

**The contingency of pain:
Maternal detachment, bereavement trauma, and Indigenous
women's resilience in Tommy Orange's *There There***

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Abstract: Native American literature constitutes a vital archive for examining how inherited grief and social dislocation shape Indigenous lives in the present. In *There There* (2018), Tommy Orange foregrounds the emotional and relational consequences of maternal absence and abandonment within contemporary Native communities. The novel depicts Indigenous women not merely as passive inheritors of historical pain but as figures through whom trauma, memory, and resilience converge. This paper examines the contingency of pain, arguing that suffering in the novel is not an inevitable condition but a historically mediated and socially reproduced experience that persists across generations. Drawing upon Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma as belated and repetitive, the study examines how unresolved loss re-emerges in fragmented kinship structures, emotional withdrawal, and patterns of silence. Sara Ahmed's framework of the cultural politics of emotion further enables an analysis of pain as relational and circulatory, shaping attachment, exclusion, and communal belonging. Through the close analysis of the character Jacquie Red Feather, the paper contends maternal detachment should be understood not as individual failure but as a symptom of enduring structural marginalization and inherited disruption. At the same time, Orange resists a deterministic narrative of damage. Indigenous women articulate resilient presence through caregiving, narrative recalibration, and acts of relational endurance. The study concludes that ongoing negotiation within the affective afterlife of historical trauma and violence, thereby reaffirming indigenous continuity within contemporary precarity.

Keywords: trauma, memory, recovery, resilience, suffering

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Introduction

The relationship between pain and trauma exceeds the boundaries of the individual body and enters the domain of memory, relationality, and social structure. While pain may originate in embodied experiences, trauma transforms that pain into a temporally dislocated force that returns belatedly, shaping identity and interpersonal bonds. Pain is often described as a deeply private and subjective experience, shaped by one's own lived realities. As Kotarba (1983) observes, pain is frequently articulated as something "I have that others cannot have, or as a feeling that others have that I myself cannot feel" (Kotarba 1983, 29). This formulation highlights the intensely personal and seemingly incommunicable dimension of suffering. Yet pain does not remain confined to the individual psyche. It enters the collective domain of discourse, where it becomes mediated through language, culture, and shared historical conditions. In this sense, even the most intimate experiences of pain are structured by communal narratives, social reconstructions, and affective circulations. When pain is not adequately acknowledged, processed, or symbolically integrated, it assumes the form of trauma. Trauma may thus be understood as pain that exceeds the individual's capacity for immediate comprehension and returns in disruptive ways.

In Tommy Orange's *There There* (2018), pain and trauma are embedded within contemporary urban Indigenous life, where fractured kinship structures and unresolved grief shape everyday existence. The novel foregrounds disrupted maternal bonds rather than a stable, enduring motherhood as a source of nurture. Maternal absence in the text is not a matter of individual failure but emerges from compounded vulnerability marked by addiction, social marginalization, and gendered violence. The violation of Indigenous women further instigates this rupture, rendering the maternal body a site of both personal suffering and international fracture. Trauma, in this sense, is neither contained; it reverberates across generations through silence, emotional withdrawal, and identity disorganization. This study argues that *There There* represents pain as contingent upon ongoing structural precarity rather than as an isolated emotional condition. By examining disrupted maternal relationships and embodied vulnerability, the novel reveals how trauma circulates within families while simultaneously illuminating acts of endurance. Indigenous women, marked by bereavement and violation, sustain relational continuity through care, memory, and resilience. Orange

The contingency of pain: Maternal detachment, bereavement trauma, and Indigenous women's resilience in Tommy Orange's *There There*

thus reframes trauma not as irreparable damage but as persistent negotiations within the history and survival.

