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# “A Present Tense People, Modern, Relevant, Alive” : Writing Against Erasure in Tommy Orange’s *There There*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay argues that Tommy Orange's 2018 novel *There There* works to craft new spaces for a revised historicity capable of defining living and present tense Indigenous peoples, while also deconstructing the past-tense archetype embedded in the framework of "America." In arguing this point, I examine *There There*'s place in the postmodern Native American canon as it relates to the emergence of what is considered a new wave Native Renaissance. In each of the three subsections that follow, I examine *There There* in relation to three contexts: (1.1) other Native American works from the contemporary field in what is being dubbed a new wave Renaissance, (1.2) white hegemonic representations, and (1.3) distinguished Native American writers associated with postmodernism. In section 1.1, I place Orange's novel in a contemporary field of works by Indigenous authors being created in a multidisciplinary field of print culture, photography, and online activism. In section 1.2, I specifically examine Orange's references to works by non-Natives who appropriated Native narratives, such as the film *Dances with Wolves* (1990). I call upon these works and their images in order to analyze *There There*'s resistance to a cultural hegemony that has defined both historicity and Native identity. In section 1.3, I look at how Orange situates his novel in relation to three postmodern Native American works in order to examine how Orange's novel both evokes and resists the politics of representation pioneered in works by Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Sherman Alexie. In this section, I relate Orange to these writers while also situating Orange's novel as a wrinkle to the postmodern canon's once counter-hegemonic works, which are now part of the hegemonic mainstream. In section two of this essay, I then expand on how *There There*'s historicity leads to a present tense peoplehood through a close reading of the novel's present tense historicism and characterization.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

“A present tense people, modern, relevant, alive”: Writing Against

Erasure in Tommy Orange’s *There There*

by

Greg Riggio

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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“A PRESENT TENSE PEOPLE, MODERN, RELEVANT, ALIVE”: WRITING  
AGAINST ERASURE IN TOMMY ORANGE’S *THERE THERE*

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

by  
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## 1. Introduction: The Continuum Against Erasure

“I feel we are failing when we allow the majority culture to burden us with its binaries: left behind or assimilated, saints or heathens, savages or healers, warriors or drunks. I don’t know what to do with my definition of tragedy in the face of theirs. But I think the answer is always story.”

—Terese Marie Mailhot, “Native American Lives Are Tragic...”

“I am doing my best to not become a museum of myself.”

—Natalie Diaz, “American Arithmetic”

Before examining any work of Native American literature, even the most liberal and sympathetic non-Native readers must confront a historical image that has been systematically imposed on Indigenous peoples in the United States of America and Canada for thousands of years. Beginning with Columbus and continuing today with the appropriation of war bonnets at Coachella, the humanity and dignity of North America’s Indigenous peoples have been methodically ignored in favor of monolithic representations that align with the majority culture’s norms. To essayist Terese Mailhot, being monolithic means being defined by the many binaries imposed onto Indigenous peoples: left behind or assimilated, saint or heathen, savage or healer, warrior or drunk (Mailhot “Native American Lives”). According to Blythe Tellefsen, such monolithic images exist because Native history has largely been recorded, fictionalized, and reproduced by those who own the means of production and the means of representation, too (Tellefsen 127). Gerald Vizenor refers to these representations as “manifest manners,” scriptural simulations that impose an invented Indian identity through a

canonized body of literature Vizenor describes as “the literature of dominance” (Vizenor 172).

Because of these hegemonic narratives, Mailhot states that being Indian feels “false and contrived” and “[an identity] put upon us because they want us to stay relics” (Mailhot *Heart* 134). These narratives compress the temporality of Indigenous cultural history into the past tense and represent this compression in static objects that symbolically represent all Indigenous peoples—museum displays, wooden cigar store advertising figures, or red-skinned football mascots. The counter against being made into one of these relics, Mailhot suggests, is storytelling and the crafting of narratives that resist the museum version of one’s self. In participating in a ceremony of story, Mailhot states, she is a part of a “continuum against erasure” (Ibid 112). Her notion of a continuum refers to a body of marginalized writers, artists, and activists who use their platform to question, revise and replace their image as they are defined by non-Natives who controlled and still control the means of representation (Roemer 586).

Tommy Orange, author of the novel *There There*, also participates in this continuum. In the writing of the novel, Orange intended *There There* to be a polyphonic, multigenerational novel that would build a complex human identity for Indigenous peoples to replace the static, hegemonic images that I have described above (Beckerman). In particular, *There There* counters such erasures through a resistance to the mainstream inclination to universalize Native culture. In countering the monolithic images presented in these works, Orange specifically attempts to accomplish two goals: to represent Native Americans as human beings living right now and to thus imbue twenty-first century post-reservation “urban Indians” with new ways of remaining “Indian” without falling back on



tropes and tired stereotypes (Gates). One way Orange achieves this goal is through the demographics of his ensemble of fifteen characters, “urban Indians” who coalesce at The Big Oakland Pow Wow in Oakland, California: Opal Viola Bear Shield, Orvil Red Feather, Jacquie Red Feather, Edwin Black, Thomas Frank, Tony Loneman, Dene Oxende, Bill Davis, Calvin Johnson, Octavio Gomez, Daniel Gonzalez, Blue, and Looter and Lony (Orvil’s brothers). Many of these characters are half-white, but several are ambiguously non-white or are only suggested to be multiethnic. Furthermore, many of the novel’s characters are identified as Cheyenne but others are never clearly labeled. According to Ron Charles’s review of *There There* for *The Washington Post*, the novel’s characters replicate a diversity of “a group of people too often lumped together under a wooden stereotype [who hope] to perceive something beyond the image of uselessness and irrelevance that a racist nation insists upon” (Charles “What does it”).

Orange’s goal, however, is not just to cover up the hegemonic model with a narrative made louder by all of the voices in his ensemble cast, but to deconstruct this model in order to create a new space for his historiography of present tense Indigenous peoples. By raising the issue of historical representation and authenticity, Orange’s novel is aligned with the postmodernist understandings of history, fitting into the genre that Linda Hutcheon refers to as “historiographic metafiction.” In the production of a metafictional text, Hutcheon states that a novel itself presents a counter to “an elitist isolationism that separates art from the world and literature from history” (Hutcheon 28). Historiographic metafiction, in other words, creates a contact zone between art and the world and opens up a tension point between recorded history and fictive experience, leaving the reader to reconcile a new defamiliarized sense of history. By opening such a

rift in *There There*, Orange specifically attempts to counter a “textbook image that’s remembered and spoken of in the past tense” (Petersen). In his writing of the novel, Orange therefore participates in the contemporary project that I have described above, working to craft new spaces for a revised historicity capable of defining living and present tense Indigenous peoples while also deconstructing the past-tense archetype embedded in the framework of “America.”

In showing how Orange develops this point, I examine *There There*’s place in the postmodern Native American canon as it relates to the emergence of what is considered a new wave Native Renaissance. In each of the three subsections that follow, I examine *There There* in relation to three contexts: (1.1) other Native American works from the contemporary field in what is being dubbed a new wave Renaissance, (1.2) white hegemonic representations, and (1.3) distinguished Native American writers associated with postmodernism. In section 1.1, I place Orange’s novel in a contemporary field of works by Indigenous authors being created in a multidisciplinary field of print culture, photography, and online activism. In section 1.2, I specifically examine Orange’s references to works by non-Natives who appropriated Native narratives, such as the film *Dances with Wolves* (1990). I call upon these works and their images in order to analyze *There There*’s resistance to a cultural hegemony that has defined both historicity and Native identity. In section 1.3, I look at how Orange situates his novel in relation to three postmodern Native American works in order to examine how Orange’s novel evokes and resists the politics of representation pioneered in works by Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Sherman Alexie. In this section, I also situate Orange’s novel as a wrinkle to the postmodern canon’s once counter-hegemonic works, which are now part of

the hegemonic mainstream. In section two of this essay, I then expand on how *There There*'s historicity leads to a present tense peoplehood through a close reading of the novel's construction of historicism and characterization.

