

In a Mirror Clearly:

Narrative-Based Interventional and Restorative Possibilities in *There There*

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For Indigenous Americans, a lack of representation is not the issue; in fact, American culture is saturated with images of Indians. Many worldwide associate the image of an Indian's head, complete in its feather headdress, with classic American history and iconography. A lack of representation is not the "real" issue because the representation is not real. Maybe that is why, year after year, Indigenous American writers still face accusations of inauthenticity. The problem, of course, is that authenticity has always been a product of colonization and violence wherein non-indigenous audiences demand that Native Americans continue to perform the familiar image without recognizing the centuries of damage several nations of people have had to endure. If novels about the city, Alcatraz occupation, protesting pipelines, or high suicide rates, alcoholism, and addiction are not authentic, then it is only because they do not conform with the image of the "Indian" fabricated in literature predominantly by white people for the last several centuries.

"Inauthentic novels," like *There There* by Tommy Orange, are absolutely vital for the reconstruction, visibility, expression, and future of Indigenous American identity. What makes Orange's debut novel so powerfully subversive is not simply that it is a real story of an Urban Indian, one seldom heard, but that it questions the nature of authenticity, Indian identity, and tradition. The stories collected and recorded in the work of Tommy Orange and so many other Indigenous authors have the power to change the world: globally, personally, and communally.

With so many Indigenous people feeling trapped in generational cycles of powerlessness, stories empower those who feel alone, unrecognized, and detached from a true sense of identity. In this sense, *There There* allows Indigenous audiences, specifically youths and Urban Indians, to see themselves clearly while also creating a way to overcome the image superimposed on them by non-Indigenous culture and media. Orange goes beyond mere representation. His storytelling is an intervention for non-Indigenous audiences to discern why Native Americans living their lives and telling their stories is such a threat. The power of *There There* lies in its dual impact: storytelling *as* restoration and intervention.

There There contains first-person and third-person narration focused on a cast of varied Indigenous characters, most of whom wrestle with the question of identity. Marija Krivokapić and Sanja Runtić comment that “most of the ‘narrative wisps’ assembled in the novel [...] seem to point to their narrators’ confusion about their identity. Almost all of these characters’ stories are dysfunctional and considered meaningless, illustrative of their profound alienation from their Native community and history” (5). The demand for authenticity complicates this struggle with identity, creating barriers to the characters’ view of self. One of the many ways “authenticity” complicates identity is through the image of the Indian Head that begins the novel. The first of these images Orange describes is “a headdressed, long-haired Indian depicted, drawn by an unknown artist in 1939, broadcast until the late 1970s to American TVs everywhere after all the shows ran out. It’s called the Indian Head test pattern” (Orange 3). Orange then details the history of colonization, including several moments in which the actual decapitated head of an Indigenous person was purchased, displayed, kicked around like a soccer ball, and kept in a jar. The latter appears as an event in the first Native American novel, written in 1854 by John Rollin Ridge, a Cherokee man (Orange 5). Sabine N. Meyer comments that *The Life and Adventures of*

Joaquin Murieta has been “employed by Native writers across generations to negotiate their coherent integrity and social, cultural, and legal identities as collectivities, as peoples” (270). Orange’s inclusion of this keystone work connects him to a long literary tradition of fighting against erasure by caricature.

As he continues to walk through a brief history of white settlers, violence, reservations, protests, and media portrayals, Orange connects containment and relocation with the image of traditional indigeneity perpetuated by white America. David L. Moore states that most scholars no longer “advocate for ‘authenticity’ to remain in the discourse of Indigenous studies” by the reality that to ask whether a text is “authentic” is to ask whether it is “Indian,” or more bluntly, how it conforms with the white image of the Indian (226). Orange uses several characters’ inner monologues to challenge this idea of authenticity. As characters grapple with how their reflections compare with that of the Indian Head, Orange reveals the multiple facets of authenticity demanded of Indigenous writers. His characters question whether they are villains, addicts, or victims of generational trauma, all while acting as storytellers through their existence. Orange challenges a society that wants Indigenous Americans to perform the traditional image in the same way it wants to keep them contained: not just to physical boundaries but prevented from growth, change, and healing.