Analysis: Structural violence, relocation, and formation of trauma

Jacquie Red Feather is a Cheyenne girl who lives in East Oakland with her mother and sister, Opal Viola Bear Shield. One day, her mother informed her, "We are moving to Alcatraz" (Orange 2018, 45). From November 1969 to June 1971, Native Americans occupied Alcatraz Island to protest the unjust treatment of indigenous peoples. However, life on the island was harsh and mirrored the material deprivation, replicating the structural conditions of many Indian reservations, as it "resembles most Indian reservations: it lacked running water, sanitation, transportation, minerals, industry, agriculture, and educational facilities" (Kelly 2014, 168). The occupation unfolded within conditions of acute infrastructural deprivation, thereby reproducing the systemic neglect historically imposed upon Indian reservations. As a child, Jacquie did not understand the purpose of moving to Alcatraz. When she questions her mother, she responds, "We are going to be with our relatives. Indians of All Tribes. We are going to where that prison was. Gonna start from the inside of the cell, which is where now, Indian people, there is where they got us" (Orange 2018, 48). The metaphor of "the cell" is symbolically dense: while framed as reclamation, it simultaneously acknowledges Indigenous confinement as a structural condition of colonial modernity. For Jacquie, this metaphor is not abstract but materially lived, transforming Alcatraz into a site of resistance and coexistence with structural precarity.

Once on the island, Jacquie finds herself among loosely supervised clusters of teenagers who drift through the cellblocks and parade grounds as adults direct their energy toward meetings, food lines, and maintenance. The thin social infrastructure exposes her to both the exhilaration of collective action and the risk of neglect, revealing how a space of resistance can also reproduce everyday precarity. There, she meets Harvey, a boy her age. One day, while playing on the rocky cliff, Harvey rapes her. She was too young to comprehend what had happened; she later expressed her anger in a quiet, restrained way. This assault is not read as an isolated event but as an intimate manifestation of structural violence opening within conditions of displacement and inadequate protection. The absence of sustained maternal protection in Jacquie's life further instilled her vulnerability.

Although her mother was physically present during the occupation, the broader instability of relocation and political struggle limited the emotional and protective framework associated with maternal care. Child Sexual Abuse is a “special destroyer of adult mental health” (Seligman 1994, 232), and it is “such a powerfully negative force that (a) is likely to cause harm, (b) most children or adolescents who experienced it will be affected, (c) this harm will be severe or intense” (Rind et al., 1999, 46). This is evident in Jacquie’s reaction at the beginning, as she cannot fully process the violation but instinctively registers the harm. When her sister, Opal, asks her what happened, Jacquie initially mutters, “Piece of Shit”. Pressed further, she responds, “Nothing, I told him not to. Then he did. I told him to stop” (Orange 2018, 56). She rubs her eyes and says, “It does not matter, C’mon” (Ibidem). Her minimization of the events signals not indifference but psychic disruption. The assault exceeds her capacity for articulation. Her restrained response reveals how trauma unsettles the relationship between experience and language. As Elaine Scarry suggests in her powerful book, *The Body in Pain*, pain is not only a bodily trauma, it also resists or even ‘shatters’ language and communication (Scarry 1985, 5). In this sense, pain is not merely bodily injury but epistemic fracture. Jacquie’s truncated phrase, “It does not matter” (Orange 2018, 56), reflects this linguistic collapse precisely. Her speech contracts around the wound rather than expanding to narrate it.

After that occupation ended, Native Americans were forced to leave Alcatraz, and Jacquie’s family returned to Oakland. Shortly after, her mother was diagnosed with cancer and eventually passed away. Left without a parental figure, Jacquie and Opal moved in with their uncle, though the loss of their mother created a deep emotional void. One day, while walking home from school, the weight of her unspoken became unbearable, and Jacquie suddenly burst out in frustration as she said:

What are we doing? she asked. Going home, I said. What home? Jacquie said. I do not know, I replied. What are we gonna do? I do not know. You usually have some smart-ass answer. Just keep going, I guess. Jacquie was silent for a moment before she said, I’m pregnant. What? Fucking piece of shit, Harvey. Remember? What? It does not matter. I can just get rid of it. (Orange 2018, 59)