### *1.1 Context: The Contemporary Renaissance*

Before thinking about *There There* in relation to all of its predecessors, it is helpful to situate Orange's novel in relation to the continuum against erasure that I described in the opening of this essay. This is because Orange is not alone in resisting past hegemonic narratives, and the methods employed by these sources help contextualize the project he is working on in *There There*. Orange, like a number of contemporary writers, artists, politicians, and activists are attempting to reclaim Indigenous representation and resist invisibility in an unprecedented way in what is being regarded by some as a new wave "renaissance."<sup>1</sup> This movement is especially boisterous on the Internet, where Instagram and Twitter seem to be giving Indigenous peoples a wealth of self-generated, representative images and stories, accessible on an endless scroll with the hashtag: "#WeAreStillHere." This hashtag is featured on almost all of the Apsáalooke photojournalist Adam Sings in the Timber's Instagram feed, especially in photographs that make up his "Indigenizing Colonized Spaces" series. On his feed, Sings in the Timber (who has nearly 24,000 followers, garnering thousands of likes per post) posts his photographs of Indigenous models occupying spaces like the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus, where the university's Bascom Hall was built over a Ho-

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<sup>1</sup> Terese Mailhot states in *Heart Berries* that Sherman Alexie told her that he came up with this phrase. She states: "When people were trying to conceptualize a program for Native Writers, [Alexie] said it would be a renaissance" (Mailhot *Heart* 58). Besides Mailhot and Orange, other well-reviewed contemporary writers

Chunk burial mound in 1857. In the photo “Indigenizing Colonized Spaces with Starla No. 8,” photographed in the Field Museum in Chicago, Illinois, Sings in the Timber’s model Starla stands in vibrantly colored Anishinaabe regalia, posed next to mannequins encased in glass and dressed in drably colored regalia. This image presents a visual juxtaposition that challenges a viewer’s ability to define the traditional dress as an artifact because Starla, in her brightly colored Anishinaabe regalia, is undoubtedly alive. Nonetheless, the museum’s display suggests a sense of history that bolsters a settler colonial narrative that Native Americans are extinct both because these emblems of nativeness are displayed as if they are relics and because these items are presented alongside ancient Egyptian artifacts and dinosaur bones. While museums are vital to preserving history and protecting cultural artifacts, the juxtaposition between historical artifacts and cultural emblems in museums no doubt underscores the anxiety of reflecting an extinct or ancient identity. This is, again, epitomized in Natalie Diaz’s notion that she is doing her best not to become a museum of herself.

Rather than reducing this Diaz excerpt to a representation of an individual consciousness, though, it should instead be seen to represent an invisibility that results from a lack of representation in contemporary domains of American life. Somah Haaland (daughter of Congresswoman Debra Haaland, one of the first two Indigenous women elected to the House of Representatives) recently evoked this idea in an op-ed written for *Teen Vogue* magazine. Reflecting on the visibility she and her family experienced as they made their way onto the House floor dressed in their Pueblo regalia, Haaland states:

So much of America still sees us as savages in glass cases and our traditional dress as costumes to be worn. My mother, standing on the floor of the U.S.

Congress in moccasins and turquoise jewelry, is a tangible symbol that we have survived... this could have been the first time people on Capitol Hill had really seen that we are still here” (Haaland).

Haaland’s point, similar to that of Sings in the Timber, is to therefore force us to consider the ways in which historical and official narratives fail to tell the whole story of Native history and of the living present. As concluded by the authors of the article “‘Frozen in Time’: The Impact of Native American Media Representations on Identity and Self-Understanding,” underrepresentation and false representation in the media leads to a deprivation of messages or strategies “for how to be a person.” Instead, Native Americans, more than any other group, are seen and learn to see themselves through the lens of negative stereotypes (Leavitt, et al. 40). As these findings show, stereotypes and false representations that make up the public perception of indigeneity directly lead to low self-esteem and self-consciousness and the feelings of invisibility mentioned above. For this reason, it is important to consider the role storytelling can take to counter invisibility, especially when it is self-generated and easily distributed using the Internet and social media.

For Orange, this thinking manifests in *There There* in two ways: metafictional storytelling and the creation of a present tense peoplehood. What best defines *There There*’s metafictional approach is the character Dene’s StoryCorps-style project to capture Native American stories. Like the non-profit StoryCorps, which sets up storytelling booths in order to record, collect, and share the stories of everyday Americans, Dene sets up a booth to specifically record, collect, and share the stories of his Native American community. While StoryCorps is dedicated to preserving

“humanity’s stories,” Dene’s desire to collect stories stems from a claim in the novel’s prologue that the mainstream image of Native American life is based on a copy of a copy of the image of an “Indian” from a textbook. Because of these images, Dene claims that the only stories he has about himself are pathetic visions of the Native experience as seen on screen (Orange 7, 40). Dene, no doubt, is referring to a list of films mentioned in the novel’s prologue that reinforce these textbook images: *Apocalypto* (2006), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975). What these types of films lead to, Dene states, is the invisibility of actual Indigenous people in general and “urban Indians” more specifically. To counter invisibility and erasure, Dene sets up a booth and films people who are willing to tell their stories so that he can record a history that will replace the current, tragic and one-dimensional model.

Although Dene’s project is never completed in the diegetic timeline of the novel, readers thankfully have *There There* to serve as the example of counter-hegemonic storytelling that can replace the tragic, one-dimensional models of indigeneity. Just like Dene’s intention to use his project to create a new history, so too does Orange use an ensemble cast to replicate the endeavor to create and reflect a present tense “urban Indian” consciousness. More specifically, Orange’s ensemble contrasts characters with comfortable access to tradition, history, and ceremony with others who must rely on the Internet. For example, while his character Thomas Frank grew up with both parents (his mom white and his dad a “one thousand percent Indian” medicine man) and spent his whole life as a powwow drummer, Orange’s “full-blood character” Orvil Red Feather can only learn to powwow dance from watching videos on YouTube. This lack of access due to missing information is similarly seen in the character Edwin Black, who discovers he

is Cheyenne only after randomly finding his father on Facebook, a social media platform where he also learns to call himself “Native” because that is what everyone else on the site does. As we see in these three examples, Orange’s characterization avoids familiar tropes and stereotypes that presume all Indigenous peoples have special, spiritual connections to themselves and their past. Nevertheless, many of Orange’s characters want that access, participate in ceremonies to look for it, and even wear feathered headdresses and regalia. Using an ensemble cast, Orange is able to give these types of expression space, while also looking for new ways to represent indigeneity, stating in an interview with Marlena Gates that he wanted to conceive of new ways for twenty-first century post-reservation Indians to remain Indian without falling back on tropes and tired stereotypes (Gates). For Orange, this means his characters use the Internet, social media, modern dance, and hip-hop, along with traditional powwow music and dancing, and are given space within his novel to do so.

Such diversity generates a form of characterization that makes it difficult to imagine Orange’s ensemble as a part of an imaginary totality that exists in the mainstream American perception of what an Indigenous person looks like. Because of this quality in Orange’s writing, Gates states that Orange’s novel writes urban Natives into existence, an event that means “we will live as ghosts no longer” (Ibid). This notion of being a ghost represents invisibility and the feeling of being made into a past-tense relic, as discussed earlier. While critics of Native literature must be cautious not to reduce the concerns of Native literature to simply be about identity, the anxiety of being a ghost, being invisible, or being a museum of one’s self is nonetheless a manifest concern in these works that are especially interested in retrieving and rewriting Native history. It is

perhaps for this reason that author David Treuer argues that there is no such thing as Native American fiction, suggesting readers stop treating such works as “wish fulfillment” and start treating them like literature that can train our minds to work better (Charles “David Treuer”). Besides storytelling and the oral tradition being linked to a historical, defining quality of Native American culture, the act of storytelling and participation in media is especially important when viewed as a weapon against the hegemonic image of Indigenous peoples in order to claim authorship of self and define relations. As Nancy Peterson states, revising such erasures imbues the writing with a power for marginalized peoples to counter invisibility (Peterson 983).

This philosophy is likely the type of thinking that lead poet Tommy Pico to have his speaker and alter ego Teebs refer to himself in *Nature Poem* as “a weirdo NDN faggot” (Pico 2). This statement by Teebs works to define himself inasmuch as it produces a counter-narrative of Native American men on the one hand and the intersectionality of queer Native American existence on the other. While employing historically derogatory language with his usage of “faggot,” Pico immediately subverts it by also referring to himself as “NDN”—a label that signifies an anti-colonial revision to the identity imposed on Indigenous peoples through the word “Indian.” As quoted in a profile of Tommy Orange for the *New York Times*, Pico stated that “Indian” is an identity imposed on a myriad of Indigenous peoples to rob them of their distinctions. “NDN” by contrast, indigenizes the colonized power of language by creating a new identity (Alter).<sup>2</sup>

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2 Although developed as an important counter to historical labels that are racist, demeaning, demented, or inaccurate, I chose not to use NDN in my writing as I felt appropriating it into academic discourse would have meant removing the word’s power. As a white writer of a thesis for a university built on Lenni Lenape land, appropriating NDN would have meant participating in a system of power that reinforces white supremacy, historical erasures, and genocide. Appropriating this term merely to avoid using other labels would reinforce my liberalism and wokeness, but would have meant my writing would benefit from a legacy of settler colonialism that this thesis is consciously working against.