Identity, Image, and Dysmorphia

From the prologue, the image of a Native American head comes clearly to each reader’s mind, dressed like the Test Pattern Indian. And that is Orange’s point: this head in full regalia is what we have all been sold as the idea of the “authentic Indian.” Years of media portrayals, violence, and policy have kept it that way. He writes:

We've been defined by everyone else [...] despite easy-to-look-up-on-the-internet facts about the realities of our histories and current state as a people. We have the sad, defeated Indian silhouette, [...] we have it in 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. [...] Indians were removed, then reduced to a feathered image. Our heads are on flags, jerseys, and coins. Our heads were on the penny [...] before we could even vote as a people... (Orange 7)

The problem, he explains, is not just the attempted physical erasure through violence and containment but the still violent, more metaphorical erasure of replacing the voices of real people with simple images commodified and sold. The damage inflicted on Orange's characters manifests itself in scenes where the characters look at themselves in reflections, photographs, and memories. James H. Cox remarks, "As the numerous images of characters in mirrors and other reflective surfaces suggest, Orange establishes Indigenous people looking at Indigenous people, and Indigenous authors looking at Indigenous authors, as foundational to the novel's form" (565). While Orange uses this meta mirror motif to develop the characters' identity struggles as challenges to demands of authenticity, he also uses the form of the novel as a mirror to the world. Through Orange's storytelling, characters and readers witness their lives through images. In this way, *There There* reveals the multifaceted struggle to perceive clearly under the regime of authenticity. When characters reflect on their identity, instead of themselves, they often see dissociating images.

The dysmorphia extends beyond reflection to a disconnect from each characters' culture. As they each prepare for the powwow, characters question their relationship with traditional "Indianing," as Orvil calls it. Characters have a variety of reactions to the regalia, dancing, and

drums: a deep feeling of internal connection, non-identification and rejection, or general confusion and out-of-body sensations. Tony Loneman begins the reflections on reflections as he sees his face in the dark television screen. Orange writes from his perspective:

Most people don't have to think about what their faces mean the way I do. Your face in the mirror, reflected back at you, most people don't even know what it looks like anymore. That thing on the front of your head, you'll never see it, like you'll never see your own eyeball with your own eyeball, like you'll never smell what you smell like, but me, I know what my face looks like. I know what it means. People look at me then look away when they see I see them see me. (16)

Many of the Indigenous characters in the novel have the feeling of wearing a mask, but especially Tony, who, due to Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, wears the struggles of his mother always on his face and calls it "The Drome." Though already his Native American appearance may stand out amongst white crowds, his face is a frequent topic of conversation with the other characters because of its drooped, still look. Tony's dissociation is a recognition that his face does not reflect his inner life, nor does he look like anyone else. He also faces isolation because the struggle of his community is apparent on his face: alcohol abuse. Tony becomes a living symbol for a mass problem: "The Drome is my mom and why she drank, it's the way history lands on a face, and all the ways I made it so far despite how it has fucked with me since the day I found it there on the TV, staring back at me like a fucking villain" (Orange 16). This foreign appearance in the TV causes him to reflect on the past personal and communal injustices. He cannot escape his tragic identity in the same way Indigenous Americans cannot escape their unredressed history, but this history is shoved underneath regalia, hidden from the public eye. Toward the end of his first section, Tony tries on the regalia he will later wear to the powwow

and looks again at the TV, thinking, “I looked at my face. The Drome. I didn’t see it there. I saw an Indian. I saw a dancer” (Orange 26). Beneath the facade of the Indian Head, Tony cannot see himself, he can only see the image crafted by people for whom tradition is a costume or mask.

On the other hand, Orange uses Dene Oxendene to represent a complicated desire to associate with Indigenous heritage through storytelling. Because Dene’s appearance is passing, his attempts to reconnect with his Native heritage reveal yet again how the Indian Head obstructs the ability to discover true authenticity. Though Dene knows he does not outwardly look Native American, he feels immense pride in what he sees upon winning a grant for his documentary project. He “sees his face in the dark reflection of the train window. He’s beaming. He wipes the grin from his face when he sees it” (Orange 42). His sense of identity is complicated. He proposes to become a storyteller for Indigenous Americans in the Oakland area. This thought overwhelms and confuses him, as it was not his project to begin with, nor does he feel he earned the grant outside of his Native identity. Shortly after wiping the grin from his face, Dene “thinks of his uncle and his eyes well up. He clenches them shut and keeps them closed, leans his head back, thinks of nothing, lets the train take him home” (Orange 42). This retreat inward shows that Dene has a deeper connection to himself than his community; he often worries that he will be seen as a fraud because of his lighter skin color, pitied because he is enrolled with two different tribes in Oklahoma, inadequate because the project was truly his uncle’s. Though Dene certainly feels conflicted about his Native identity, we wonder whether this confusion would exist without the imposed notions of what it means to be an Indian. Dene is not dark-skinned, or dancing and drumming, or wearing regalia, but he is an Indigenous American, nonetheless.