The contingency of pain: Maternal detachment, bereavement trauma, and Indigenous women's resilience in Tommy Orange's *There There*

Jacquie's detached admission of pregnancy reflects the normalization of sexual violence and the erasure of Indigenous women's pain. Her response, "It does not matter. I can just get rid of it" (Orange 2018, 59) reveals both an attempt at agency and deeper resignation to injustice. The repeated questioning of "What Home?" foregrounds displacement as affective instability rather than mere geographic relocation. Home becomes an emotional void shaped by assault, maternal loss, and structural precarity, as Sara Ahmed (2004, 22) argues, "present in speech, or forms of testimonial address. And yet, as we have seen, 'claims' to pain and suffering on behalf of myself or others are repeated in forms of speech and writing. There is a connection between the over-representation of pain and its unrepresentability". Jacquie's silence exemplifies this paradox: the wound persists even when language fails. Following the assault, Jacquie suffers from insomnia, repeatedly convincing herself that "she was asleep" (Orange 2018, 102). This dissociative impulse reflects trauma's refusal to remain confined to the past, as Cathy Caruth states:

It is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language (Caruth 1996, 8)

Jacquie's experience illustrates the temporal dislocation that structures traumatic memory. The violation does not end with the event itself but resurfaces betwinedly through insomnia, dislocation, and emotional rupture of pain as the formation of trauma. Pain, when denied articulation, transforms memory, demonstrating how structurally produced violence continues to inhabit the present long after its initial occurrence.

Addiction, self-anesthetization and maternal detachment

Jacquie has distanced herself for years from her family, her daughter, her grandsons, and her sister Opal, creating a prolonged rupture in kinship ties shaped by addiction and unclaimed trauma. The novel shifts to Jacquie as a young woman working as a Substance abuse counsellor. She is in Albuquerque for a conference related to "Keep Them from Harm" (Orange 2018, 98). While staying in the hotel, she reflects on her past and realizes how distant she is from her grandsons, "The boys. What they might be doing. Over the past few months, after years of silence, they'd been texting. Opal took care of Jacquie's three

grandsons—whom she'd never even met" (Orange 2018, 100). She spent years in addiction, relying on alcohol as a means of numbing unresolved grief and trauma. During the conference session addressing rising rates of substance abuse and suicide among indigenous youth, Jacquie finds herself unable to sustain emotional distance. The speaker's words collapse into proclamations, provoking guilt and suppressed memory. She abruptly leaves the hall and suddenly sees a flashback of traumatic memories, as it states in the novel:

She saw the big hole first. Then, her daughter's emaciated body. There were little red and pink holes up and down both her arms. Her skin was white, blue, and yellow, with green veins. Jacquie was there to identify the body. The body was her daughter's body, had been the little body she carried for just six months. She'd watched the doctors put needles in her arm, then, there in the incubator, back when all she'd wanted, in a way, she'd never wanted anything before, was for her new baby girl to live. (Orange 2018, 105)

The flashback of her daughter's body, and "big hole," shatters Jacquie's long-sustained anesthetic distance. The visual violence of death confronts her not only with the loss but with the depth of estrangement that had defined their relationship. In Jacquie's case, Jamie's death intensifies rather than resolves her dependence on Self-Anesthetization. Although she maintains sobriety for six months- the longest period since she began drinking, she soon relapses, "six years stomaching a fifth of whiskey" (Orange 2018, 106). Her addiction reasserts itself as a mechanism of affective suspension, numbing the unbearable convergence of guilt and grief.

Her departure from Oakland extends this anesthetic logic into relational space. Physical relocation mirrors emotional withdrawal. When she later encounters Harvey, the origin of the earlier violation at the reservation, re-emerges, confirming what Cath Caruth (1996, 11) describes as belatedness experience of trauma "then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality, the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life". Maternal detachment in Jacquie's life thus appears not as indifferent but as the lingering structure of anesthetized trauma, a continuous cycle of pain rather than solving it.