When paired with other stigmatizing language, it appears that Pico is altering the signifier of homophobic language as well and thus counters the hegemonic models that otherwise limit the power of the colonizer's language. While Orange's ensemble does not contain a character representing the intersectionality of queer and Indigenous like Pico (or his speaker Teebs), Orange certainly resists an assumption of authority in *There There* that would be responsible for supporting painful stereotypes that would suppress voices like Pico's, thus also suppressing his own.

### *1.2 Context: White Hegemonic Representations*

In resistance to hegemonic narratives that reinforce invisibility and monolithic representation, Orange establishes *There There* as a work diametrically opposed to narratives by non-Native authors, specifically calling out these works throughout his novel. For example, Orange's character Edwin thinks he received a computer virus when he downloaded the 2013 film *The Lone Ranger*, which he downloaded in order to see Johnny Depp's performance of Tonto; Edwin stating: "There's something about seeing [Depp] fail so badly that gives me strength" (Orange 64). Moreover, Orange also uses his ensemble cast of characters to counter two main historical images of "the Indian" perpetuated in white hegemonic stories: Indian as relic, perpetuated in narratives like *The Indian in the Cupboard*, and the vanishing Indian, perpetuated in narratives like *The Last of the Mohicans*. The 1990 film *The Indian in the Cupboard*, for example, relied heavily on the depiction of a plastic "Indian" action figure named "Little Bear," who was modeled on a stereotypical, historical representation that negated the history of actual

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Native people living in the 1990's when the film was set. Regardless of the intent of the film, which is actually sympathetic to Native issues, *Little Bear* is still based on a narrative that perceives Indigenous peoples as relics existing only in the past tense and thus fair game for appropriation.

Along with using his novel to deconstruct the falsehoods of white hegemonic representations, *Orange* is also focused on the impact of these simulations on real people. Similar to Mailhot's description of the majority culture's binaries, *Orange* states in an interview with *The Guardian* that these representations have created a monolithic version of what an Indian is supposed to be. To *Orange*, being monolithic is akin to being "historical," which means wearing a headdress and looking off into the distance (Beckerman). These monolithic images of nativeness specifically generated by white authors has led to the invisibility of Native Americans, particularly for those who now reside in cities. As I've previously quoted, the authors of "'Frozen in Time': The Impact of Native American Media Representations on Identity and Self-Understanding" suggest this invisibility forces Indigenous peoples to only see themselves through the lens of negative stereotypes. This conclusion is similarly suggested by *Orange*'s prologue, in which his prologue's narrator-character states, that without control of the narrative:

We've been defined by everyone else and continue to be slandered despite easy-to-look-up-on-the-internet facts about the realities of our histories and the current state as a people. We have the sad, defeated Indian silhouette, and the heads rolling down temple stairs, we have it on our heads, Kevin Costner saving us, John Wayne's six-shooter slaying us, an Italian guy named Iron Eyes Cody playing our parts in movies. We have the litter-mourning, tear-ridden Indian in the

commercial (also Iron Eyes Cody), and the sink-tossing, crazy Indian who was the narrator in the novel, the voice of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. We have all the logos and mascots. The copy of a copy of the image of an Indian in a textbook (Orange 7).

This passage is significant in that it references some of the most popular “Indian” figures of the last century, none of which originate from narratives written by Native Americans. As such, Orange links the image of history depicted in history textbooks with Hollywood blockbusters and American advertising.

Before revising these myths and constructing new models in his novel, Orange first deconstructs these hegemonic references as valid reflectors of identity, consciousness, and history. An easy narrative for Orange to quash is Iron Eyes Cody, the famous crying “Indian” from the 70’s public service announcement about pollution, who is actually an “Italian guy” named Espera Oscar de Corti. Other “invented Indians” referenced above are a bit more difficult to deconstruct, as they are not wholly problematic in content. *Dances with Wolves* is largely a sympathetic narrative, yet the film makes that sympathetic statement by simultaneously emphasizing the harmful binaries referenced earlier by Mailhot of “saints or healers, savages or heathens.” While the film attempts to humanize the Lakota Sioux, it reinforces harmful stereotypes at the expense of the Pawnee, who are demonized much like the Huron in *The Last of the Mohicans* (Wes Studi ironically playing both the demoniac Magua of the 1992 film version of *The Last of the Mohicans* and the “Toughest Pawnee” in *Dances with Wolves*). More importantly, Orange’s remark about the film reduces *Dances With Wolves* to its white savior narrative, therefore entirely disregarding a sympathetic reading of the film.

In this revisionary look at the film, *Dances with Wolves* is about Kevin Costner saving the Sioux people with his cache of rifles in a confusing, uncontextualized battle between the Pawnee and Sioux that seems to occur only because the Pawnee are bloodthirsty savages incapable of living peaceful lives with both whites and other Plains Indians. By disregarding this popular reading of the film, Orange not only negates the film's liberalism but subverts the ability for such representations to even have sympathetic intentions.

### *1.3 Context: Native American Postmodernism*

Along with its clear resistance to the monolithic images developed in the storytelling by white authors, Orange's novel must also be read within the context of high postmodern works by Native American authors that directly attempted to revise and replace these white hegemonic narratives. These works are important in the context of *There There*, as they highlight a shift of Indigenous representation in print culture and the literary marketplace through a subversion of western power structures supporting hegemonic conceptions of Indigenous experience, culture, and history. Explicitly referenced in several plot points and images, Orange frequently borrows from Alexie, Silko, and Erdrich. For example, his character Edwin spends almost an entire page of his narrated chapter reflecting on whether or not he should drink a Pepsi, a product Alexie frequently uses as a symbol of popular culture that defines the American identity (Tellefsen 126). Orange's character Tony, also reads Erdrich's work to his grandmother, Maxine—literature regarded by him as “Indian stuff” that he often does not understand.

More specifically, Orange places his novel in relationship to postmodernism by borrowing the style and form from his forbearers; relating to his high postmodern

predecessors through episodic narrative and formal play of perspectives and temporality. While Orange states in an interview with Hannah Beckerman that he thought the episodic nature of the novel gave the book propulsion, making it an active reading experience, the episodic structure also allows Orange to play with temporality and linear timelines (Beckerman). This is important when examining how *There There* participates in a continuum against erasure, as Renée Bergland states temporality and linear timelines are two traditional narrative concepts that are rooted in European colonialism (Bergland 142). Resistance to erasures can therefore be associated with the act of writing against time, an aspect of the novel best observable in Orange's chapters, each differing wildly in the temporal tenses of past, future, and present, with each chapter written in either first, second, or third person perspectives. Only a few of Orange's characters are narrated in one tense or perspective throughout their narrative arc in the novel. Dene, for example, is only narrated in third-person present tense, which may be intended to mirror his role as an objective director of Native American stories. Narration for Orange's character Tony, on the other hand, shifts radically between the character's four chapters. The novel begins with Tony narrating himself in first-person past tense, but when the novel returns to Tony nine chapters later in the first Interlude chapter after the narrator-character speaks, Tony is narrated in third-person future tense, only to shift again for Chapters 15 and 37 to third-person present tense. Although the tense and perspective repeats for Tony's last two chapters, the last Tony chapter (Chapter 37) chronologically follows Chapter 34, thus revealing yet another syntactic shift. Orange's weaving of the novel's components turns *There There* into a dizzying collection of voices and perspective.

The immensity of this network defines the way in which Orange deconstructs the hegemonic narrative of “the Indian.” Similar to Erdrich’s *Tracks*, Orange’s novel uses a postmodern approach to history—a poststructural gesture towards questioning historical representation and its relation to realism. According to Peterson, Erdrich crafted history in her novel to “forge a new historicity” that resists traditional historical narrative techniques. This means that *Tracks* was written in response to the recognition in postmodern culture that history is a text composed of competing and conflicting representations and meanings. This is because, in the post-structural era, what was once understood as objective historical narration must now be thought of as a subjective construction of a researcher’s and a culture’s ideologies (Peterson 982, 984). By thinking of history as a text, it can then be thought of as revisable, leading to new perceptions of historicity, or historical actuality (as opposed to myth or fiction). This is especially true of Erdrich’s novel, which is concerned with the way in which official documentation determines hegemonic historical consciousness as opposed to oral history that foregrounds Indigenous historical narratives. In writing her Anishinaabe elder Nanapush’s storytelling to his granddaughter Lulu, Erdrich shaped a new historicity, by shifting the narrative voice of Nanapush, from a “we” (representing the Anishinaabe people) to an “I” (representing a personal narrative as the only surviving witness). As Peterson states, this pronoun usage signifies an attempt to empower Lulu through a personal narrative that goes beyond the limits of documentary history and its politics (Ibid 985).

