in his traditional apparel. This quote is also ironic because the powwow helps preserve the traditions and history of Native Americans only to be injured by the hands of their own people. Therefore, Indigenous people are shaped through the history of their community.

There There captures Tommy Orange's views on the lives of Native Americans. He discusses the Native Americans' difficulty in embracing their cultural identity. Orange mentions how trauma is passed down through the families of Native Americans. Finally, Orange demonstrates how Native American communities can bring Natives closer together but with their history of genocide to the indigenous people, violence still troubles their community. These themes also connected with the character Orvil, who has issues discovering his identity because of intergenerational trauma. Orvil embraces his true identity which brings him face to face with danger. Orange's novel presents these themes through the tragic stories of

multiple Native Americans and uses narration by telling the life stories of different Natives and how Native Americans have all experienced trauma whether it be because of their identity, family, or their community.

Artist's Statement

Into the American Desert no. 28 by Jett Johnson

These are my photos for a little series I called *Into the American Desert*. I have loved the desert. It is vast, tranquil, and somewhat empty. It seems like one of the very last places where you can truly be yourself and do what you wish. I saw trailers, houses, and compounds, and it really looked like they had moved out there, staked their claim of America, and made their own life. This is something that I was completely unaware still happens, but in the vastness of the desert, it does. I was about to start a job, and recently had COVID-19. I was feeling bored, alone, and worried about sinking my life into this 9 to 5. So I took off into the American desert, and I learned about what money means to me and gave me hints about the direction I want to go in life.

Author Bio

Tatyana Villela is a student at CSUMB. This essay was written as a part of a first-year composition course. She is fascinated by artwork and enjoys to read on her free time. She has a chihuahua named Ka'eo which she deeply loves. Tatyana also loves to travel and learn about new cultures.

Works Cited

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