Trauma, recovery, and resilience

Judith Herman argues in *Trauma and Recovery* that healing unfolds in three stages— “safety, remembrance and mourning, and the gradual reconnection with ordinary life” (Herman 1992, 87). Jacquie's trajectory in *There There* can be read through this framework. For much of her life, she has avoided the cyclical return of childhood trauma through alcohol, sustaining what appears to be stability but is, in fact, a form of self-anesthetization. Sobriety becomes her initial attempt at establishing safety. When she stands before the audience at the conference and declares, “My name is Jacquie Red Feather. I do not say that I am an alcoholic. I do not drink anymore. I used to drink, but I do not now. I currently have eleven days of sobriety. I am grateful to be here. Thank you all for listening” (Orange 2018, 109). She performs this fragile stabilization in public and states:

The problem that became a drinking problem started for me way before the drinking was even related to it, though it was when I first started drinking. Not that I blame my past or do not accept it. We'd been on Alcatraz, with my family and me, back during the occupation in 1970. It all started for me there. This piece-of-shit kid, Jacquie, made sure to look right at Harvey after she said this. He squirmed in his chair a little but otherwise just stared off toward the ground in a listening pose. (Orange 2018, 110)

For most survivors of violence, the initial consequences of trauma are the loss of control over the body, thoughts, and emotions. Trauma disrupts the coherence of selfhood, producing fragmentation rather than integration. In Jacquie's case, this loss of control manifests first through silence and later through addiction, as alcohol becomes a means of regulating overwhelming affect. For the first time, Jacquie speaks openly about the pain and sexual violence she endured as a child, transforming a history of silence into an act of testimony. She states:

Maybe he did not know what he was doing, but then again, maybe he went on to fuck over a whole line of women and used force to stretch a no into a yes, assholes like him, I know now, are a dime a dozen, but I suspect, from what little time I spent with him on that island, that he went on to do it again and again. (Orange 2018, 110)

Jacquie's speech is a moment of reckoning as she confronts her rapist, Harvey, after years of silence. She acknowledges that her drinking problem began long ago, rooted in the trauma of Alcatraz in 1970, when she was just a child. Looking directly at Harvey, she forces him

to hear what he did, exposing the pattern of violence men like him perpetuate, turning a “no” into a “yes” through force. Though he squirms in his chair, he does not react, embodying the cowardice of abusers who escape the consequences. But for Jacquie, this moment is about more than just naming her trauma; it is about reclaiming power. By breaking her silence in front of him, in front of others, she refuses to let her past define her.

Speaking her truth becomes her first decisive step toward resilience. By admitting, “I gave up a daughter to adoption at that time. The girl I birthed came from that island. From what happened there. When I gave her up, I was seventeen. I was stupid. I would not know how to find her now, even if I wanted to. It was a closed adoption” (Orange 2018, 110). Her words reflect that she was guilty of what she did, shaped by the violence she endured and the choices she felt forced to make as she further elaborates on her trauma:

I would not know how to find her now even if I wanted to. It was a closed adoption. Since then, I have had another daughter. But I fucked that up too in my addiction—fifth a night of anything ten dollars or less. Then it got so bad that they told me I had to quit if I wanted to keep my job. And then, as it goes, to keep being able to drink, I quit my job. My daughter Jamie was out of the house by then, so it was easier for me to fall completely apart. (Orange 2018, 110)