In a gesture key to this examination of history, Orange’s novel employs a narrator-character who speaks omnisciently using first person plural pronouns “we” and

“us” in the novel’s essayistic prologue and interlude chapters. If Nanapush represents one surviving witness who is capable of empowering one individual, Orange’s narrator-character is resolutely collective. He states:

We are Indians and Native Americans, American Indians and Native American Indians... Urban Indians and Indigenous Indians, Rez Indians and Indians from Mexico and Central and South America... Alaskan Native Indians, Native Hawaiians... enrolled members of tribes and disenrolled members, ineligible members and tribal council members... full-blood, half-breed, quadroon, eighths, sixteenths, sixty seconds (Orange 136).

Not presenting the history of one tribe or one member, Orange’s narrator-character uses a “we” here to create a collective community. Regardless of tribal enrollment, enrollment status, or self-identifying (or imposed) labels, Orange’s narrator-character includes everyone in the collective and the narrator-character speaks on behalf of all, thus demonstrating unmediated access to the cultural inheritance of all Native history. Additionally, Orange’s narrator-character speaks with a closeness to Native history and tradition that his characters fail to obtain or hold on to. In imbuing his narrator-character with this extraordinary access, Orange de-historicizes the hegemonic historical narratives and models, developing a new historicity based on the long living history of his characters and their culture. However, this narrator-character should not be viewed as spokesperson or transmitter of this access to readers. Although readers might expect this conjured list to end with a clear catchall label, Orange’s text specifically resists such authority. This list is thus not intended to provide clear answers, and especially serves to frustrate non-Native readers who might Google: “What should I call Indians?” As a

result, Orange appears to be playing with readers' inclination to install him as the spokesperson of contemporary Native American literature.

Instead of giving readers clear answers, Orange's use of the narrator-character device disrupts readers' familiarity with monolithic Native history as it pertains to relationships to an Indigenous peoplehood and individual Indigenous identities. This narrative voice does not speak specifically about the novel's plot, nor is this voice clearly the speaker who narrates the novel's chapters written in third-person. Instead, this narrative voice in the prologue works to defamiliarize the popular narrative of American history by establishing a critical framework for the historicity of *There There*'s narrative world. As I will argue in the next section, Orange uses the prologue and his narrator-character to disrupt the historicity of hegemonic narratives. In doing so, Orange creates a narrative present separated from the rules of linear temporality, allowing him to revise one-dimensional historical images.

While a contextual reading of *There There*'s postmodern Renaissance forbearers is necessary to understanding the novel, it is equally important to examine its shift away from these works, especially as they can be seen as responsible for the contemporary monolithic images of indigeneity. According to Julian Brave Noisecat, *There There* "elides the reservation dispatches that have dominated Native fiction over the decades" (Noisecat). The dispatches referenced by Noisecat most likely relate to the works of Alexie, who Orange says is "very rez" and is therefore an author he avoided reading because it made him feel "like it was the only way to Indian write" (Petersen). It is also because of the domination of these narratives that Noisecat actually celebrates the fall of Alexie in 2018 when sexual assault allegations were raised against him. To Noisecat,



Alexie's characters were far too exaggerated, corny, and read "more like simulations of rez-y-ness than windows into what our relatives are actually going through" (Noisecat). Because Alexie was considered by the mainstream to be the spokesperson for Indigenous peoples in the US, his voice and thus his narratives received increased attention and credibility, maintaining legitimacy today as accurate portrayals of contemporary Indigenous life. According to Gates when she defines the social implications of *There There*, "urban Indians" in particular are absent in both the mainstream American imagination and in most Native narratives as well. By specifically crafting this presence in his novel, Orange states that he hopes to "resist the one idea of what being Native is supposed to look like," allowing "urban Indians" in particular to be represented as human beings living in the contemporary world (Beckerman). My point is not to criticize Alexie but to understand how the gap between the heyday for postmodern Native American literature and today informs the present situation for Orange, other contemporary Indigenous authors, and an audience deserving of representations that empower instead of perpetuating stereotypes. It is therefore important to read *There There* as a response to narratives that clearly exemplify Vizenor's term of a "literature of dominance," texts that support historical and one-dimensional images, even if they were consecrated in Renaissance literature. As I will now show, resistance to these monolithic conceptions is how *There There* develops a "present tense people."

## **2. The Present Tense in *There There***

### *2.1 Massacre and American Violence: Revision of the Past Tense in There There*

Orange's ensemble, besides representing racial diversity, is also diverse in how they intend on using the powwow that is the key event in the novel's timeline. Some

members of Orange's ensemble, like Orvil and Edwin, use the powwow to discover their relations to a larger collective. Others use the powwow to create art, like Thomas who drums for the dancers, and Dene who hopes to use attendees to record his stories. However, characters like these are contrasted sharply to the characters Octavio, Tony, Calvin, Charles and Carlos, who see the powwow as the perfect opportunity to pull off a heist. Using plastic guns that were 3D printed by Daniel, the five characters attempt to steal the powwow dance competition prize money; their failure erupts in a confusing mess of violence when Carlos turns his gun on Octavio; the five men wind up shooting at each other. The shooting results in all of the actors of the robbery getting shot, along with Orvil, Thomas, Bill, and an unknown number of other powwow attendees who all get hit by stray bullets.

As previously discussed, Orange's novel can be read in the context of its postmodern predecessors because of its episodic chapters that are defined by postmodern play with point of view and temporality. This section of the novel and the diegetic information provided about the robbery and shooting offers the best opportunity to see Orange play with these narrative devices. The attempted robbery and shooting spans seven of the novel's chapters but only makes up twelve of the novel's pages. Through seven chapters covering the shooting, it is unclear how many shots are fired and how much time actually elapses between shots. Chapters 28 (Dene) and 29 (Orvil), for example, might describe the same shot from two different points of view or two different shots entirely. The length of time that these chapters cover is compressed into twelve pages with seven episodes jumping between the gunshots, the shooters, and the victims. Perhaps the only consistent convention observable in these chapters is that the seven

chapters, along with the final chapter (which returns to the shooting) are all written in third-person present tense. While it is possible to describe the shooting and its related chapters individually, it is nearly impossible to reconstruct Orange's sequence of events within the framework of linear time, particularly because readers cannot trace the bullets and stray rounds back to their source.

Orange focuses on these untraceable bullets as symbols of historical violence, crafting a temporal play that defines the violence happening in the present tense of the novel's chronology as an event connected to settler colonial violence. Connected to historical violence that Orange invokes as the diegetic history to the novel's fictional plot, these bullets define colonization, racism, and subjugation in both the past and the present. The narrator-character states in the prologue:

When they first came for us with their bullets, we didn't stop moving even though the bullets moved twice as fast as the sound of our screams... The bullets were premonitions, ghosts from dreams of a hard, fast future... 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. Stray bullets and consequences are landing on our unsuspecting bodies even now (Orange 10).

In collapsing the temporality of history in this paragraph, Orange's narrator-character recontextualizes colonial violence as an inherent fact of American history that still has consequences for Native Americans today. In other words, the narrator-character recontextualizes history to be an ongoing lived experience and not a past tense, single

event. By conceiving of time this way, bullets act as premonitions of the future under colonial and post-colonial rule, while also having the ability to linger from the past into the present as the long shadow of colonial violence. In this narrative, what began as colonial violence in the settlers' effort to take over and replace Indigenous peoples as the possessor of land, are now symbolic of erasures and revisions of history as the victors who fired their bullets in the air, and could write and forget whatever historical facts they wanted.