A further challenge to authenticity is a character like Edwin, who sees his face as a reflection of addiction. Though addiction and alcoholism are tropes associated with the Indian

Head, Edwin's struggle goes deeper into questions of internalized self-loathing related to the image of addiction. When he unplugs his computer, he sees his reflection as a "face [...] staring first in horror at the computer dying, then at [his] face reacting to seeing [his] face react to the computer dying" (Orange 63). He feels like "a little part of [him] died then, seeing [his] face, thinking about this sick addiction, all this time [he's] spent doing nothing" (Orange 63). Though he initially attributes his computer habits to addiction, they actually reveal a deep loneliness and isolation. His mother, on the other hand, thinks he is also addicted to food and attempts to curb his eating habits, preventing him from obesity by putting a mirror in front of the fridge. Edwin wonders if she wants him to see what he's become, calling himself a "monster" (Orange 68). His addictions, though not as immediately life-threatening as drug and alcohol addiction, manifest in his reflection, a constant reminder to him that he could do something to change his life, but does not. *There There* questions Edwin's notions about agency: if ancestors had their independence and freedom stripped with no just cause, what did they have left to pass on? The problem, yet again, is that Edwin has no other Indigenous American to look at. Like the young audience Orange concerns himself with representing, Edwin's search for normality demonstrates that without points of reference, the adolescent self may face identity-based developmental difficulties. Still, Edwin's difficulty in recognizing himself reveals how Native American youths, while modernizing and urbanizing, need to find communities where they belong. The question of identity, while central in young adult development, becomes infinitely more difficult when role models and older members of the community face struggles like Edwin's mother and when access to representational images is already limited.

What is unique about *There There* is that though several characters face extreme and unjust difficulty in accepting themselves, Orange includes several stories of hope and restoration

through some of the older characters. Opal, for example, has been through years of struggle and hardship, yet she has her own vision for what the future might hold. Unlike the young adult and teenaged characters examined thus far, Opal does not feel surprised when she looks into the mirror; in fact, she does it daily to reassure and recenter herself. On her mail route, like a ritual, she looks at her face in the rearview mirror of her truck. It reminds her of the years she has worked there, of the toll on her physical body, of the age her face carries. She does not look for pleasure, and in fact, “it’s hard [for her] to see the years on her face, the lines and wrinkles that surround her eyes, branch out like cracks in the concrete” (Orange 159). Just like Edwin wears the Drome on his face, Opal’s face shows a long, painful past. She has seen abuse, moving, broken families, suicide, self-harm, and drug and alcohol usage, and despite the outwardly normal life she leads as a mail carrier, her face reflects the hardship she has endured. Maybe that is why, “even though she hates to see her face, she’s never been able to stop the habit of looking at it when she finds a mirror there in front of her, where she catches one of the only versions of her face she’ll ever see – on top of the glass” (Orange 159). When Opal looks in the mirror, rather than feeling foreign in her body, she sees herself. She sees an Indigenous woman, unique and strong, yes, but worked too hard. Her face tells a story against all odds but also juxtaposes age and experience against the youthful identity confusion of her grandchildren.

Orvil Red Feather, in his youthfulness, has not yet formed a sense of identity, and in fact, his relationship with “Indianing” is complicated by his grandmother, Opal, being “openly against any of them doing anything Indian. She [treats] it all like it [is] something they could decide for themselves when they were old enough” (Orange 118). Though Orvil does not understand Opal’s request, he tries to respect it, yet finds the regalia in the closet and the dancing online, anyway.

He tries to feel a deep connection to this performance of tradition, but Opal cautions that these things do not define him:

‘...anything you hear from me about your heritage does not make you more or less Indian. More or less a real Indian. Don’t ever let anyone tell you what being Indian means. Too many of us died to get just a little bit of us here, right now, right in this kitchen. You, me. Every part of our people that made it is precious. You’re Indian because you’re Indian because you’re Indian.’ (Orange 119)

Her powerful affirmation to her grandson welcomes Indigenous readers to find themselves within narratives like those in *There There*. While the novel embraces the identity of Urban Natives in and around the Oakland area, Opal gently reminds us that their life is only one version of what it means to be Native American. Orvil struggles to find his identity, but his desire to find his story somewhere continues despite Opal’s supposed ban. Though Opal’s solid understanding of her identity has allowed her a small measure of peace despite ongoing wrongs, Orvil opens a new path for her to reconsider how multiple versions of “Indianing” may enrich and promote the survival of their heritage. His struggle to understand what it means to be an Indian shows not only that the different ways of being can edify the community but also that generational knowledge may still be passed down with attitudes of openness to learning from youth.