Jacquie’s addiction stems from the repeated violence and losses she endured as an Indigenous woman, shaped by sexual assault, forced separation from her child, and systemic neglect. Like many survivors, she turns to alcohol as a means to escape, numbing herself to the pain of her past, including what happened in Alcatraz and the child she forced to give up. As *Motherhood in the Face of Trauma* states, “Women are twice as likely as men to develop PTSD after a traumatic event and to carry this diagnosis across their lifetime” (Muzik et al. 2009, 29). Her dependency deepens after losing her second child, Jamie, to suicide, leading her into a cycle of self-destruction where drinking consumes her life. Her words reveal the fragility of survival as she struggles to reclaim after years of self-destruction and loss. As she narrates it further, “Insert an endless succession of drinking horror stories here. Today, I’m trying to make my way back. My daughter died and left her three sons behind, but I left them, too. I’m trying to make my way back, but as I said, eleven days” (Orange 2018, 110). This pattern continues when Jamie, her second daughter, dies by suicide, leaving behind three grandsons whom Jacquie initially cannot

bring herself to raise. As her addiction deepens, she falls into a cycle of self-destruction, mirroring the findings of Chivers-Wilson (2006, 112), who states that “women with PTSD and a history of sexual trauma are at a significantly higher risk of developing substance use disorders as a means of self-medication”. This aligns with Jacquie’s descent into alcoholism, where she drinks to suppress the overwhelming guilt and pain tied to her past. PTSD has been widely recognized as a disorder that impacts maternal relationships, with research showing that “postpartum PTSD has been associated with less sensitive parenting, greater worries about intimacy with the baby, and higher rates of infant temperamental and attachment disorders” (Muzik et al. 2009, 31). This applies directly to Jacquie’s experience, as her unresolved trauma distances her from her grandsons, making her hesitant to take on a maternal role once again.

Jacquie’s recovery does not conclude with confession; it extends into relational action. After confronting her rapist and publicly narrating her trauma, she turns toward reconnection, the third stage in Herman’s model of recovery. Her recognition that “Those boys need their grandma. I don’t know. And you sure as hell don’t know a goddamned thing about my life” (Orange 2018, 60) marks a moment of vulnerability that contrasts sharply with her earlier detachment. She texted her sister Opal, “If I come to Oakland, can I stay?” (Ibid, 61). This request is not merely logistical; it represents an attempt to rebuild fractured kinship ties and reinsert herself into familial continuity. Resilience, in this instance, lies not in heroic triumph but in the willingness to return, to risk intimacy, and to re-enter relationships from which she once withdrew. Recovery thus becomes relational rather than individual, grounded in reconnection and the restoration of maternal presence.

Jacquie’s trajectory ultimately reveals that trauma is neither static nor singular, it is a structure that reorganized itself across time, relationships, and identity. The violence at Alcatraz fractures her bodily autonomy, maternal continuity, and sense of belonging, and addiction emerges as a strategy of self-anesthetization that suspends rather than resolves that rupture. Yet her public testimony disrupts the cycle. By narrating the origin of her drinking, confronting Harvey, and acknowledging the daughters she lost, one through adoption and another through suicide, Jacquie integrates fragmented memory into conscious speech. Her decision to return to Oakland and reclaim her role as grandmother reflects motherhood not as failure but as a

renewed commitment. Trauma may have structured her past, but it no longer monopolizes her future.

Conclusion

Pain, happiness, maternal detachment, and resilience in *There There* are not discrete emotional states but interwoven conditions produced within histories of violence and survival. Jacquie's life reveals how trauma unsettles the foundations of intimacy, rendering motherhood fragile and happiness provisional. Her addiction is not excess but anesthetic adaptation, a strategy to suspend pain that simultaneously suspends relational presence. Yet the novel does not allow the trauma as the final word. Recovery emerges not as restoration of innocence or as a return to an unbroken past, but as a conscious inhabiting of fracture. Resilience, therefore, resides in this willingness to re-enter connection despite shame and grief. In tracing her movement from silence to testimony, from withdrawal to relational accountability, *There There* proposes that healing for indigenous women is not escape from history but the reclamation of agency within it, where pain is acknowledged, memory is spoken, and kinship is chosen again.

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The contingency of pain: Maternal detachment, bereavement trauma, and Indigenous women's resilience in Tommy Orange's *There There*

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