Bullets, then, become a way for Orange to connect this present tense action of his novel to a living history—thus shaping a new way of perceiving American history. To give this new historicity shape, Orange relates key moments in Native American history along the timeline of American “progress,” events in history that define the foundation of American history and domination over Indigenous peoples. One story used in the prologue is the “successful massacre” of the Pequot in 1637, which led to the Massachusetts Bay Colony holding a feast of thanksgiving. One thanksgiving celebration, the narrator-character states, is said to have involved the colonists kicking the heads of Pequot people through the streets of Manhattan (Orange 5). More than giving the context for how Thanksgiving came to be, these narratives contextualize what becomes lost when the victors tell their sanitized side of the story. This is the same type of thinking that led Vizenor to critique the definition of the massacre of tribal women and children at Wounded Knee as the “last major battle of the Indian Wars.” That a massacre could become defined as a major battle is Vizenor’s very definition of manifest manners and the literature of dominance (Vizenor 159). Similar to Vizenor, Orange’s narrator-character sees events of historical violence in American history as “flags flown and

meant to be seen broadly” to reinforce the narrative written by the victor (Orange 5). These “flags” of an American culture of dominance include Chief Metacomet’s head being displayed on a spike outside of Plymouth Fort for more than twenty years,<sup>3</sup> the Indian Head Penny, and mascots on sports jerseys. Furthermore, in a reconceptualization of the “Indian-head Test Pattern” that ran on television sets between 1939 and the late 1970’s, the narrator-character states that these “flags” can now be broadcast directly into homes throughout the “new world” (Orange 6). As benign as this image might seem, the narrator-character equates it to the same acts of violence conducted by colonists in 1637; the head in the test pattern is encircled in what resembles the sights of a rifle scope. And yet, the narrator-character quips that “this was just a test” (Ibid 4). Not merely static events of the past, Orange’s conjuring of Indian-heads recontextualizes the images we see today, making them visual cues that indicate a continuity with Native history. This violence endures today, the prologue states, because the settler victors were enabled, and are still enabled, to tell one version of history while suppressing ongoing narratives of atrocity and resistance.

In acknowledging the historical context of violence, embracing it as a part of the narrative that makes up history, Orange also states that this violence is not necessarily based on a white settler erasure of historical violence but that it is also due to a lack of consciousness ingrained in the thinking of Native people. To Orange, violence is an

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<sup>3</sup> Seeking to evade capture by the first American Rangers, Chief Metacomet of the Wampanoags was assassinated by John Alderman on 12 August, 1676. After his death, his wife and son were sold as slaves in Bermuda. Metacomet was beheaded, and dismembered. Cut into quarters, his limbs hung in trees. Alderman was given Metacomet’s right hand as a trophy. After Alderman sold it to the Plymouth settlement for thirty shillings, Metacomet’s head was displayed outside of Plymouth Fort, built on the site of the first American colony.

ingrained part of our history but we're never able to reconcile with it because people aren't willing to admit that [violence] was such an important piece of the conquering and the killing that has happened. *We* aren't even willing to admit [violence happened], as a nation under Americans (Gates).

Violence is therefore a defining feature of the US hegemonic superstructure and is what American history means. If violence cannot be divorced or erased from the American historical consciousness then this also means that it is not a part of the historical past but the living present, as this violence defines a nation that is still "under Americans." To be "present tense" seems to mean acknowledging and responding to violence like Sings in the Timber does in his photographs on the University of Wisconsin campus, where Ho-Chunk burial grounds were erased in 1857. For Orange, this acknowledgement is summed up best in his epigraph to Part III: Return; quoting James Baldwin from *Stranger in the Village*: "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them" (Orange 157). As Baldwin states in the sentence preceding the line chosen by Orange, history is a nightmare, and it is a nightmare from which none can awaken. Consciousness of this nightmare is shown best in *There There*'s temporal play with bullets, as it allows Orange to link a particularly nightmarish past with an equally nightmarish present, emblematically represented in a massacre that several of his characters cannot comprehend and the text cannot objectively depict.

In his claim about historical violence, Orange implicates both Natives and non-Natives, who do not know that this violence exists or happens and choose easily digestible narratives based on historical erasures. Orange particularly conjures the issue of obscured historical violence in an observation made by his character Jacquie, who

while hiding from the bullets whizzing past her head, wonders if all the violence she is observing could be some elaborate performance-art piece as all the people in regalia on the ground “resemble a massacre” (Ibid 279). This is a curious thing for Jacquie to think, as the violence does more than resemble a massacre—it actually is one. However, Jacquie is likely using the word “massacre” here in reference to the acts of genocide referenced in the novel’s prologue, like that of the Pequot in 1637. Although Orange’s shooting depicts one act of violence specifically perpetrated by Native Americans against Native Americans, the sudden immediacy to a violence she considered either as performance-art or a historical event makes the bullets that were fired “from far off” a shocking present tense, living history. Jacquie’s struggle to comprehend the act likely stems from the fact that the scene does not look like a living present she thought she knew. Opal expresses a similar shock and confusion at the thought of violence occurring at the powwow, asking: “Did someone really come to get us here? Now?” (Ibid 276). This response to the violence suggests Opal usually feels safe or had felt safe, as if there is no expectation of violence to occur at an event so focused on centralizing and crystalizing Indigenous relations. Clearly, violence is not ingrained in Opal’s consciousness either, as recognition of a specifically American violence would have given her a clear answer to her question. In Orange’s crafting of a historical narrative that such observations are part of a historical and cultural consciousness, occurrences of violence at the powwow can be contextualized as one part of Native American existence. Not solely defined by a singular ceremony of powwow or an imposed hegemonic image like “looking off into the distance,” Orange’s replication of massacre at his powwow suggests that atrocity is but one defining characteristic of Indigenous life.

The replication of violence in Orange's massacre at the Big Oakland Pow Wow is essential to the goals of Orange's novel because it underscores the indivisible connection between violence in the past and its effects in the living present. This, I argue, is why Orange chose to end his novel on the image of Tony, dead in his regalia, his body riddled with bullets. This description of Tony's body is a literalized depiction of the narrator-character's claim in the interlude: "We've been fighting for decades to be recognized as a present tense people, modern, relevant, alive, only to die in the grass wearing feathers" (Ibid 141). As the narrator-character suggests through this statement, the obstinacy of the hegemonic image of the "Indian" persists despite narratives by authors who have been fighting for decades to change the visual. No matter how hard this image is countered, the image of a massacred "Indian" in the grass will always supersede narratives that give Native people modern, relevant, living histories. This is conjured in the past tense history of the narrator-character's exposition on historical violence and then replicated in the present tense of Tony's death—ironically signifying Baldwin's suggestion that he cannot escape this history because violence still shapes him and the present.

Orange's depiction of Tony's death therefore subverts a monolithic notion that hegemonic emblems and performances of indigeneity must provide Tony with a stable center. Ironically, it is the violence committed by and against him that is depicted as providing a more centering definition of indigeneity than any ceremony or biological fact. Although Tony states he saw himself "as an Indian" when he tried on his regalia in preparation for the heist in Chapter 1 and later feels empowered while wearing the regalia on the BART because it allowed him to show the world that Native Americans still exist, it is the bullets that have riddled Tony's body in Chapter 37 that are described as anchors,



pulling him down to “the center’s center” (Ibid 290). That traditional “Indian” emblems do not imbue Tony with a stable center is not surprising, though, as readers know that Tony’s regalia is significant only as a cover to help him blend in at the powwow, which he only goes to with criminal intentions. That Tony replicates the image of a dead “Indian” in the grass is made even more ironic by this fact, as the massacred image of his body is what would be defined as historical, whereas it is the violence his corpse signifies that defines Native history and existence.

The bullets that have riddled body are also significant as they supersede another suggested marker of historical violence in Indigenous narratives: Tony’s fetal alcohol syndrome, or “The Drome” as he refers to it. The Drome is significant to Tony’s character and the novel itself, as it is the first thing readers learn about him in the first chapter of *There There*. Describing the appearance of his face as he notices The Drome for the first time, Tony states: “My eyes droop like I’m fucked up... my mouth hangs open all the time. There’s too much space between each of the parts of my face... spread out like a drunk slapped it on reaching for another drink” (Ibid 16). Readers of Tony’s Drome might be inclined to see this description as a signifier for the historical prevalence of alcoholism in the Native American community, a real concern affecting nearly two million Indigenous peoples across North America and linked by the National Institute of Health to a legacy of settler colonialism. On The Drome, Tony states: “I know what my face looks like. I know what it means... The Drome is my mom and why she drank, it’s the way history lands on my face” (Ibid 16). While the findings of the NIH, colonial violence, might be “why” Tony’s mom drank, this is not clearly or exclusively what Tony is referencing when he refers to the “history” his face represents. Instead, Tony is

concerned with his lived experience as an individual with fetal alcohol syndrome, stating that The Drome is why everyone calls him simple and why people look at him “like he is ghost,” if they look at him at all. As such, and to him, his Drome is relevant only when it signifies his individual experience as someone who fails intelligence tests and who is often not looked at by others (both the result of fetal alcohol syndrome effects on the brain and physical appearance).

Furthermore, Tony explicitly does not choose to engage in what he refers to as “Indian stuff” in order to understand his Drome or indigeneity. As indicated above, Tony does not always understand the “Indian stuff” his grandmother Maxine makes him read, and thus it fails to help him make sense of his place in the world. Instead, Tony listens to the hip-hop artist MF DOOMf, whose lyrics provides him with a strategy to understand himself and his Drome. When discussing his favorite song, “Rhinestone Cowboy,” Tony states that he understands living with the effects of fetal alcohol syndrome best through the lyric: “Got more soul than a sock with a hole.” To Tony, this lyric means that the foot’s sole comes through a hole in the bottom of a sock, just like his soul comes through his Drome. Just like the sock, he says, his Drome is “a face worn through” (Ibid 18). Tony’s relation to the MF DOOM lyric therefore provides him with a strategy for developing a selfhood beneath his Drome, giving Tony a more complex, human personhood. In some ways, modernizing or revising the historical model of Native relations crafts this characterization, but Orange also uses Tony to make a hegemonic “Indian” sign conditionally related to a particular signifier.

## *2.2 The Urban Indian: Present Tense Post-Reservation Personhood*

Perhaps the most shocking thing about *There There* is that members from within the Native community commit the massacre and not the outsiders readers might expect. However, this plot point is not surprising once generalized claims about Indigenous connectivity are subverted, for example, by the novel's treatment of Octavio and his crew. When he first appears in Chapter 1, Octavio specifically asks Tony if he has any "Indian shit" to put on when they rob the powwow. When Tony asks him what he means, he responds: "I don't know, what they put on, feathers and shit" (Ibid 25). Until readers discover later that Octavio is also Native American because of the medicine box he makes with his uncle in Chapter 10, there is very little evidence from this earlier passage to suggest that he is also Native. This is especially because he establishes a binary between himself and the "they" who wear regalia and participate in powwows. Octavio cannot even access the word "regalia" and instead uses vague wording of "Indian shit." Octavio therefore seems to function as a reminder to white readers in particular that racial indigeneity does not define actual relations and/or a connection to an Indigenous peoplehood. While powwows are cultural performances used in modern times for ceremony, socializing, and selling goods, Orange's novel shows that it certainly does not make powwow a centralizing practice for all. Using Octavio as a foil to seeing these cultural practices as undeniably unifying, we see that Orange is invested in developing other ways of maintaining contact with a center in a poststructural and postmodern era, when traditions no longer act as unifying practices for all.

In particular, *There There* is interested in questioning the hegemonic tradition of living on the reservation, and how the ubiquity of urban residence means the symbolic reservation must be replaced. The hegemonic image of the reservation, as communicated

by Alexie, is especially ill-fitting for members of *There There*'s ensemble who are multiracial, or ineligible for or disinterested in tribal enrollment simply because they do not know what tribe they belong to. Even Orange's characters who do not fit this description are caught in a paradox because they are all "displaced" in Oakland and disconnected from the power of the reservation to localize a tribe into one community. Orange's character Edwin, for example, does not know who his father is and thus he cannot become a member of any tribe or even have knowledge of what tribe he belongs to. The only connection Edwin has to a general peoplehood is on Facebook. It is because of input from his Native American Facebook friends that Edwin decides to use the label "Native" to describe himself. His mother, however, uses "Native American Indian," a term Edwin states is a weird politically correct catchall you only hear from white people who have never known a real native person (Ibid 69). The fact that Edwin uses "Native" and not this phrase suggests that his contact with Native people online makes him a non-white person despite his lack of access to a more specific tribal identity.

Along with Facebook, Edwin also plays the online game *Second Life*, which he uses to craft an identity that is clearly a more idealized Native version of himself. When readers first meet Edwin, he does not have the ability to leave the toilet due to a crippling bout of constipation, thus it would be impossible for him to go to a reservation, let alone go in search of his father and discover which reservation he should actually visit. As a result, Edwin relies on *Second Life* to engage in and explore the world in which he lives, but more importantly, he relies on *Second Life* to perform a stereotypical form of indigeneity. Despite the fact that the virtual world of *Second Life* allows users free reign to create an entirely original character, Edwin still makes himself Native American,

creating an avatar that he defines as being “raised on the reservation with his dad.” This detail is important such that Edwin is given the chance to author himself and he does not make himself whiter but more distinctly Native American—knowing his dad and thus his tribe, and in turn living with his people on a reservation. Whereas the Edwin in the real world of the novel is overweight, unemployed, and does not know his tribe or dad, Edwin states: “The Edwin Black of my *Second Life* was proud. He had hope” (Ibid 63).

The Internet in the novel subsequently acts as an access point to indigeneity that, while mediated, provides a sense of cultural inheritance that earlier works like *Ceremony* seemed to take for granted. Whereas Tayo in Silko’s *Ceremony* found a center through Betonie’s teaching him about performing ceremony, such connections are accessible in *There There* primarily through the virtual network of the Internet. Orange’s character Opal, for example, has decided not to “force” these traditions and cultural practices onto the brothers Orvil, Loother, and Lony. While Loother and Lony do not care, Orvil does, and thus he must rely on YouTube to watch videos to teach himself to powwow dance. While enabling access to ceremony and tradition, though, YouTube does not imbue Orvil with the same sense of legitimacy that the social media network of Facebook gave to Edwin—and certainly not what Tayo gets from Betonie. As a result, the Internet spurs an existential crisis for Orvil about how he fits into his peoplehood, making him feel like a fraud and like he is “acting Indian” because he is not really powwow dancing. Using Google, Orvil asks “What does it mean to be a real Indian?” and discovers the term “pretendian” on [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com)<sup>4</sup>, which reinforces a notion of self that makes Orvil feel like he is merely dressed up “like an Indian” (Ibid 121). Moving from dancing in

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4 Some entries Orvil might have seen include: “Person who falsely claims Native American heritage, lineage, Indian hoaxers”; “A wannabe American Indian”; “Every white person in America that claims to be 'part' Native American.”

front of his mirror to the Big Oakland Pow Wow allows Orvil to see that all the powwow dancers are “Indians dressed as Indians” and thus his feelings of being a fraud dissipate when he discovers his relationship with and connection to these men. Although a meaningful connection only happens when he joins an IRL network, the Internet was essential for Orvil because Opal refused to pass on cultural inheritance and thus Orvil needed to author these relations himself. As Orange shows, there is a need for new models to compensate for changing attitudes, and in the twenty-first century, what better tool can be used to develop and replace essentialized models than the ubiquitous Internet?

Yet Orvil still needs the powwow and Edwin still wants to meet his real dad. It is also worth noting that Edwin’s idealized version of himself lives on a reservation. Reservations are considered essential tools for maintaining and preserving what could be considered cultural heritage, or more broadly, sovereignty. Within the borders of the reservation exists the idea that there is safety from the dominant culture, enabling Native people to maintain control of traditional lifestyles, languages, and cultures. The reservation might therefore be seen as a physical access point—allowing Indigenous peoples to connect to a sense of indigeneity while also aiding in developing authenticity and pride, as is suggested in Edwin’s crafting of himself in *Second Life*. While the Internet in *There There* destabilizes monolithic concepts of “Indian” identity that define strict ways of living authentically, Orange still conjures a consciousness about the significance of the reservation to Native culture and peoplehood. Rather than further that hegemonic power, however, Orange’s novel focuses on developing the validity of having consciousness off the reservation in major urban centers in American where the majority of Native people now live. As Orange argues in his interview with Marlena Gates,

“there’s not going to be some massive move back to the reservations, so we have to forge a new identity that is related to the city in a way that we bring cultural values and ways with us” (Gates). If the signifier of reservations no longer lines up to lived experience, Orange needs to reconfigure the center of Indigenous peoplehood in the contemporary world. This is done partly through the Internet, but also through the powwow and thus he is clearly not moving beyond all traditions of indigeneity. For this reason, Orange’s novel looks for new ways for the seventy percent of Native Americans living in cities to identify as Indigenous without falling back on tropes and stereotypes, while also modifying cultural signifiers that need to be made present tense for twenty-first century Native Americans looking for present tense representation.

### 2.3 #WeAreStillHere: Living in the Present Tense

By decentralizing both Indigenous “identity” and authenticity, I once again argue that Orange’s novel is inseparable from its postmodern forbearers. As I argued in section 1.3 of this essay, *There There* can be read in relation to the works of Alexie, Silko, and Erdrich because of Orange’s play with postmodern thinking about temporality and style. Now, I would like to consider how Orange specifically gestures towards a postmodern philosophical approach to understanding indigeneity. Similar to how these authors used the novel to shape new representations to replace white hegemonic narratives, I argue that Orange’s goal for *There There* aligns itself with a discourse from the late twentieth century that no longer defines hegemonic frameworks as foundational or objective truths. Postmodernist thinking, for Orange, aids in the development of present tense Indigenous relationships because it subverts the notion of epistemic truths, reshaping “facts” into products of a settler colonial discourse that lead to the hegemonic simulation of the

“Indian” mythology in the first place. As a result, postmodernism in Native American literary studies helps bring to light the fact that myths regarding the “Indian” are not accurate or authentic, but scripted by colonial discourse—again, what Vizenor refers to as manifest manners. This underpins the importance of Orange’s goal to replace the copy of a copy of the image of an “Indian” from history textbooks. In his revision of these monolithic historical narratives, Orange’s novel should be conceived as postmodern because Orange uses his polyphonic narrative to give a number of alternatives for maintaining contact with the (false) hegemonic center.

Orange’s gesture towards postmodern philosophy is made explicit through Edwin’s explanation of the importance of A Tribe Called Red, a real group of First Nations DJs. Like Tony’s appreciation for MF DOOM, Orange also draws a connection to hip-hop through Edwin. However, Edwin’s music is specifically a hybrid between Native and non-Native sources, whereas Tony’s music is specifically a non-Native source. Edwin is also a stark contrast to Orvil, who is said to exclusively listen to powwow music in order to feel that he is relating to something “specifically Indian” when he hears the energy of the booming drum and intensity of the singing (Orange 126). Contrary to other characters whose music represents extremes of Native or non-Native, Edwin states that A Tribe Called Red is

the most modern, or more postmodern, form of Indigenous music I’ve heard that’s both traditional and new-sounding. The problem with Indigenous art in general is that it’s stuck in the past. The catch, or the double bind, about the whole thing is this: If it isn’t pulling from tradition, how is it Indigenous? And if it’s stuck in the



past, how can it be relevant to other Indigenous people living now, how can it be modern? (Ibid 77)

Contrary to Tony and Orvil, Edwin is described as needing more than the ritualistic, mystic, or ancient powwow music. Instead, he listens to A Tribe Called Red who sample powwow drum groups in their hybridization of traditional music, while modernizing it through electronic music. As Edwin's analysis of A Tribe Called Red suggests, the relationship between this sign and signifier cannot be dependent upon the past alone because this is not always relevant to Indigenous people living now. As a result, what is modern can be appropriated within representation strategies to give Indigenous peoples examples of existing in the contemporary world, which also allows for present tense representations in the media.

Another way the novel crafts this point is by connecting the image of powwow dancing to breakdancing, seen in Orvil's claim that the powwow dancer he watched on YouTube "moved like gravity meant something different for him. It was like break dancing in a way... but both new—even cool—and ancient seeming" (Ibid 121). Similar to A Tribe Called Red's unification of the "ancient" and "contemporary" by electrifying powwow music, the hybridization of dance suggests an expression of nativeness that is not rooted to increasingly arcane traditions. Providing a helpful frame to the concept of postmodern hybridity in indigeneity, and mirroring Orange's conception of powwow as a type of breakdance, is an exhibit that ran at the Museum of the American Indian in New York City titled *Transformer: Native Art in Light and Sound*. The exhibit, which ran between November 2017 and January 2019, was dedicated to depicting indigeneity in motion, not "frozen in amber as romantic depictions in popular culture would have you

believe” (*Transformer*). In one multimedia piece titled “Tsu Heidei Shugaxutaan 1 and 2,” Nicholas Galanin explored the connection between contemporary breakdancing and the traditional powwow. To produce this piece, Galanin filmed a Tlingit dancer and a non-Tlingit breakdancer but swapped the dancers’ musical tracks so the Tlingit dancer danced to an electronic track and the breakdancer danced to a traditional Tlingit song. This swap allowed Galanin to highlight Tlingit song and dance as both “contemporary and relevant,” showing “what is possible when culture is allowed to grow and expand to navigate new circumstances” (Galanin). Similarly expressed in *There There*, each text illustrates a desire for new forms of Indigenous expression, which can help Native people navigate new circumstances in the contemporary world. Especially for Orvil who navigates indigeneity on his own, being able to conceive of powwow dancing in relation to a familiar non-Indigenous dance can allow him to independently make powwow dancing intelligible. What he expresses in his quote about the YouTube dancer might be divorced from a specific cultural language, but he is still able to express an appreciation for the dancer’s ability to bypass limitations of gravity in performance of ceremony. Thus Orvil still recognizes the traditional importance of the dance but does not do so by depending solely on the idea of a mystic past.

Instead of romanticizing this past, it seems to only be conjured by Orange as a force to be resisted either through personal politics and belief, or because of an inability to form a relation to it. In both cases, this play with past symbols is presented in the novel through Orange’s use of spider legs, which readers learn in Chapters 8 and 9 that Orvil and Opal pull out of bumps on their legs. The discoveries of spider legs are important events in the lives of these characters, and yet readers never receive an explanation in the

diegesis of the novel. More importantly, Orvil and Opal do not understand what they mean either. Instead, according to a text message Opal sends to Jacquie, the boys Orvil, Looter, and Lony think the spider legs are representative of “something NDN” (Orange 101).

Orange uses these ambiguous spider legs to create an antithetical relationship between the mystic past and modern Indigenous life. While scratching a bump on his leg in a Target bathroom in Chapter 8, Orvil pulls three splinter-like spider legs out of his leg. As the text reports, these spider legs come out of a bump on Orvil’s leg that has been present for as long as he can remember, and is often so irritated that he is “[un]able to stop scratching it.” This similarly occurs for Opal in the narration: “The bump had never gone away. Were there more legs in there? Was that the spider’s body? Opal had stopped asking questions a long time ago. The bump remained” (Ibid 124, 164). Literalizing the idiom of scratching an itch to satisfy needs, Orvil’s spider legs are produced from a wound that forces him to confront his tenuous relations with his heritage, made more problematic because of Opal’s resistance to teaching him despite still knowing the bump on her leg is there. Instead, Opal tells him that “[he’s] Indian because [he’s] Indian because [he’s] Indian,” a phrase playing off of the law of identity that Gertrude Stein cited when she wrote “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” (Ibid 229). Nevertheless, Orvil telling himself that he is Indian because he is Indian does not make him feel any more related to a people, which might have made his version of cultural expression, powwow dancing in the mirror, matter. This is true until he participates in the Big Oakland Pow Wow and is surrounded by people like him. While dancing, Orvil looks up and sees that they are “all feathers and movement” and “all one dance,” and thus the idea that one

person dressed in regalia signifies awkwardness and fraudulence recedes when he observes that the stadium is full of “Indians dressed up as Indians” (Ibid 233).

Orvil’s spider legs may direct him towards this peoplehood and his Indigenous relations in general, but this mysticism alone fails to suffice as a defining signifier of his selfhood. As with Orange’s usage of *A Tribe Called Red*, Orvil’s spider legs are another postmodern gesture in *There There*—a hybridity between what is contemporary and what is traditional. The spider legs, which reference the past, are not wholly relevant to Orvil even if they do signify something foundational for his connection to his Indigenous relations. By never committing to defining the spider legs as part of a tradition, Orange thereby resists the convention of featuring spiritual “Indian” characters who experience magical things.

#### *2.4 Resistance to the Past: Present Tense Indigenous Women*

While Orvil’s spider legs are emblematic of indigeneity in general, Opal’s spider legs story reflects Indigenous womanhood, reminiscent of the Spider Woman mytheme in Silko’s *Ceremony*. In *Ceremony*, which borrows from Laguna Pueblo oral tradition, Silko’s spider is Ts’its’tsi’nako, the “Thought-Woman” who created the universe. *Ceremony*’s opening poem frames the novel as the story that Thought-Woman is thinking about. Storytelling, in this context, is ceremony. Referencing a metaphorical pregnancy, Silko’s speaker states that “in the belly of this story the rituals and the ceremony are still growing,” language that Orange repeats using Opal almost forty years later (Silko 2). Upon discovering Jacquie’s pregnancy, Opal declares that Jacquie cannot get an abortion because “we shouldn’t ever not tell our stories.” Jacquie interprets Opal’s usage of “story” here to mean her baby, telling Opal that “It’s not a story... this is real,” to which

Opal states that it could be both real and a story (Orange 60). Although Opal's childhood and her coming of age as a young woman are defined by the suggested Indigenous signifier of spider legs and the idiomatic itch she could not scratch, her adulthood opposes this definition according to what characters might call "Indian stuff."

This usage of spider legs allows Orange to point readers to familiar tropes in traditional Native American texts while at the same time resisting a storytelling technique that might validate the presence of mystical depth in contemporary Native American existence. Instead, Orange develops stories of contemporary Indigenous womanhood through Jacquie and her daughters. It is for this reason that Opal's spider legs may not be significant because of her storyline, but Jacquie's. Although Opal began to pick out spider legs when she got her first period, they are more important to her because the event coalesced around Jacquie discovering she was pregnant with the character Blue, and thus her menstruation and spider legs in a lump on her leg are mirrored in the text by Jacquie's pregnancy and baby legs in her swollen stomach. Both characters keep the presence of legs in their bodies a secret and both sets of legs signify types of Indigenous womanhood that are part of the cycles of violence, abuse, self harm, and addiction, which disproportionately affect Indigenous women throughout US and Canada.

In Opal's telling of 1970, their mother Vicky brought them to Alcatraz to participate in the occupation of the island led by the Native American activist group Indians of All Tribes. The occupation, which lasted for fourteen months and was held by 89 Red Power activists, was meant to enforce the Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868), granting the return of unused federal land to the Indigenous peoples who originally occupied the land. While Vicky seems involved in the politics of the occupation, she also seems to

treat Alcatraz as a place to live after their home was foreclosed upon, forcing them to move. The Occupation of Alcatraz is important in the novel because it was during this time that Jacquie met Harvey, slept with him, and became pregnant with the child that Opal refers to as a story. Jacquie later gave this baby up for adoption and lost all contact with her, events that became the reason she began drinking; the events at Alcatraz were the root of the problem that became a drinking problem, “before the drinking was even related to it” (Ibid 109).

While Jacquie does not know what happened to her daughter, readers learn in Chapter 12 (narrated by her daughter now named Blue), that she was adopted by a white family who named her Crystal and that she later changed her name to the “Indian name” Blue after getting married. Blue grew up in Moraga, a majority white suburban town outside of Oakland, and despite learning her birth mother was Cheyenne, she grew up feeling white, all the while being treated like a “brown person” by those around her. In explaining this feeling, Blue alludes to an ethnic slur of an “apple”—a term Orange states in an interview with Anne Petersen was first deployed after Native Americans were forced to assimilate and become “citified, superficial, inauthentic, cultureless refugees” (Petersen). Mirroring these psychological effects of assimilation, Blue remarks that she sees herself from the inside out, feeling inside “as white as the long white pill-shaped pillow my mom always made me keep on my bed even though I never used it” (Orange 198). To counter this disassociation, Blue eventually began working a job at the Indian Center in Oakland, which helped her feel like she belonged somewhere. Later, Blue moved to Oklahoma to be closer to where her tribe was from. In trying to live a more authentic life, unfortunately, Blue tragically ended up marrying a man who physically

assaulted her, trapping her in an abusive relationship that defined her despondency and dissociation. Blue states, “I slept in the same bed with him, got up for work every morning like it was nothing, I’d been gone since the first time he laid hands on me” (Ibid 199). In an incredibly tense and dramatic chapter, readers then watch Blue narrowly escape Oklahoma to return to Oakland as Paul attempts to murder her.

While Blue survives her conflict, Jacquie’s other daughter Jamie does not. Jamie is the mother to Orvil, Looter, and Lony, but readers learn through Jacquie’s storyline that she lost her battle with heroin addiction and committed suicide six years into Orvil’s life and thirteen years before the novel is set. Plagued by the event and the image of finding her daughter’s body, a bullet hole in her head and track marks on her arm, this further elucidates Jacquie’s battle with addiction, drinking alcohol to drink herself into a “manageable oblivion every night” (Ibid 106). Now sober but still battling threats of relapse, Jacquie works for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, for which she attends a conference on preventing self-harm in Indigenous youth populations. While the novel’s powwow is meant to be a celebratory event, the conference is only a somber reminder of the grim statistics surrounding suicide rates and violence affecting Indigenous communities, the event emcee reporting he has personally buried sixteen relatives because of suicide.

By connecting Opal’s spider legs story to the narratives of Jacquie’s network by having their appearance coincide with Jacquie’s pregnancy with Blue, it is difficult to reduce her spider legs to an Indian mystic narrative. Instead, Opal’s spider legs are connected to present tense lives of Indigenous women. Relating the novel’s treatment of these issues to historiographic metafiction means recognizing a present tense world

where Indigenous women face a murder rate ten times the national average. According to a 2018 study by the Urban Indian Health Institute, 5,712 Indigenous women were reported missing in 2016 but only 116 were officially recorded in the US Department of Justice's missing persons database. I mention this not to define Indigenous peoples as a whole as a people in crisis, but to argue that these are problems that deserve visibility and yet are seemingly missing from mainstream narrative in the media and on television. On the contrary, Orange is concerned with visibility for women fighting what Blue's coworker Geraldine refers to as a "secret war on women," that is "secret even though we know it" (Ibid 202). Transforming the image of these women who are either made invisible by disappearance or who are made to suffer violence in secret behind closed doors in private spaces, these storylines should be seen as representative of present tense lives being led, ended, and disappeared across North America.

### **3. Conclusion: What's next?**

As Orange depicts throughout the development of his characters, subversion of tragic stereotypes in *There There* does not come at the expense of re-mythologizing Indigenous characters with more monolithic identities. As I have shown through Orange's characters, subversion comes as a result of embracing present tense tragic experience and de-mythologizing the signifiers of tragedy as emblematic of an invented "Indian" identity. Some of Orange's characters are living with alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, fetal alcohol syndrome, feelings of inferiority, geographic displacement, and feelings of confusion that come from not knowing or not being able to relate to a peoplehood. Rather than shying away from these realities and thus creating more one-dimensional, reverse-stereotyped characters who replicate the act of writing



historical erasures, *There There* treats these realities as consequences of contemporary Indigenous life. However, this present tense is inseparable from a history of colonial violence and trauma. The tragic facts of disproportionate violence that Indigenous peoples face are subverted in *There There* in the text's merging of realities with a historical violence against Indigenous peoples, thus evolving the image of Native American beyond the past-tense, monolithic identities.

Orange might therefore be said to fear publishing a work that replicates the imposition of museum versions of oneself, and it is likely for this reason Orange adopted an ensemble cast that resists the mainstream motive to universalize and build collectivity and community. More importantly, though, Orange also built diversity. If underrepresentation and false representation prevent Indigenous individuals from learning how to be a person in the contemporary world, Orange's novel presents strategies for attaining present tense personhood: the internet, social media, popular music, modern dance, and of course, maintained contact to tradition. Through these different ways of negotiating the contemporary world Orange thus presents pluralistic stories of Native people narrated by Native people—allowing Indigenous individuals to see themselves through their own lenses, instead of the stereotypes of others.

What is most importantly at stake here is Orange making what is often invisible in the mainstream visible and recognizably a part of today's world. We are trained and taught to think of Indigenous peoples only in the past tense; our museums and popular culture further reinforce this narrative, making readers surprised when a major work like *There There* is released. That an epistemological shift needs to occur for non-Native readers when an invisible peoplehood is made visible only serves to highlight the

importance of works like Orange's but also highlights the importance of the diffusion of Native voices throughout the mainstream. The point here is simple: Orange alone cannot subvert hundreds of years of settler colonial discourse with one text and fifteen characters. On the one hand, this is because no one voice can displace a monolithic hegemony, and on the other it is because Orange does not come close to doing so. Even though Orange wrote a polyphonic novel, there are a million more voices he could represent from the real ensemble of North America's Indigenous peoples. Notably, Orange's novel is missing a Native American politician like Deb Haaland, a queer Indigenous poet like Tommy Pico, and a social media activist like Sings in the Timber, but he is also missing doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Providing representations for these groups is perhaps another key step to empowering communities. To imagine *There There* as the end of continuum of Native American literature is to presume that there is nothing more to write, no more models to publicize, and no more historical erasures to revise. By providing a new critical framework for a present tense peoplehood, *There There* should instead be considered a new ground on which to build; new ground established in the deconstruction of historical frameworks that lead to the invisibility of Native Americans. On this new ground, Orange as well as the continuum of authors writing today in what is being considered a new renaissance, can continue to build and develop a complex peoplehood for proper human identity.

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