Orvil’s mirror moment comes when he tries on the regalia for the first time. Orange writes that “mirrors have always been a problem for [Orvil]. The word *stupid* often sounds in his head when he looks at himself in the mirror. He doesn’t know why, but it seems important. And true” (121). Though he thinks dressing in regalia might improve that feeling, he experiences disappointment: “The regalia is itchy and faded in color. It’s way too small. He doesn’t look the way he hoped he would” (Orange 121). After deciding that “Being Indian didn’t fit” in the same

way the regalia didn't, Orvil thinks back to the countless searches online for what it means "to be a real Indian" (Orange 121). This leads him to dance, the storytelling artform where he finds his connection. Despite feeling foolish, Orvil keeps looking at himself in the mirror and "[waits] for something true to appear before him – about him. It's important that he dress like an Indian, and dance like an Indian, even if it is an act, even if he feels like a fraud the whole time, because the only way to be Indian in this world is to look and act like an Indian. To be or not to be Indian depends on it" (Orange 122). Without Opal's own stories of Indigeneity, the image perpetuated by white America persists. These narratives help to contextualize Orvil's struggles, though, to him, they provoke confusion. Ultimately, he dances because of the connection to his ancestors through storytelling. Though the novel never brings Orvil to a full certainty of who he really is, his character reveals a poignant desire to understand cultural identity through connection to images and artforms. His uncertainty does not prevent bravery in the dance at the Powwow, and perhaps his developing identity seems so radically different because he can grow along a more normal teenage path with fewer difficulties in untangling himself from the Indian Head. While his Native American heritage is something that still figures prominently in his development, his character ultimately reveals far greater hope for future generations as he ends the novel potentially recovering in the hospital. Perhaps in this way, he metonymically stands in for the wounded, yet still alive, dream Orange devotes his life to developing in Indigenous communities.

Before the ending, however, Opal and Orvil come together for one mirror moment in which Opal processes this radical potential of youthful resilience. In this memory, a naive Orvil wonders whether the people in the mirror are really the ones doing the actions and if they, the real them, are mimicking the mirror people. As Orvil dances in front of the mirror, Opal stares at him: "Arms flailing, he jumped and spun. It looked to Opal like he was powwow dancing. But he

couldn't have been. He was just trying to act crazy in front of the mirror to prove no one else was in control but him, the Orvil on this side of the mirror" (Orange 160). Orange brings the mirror metaphor full circle to demonstrate that the image of the Indian Head functions as a method of control. When these characters see a detached image in the mirror they lose a sense of agency. None of these characters can change the past. Orvil takes control by dancing and watching himself dance, and Tommy Orange by writing this novel. Though the novel ends with Orvil in the hospital with a gunshot wound, that he is still alive in the midst of his dance seems to spill out from the pages and into continuity. Readers are left feeling that if *There There* were to continue in reality, people like Orvil would continue to dance, tell stories, and heal their communities through their open-hearted existences.

Though Orvil and Opal's relationship faces questions and difficulties, this close, consistent vision of representation ultimately allows Orvil's story to be hopeful. However, Orange paints a complex community through older characters like Blue, who have faced a lifetime of non-representation. When Blue looks in the mirror, she "[sees herself] from the inside out" (Orange 197-8). Growing up, she feels white on the inside; consequently, she spends her life seeking out Native Americans with whom to identify. She enters an abusive relationship in a traditional peyote ceremony and changes her name to Blue, which she feels she "needed" because of her upbringing as the adopted daughter of a white family. Despite her belief, Blue is not alone; she works alongside Natives who also feel like "apples," "red on the outside and white on the inside," a name and image constructed by white people (Orange 10). The comparison strips an entire people of their identities, assuming that the insides of an outwardly Native-looking person are anything other than authentic. Orange posits that all people who share Indigeneity can feel unified by their history:

What we are is what our ancestors did. How they survived. We are the memories we don't remember, which live in us, which we feel, which make us sing and dance and pray the way we do, feelings from memories that flare and bloom unexpectedly in our lives like blood through a blanket from a wound made by a bullet fired by a man shooting us in the back for our hair, for our heads, for a bounty, or just to get rid of us. (10)

There There establishes a new authenticity and identity for Indigenous people, one which recalls the past and tells stories for the future as a way of remembering trauma and strongly stating that they will remain. Stories remember histories that were never heard, creating community and identity. Later, Blue looks in the mirror again and realizes that her selfhood does not lie in a preconceived notion of Indianness: "She sees a version of herself she thought was long gone, someone she'd left behind, ditched for her real Indian life on the rez. Crystal. From Oakland. She's not gone. She's somewhere behind Blue's eyes in the rearview" (Orange 236). Crystal realizes that she has always been who she is, and just like Orvil cannot make himself more Indian with the regalia, conforming with traditional imagery actually erases her true self. Orange portrays a wide range of experiences with Native American identity: those who have access to representation, those who do not, those facing centuries-old trauma, and those who feel disconnected from their heritage. However, he promotes tenuous hope that though the path is full of difficulties, Indigenous individuals can come to terms with their identity, join a community, and divorce the false white image of authenticity.

A vital part of *There There* is shedding the mask of the Indian Head and bridging the gap between "Urban Indian" life and life on the reservation. Orange writes as part of a "resistance to the idea that the only way to be Native is to be from a reservation" and also to give voice to the "many Native people living in cities [with] very little written about that experience" (Shotton

57). Edwin, for example, finds himself listening to Indigenous creators who combine modern techno music with Native drums. He thinks “the problem with Indigenous art in general is that it’s stuck in the past” (Orange 77). In his reflection on the art form, Edwin captures the subversive question of the novel: “If it isn’t pulling from tradition, how is it Indigenous? And if it is stuck in tradition, in the past, how can it be relevant to other Indigenous people living now, how can it be modern?” (Orange 77). In a way, each of the characters in the novel wrestles with this question. As they each look in the mirror, they wonder where they fit in the image of the “Indian,” if at all. They are living in Oakland, in houses, in neighborhoods, and working modern jobs. No longer tied to the land, they question the role of tradition in their life, a question not only complicated by a lost tie to the land but by the demands of “authenticity” from white audiences. These characters ended up in Oakland through a long history of removal, relocation, and reservations. As these missing stories continue to be written, just like the characters in *There There*, all different types of Indigenous Americans will see their own faces in the mirror.

In the prologue, Orange writes, “Getting us to cities was supposed to be the final, necessary step in our assimilation, absorption, erasure, the completion of a five-hundred-year-old genocidal campaign. But the city made us new, and we made it ours” (8). With this new life comes new stories and a re-telling of those lost to the genocide. These stories are beautiful, painful, hopeful, and everything in between, but they are often criticized as not being “Indian enough” despite critics’ recognition of this essentially flawed premise. Deborah L. Madsen comments that in the past, “Native American Indian literary study [has been] based on the assumption that such a thing as ‘Native Americanness’ or ‘Indianness’ exists to define the category of literary expression that is the object of study” (1). Tommy Orange’s novel challenges that notion, establishing from the prologue that “Indianness” is a white construct designed to

erase the real identity of Native peoples. The Urban Indian is as much an authentic Indigenous American as one who grew up on a reservation and dresses in regalia.

The story of the Urban Indian may seem limited to stolen agency, but it still only recognizes a presumed experience. Though many were forced by law to move to the Oakland area, Orange insists that the Indian Relocation Act (part of the Indian Termination Policy) was not the only factor that established the Urban Indian. Orange writes that policy “was and is exactly what it sounds like. Make them look and act like us. Become us. And so disappear” (Orange 9). Ultimately, these policies did not succeed in containing and suppressing; instead, Native Americans formed identities in new environments. Though this harmful policy pushed several groups to relocate against their will, Orange contends that assuming Oakland as the site of ultimate violence fails to portray how the community has only continued to grow stronger and more complex. In fact, “Urban Indian” is more than just an Indigenous person who lives in a city; due to various reasons for relocating, the Urban Indian yet again challenges the monolith of authenticity. Orange argues, “it wasn’t just like that. Plenty of us came by choice, to start over, to make money, or for a new experience. Some of us came to cities to escape the reservation. We stayed after fighting in the Second World War. After Vietnam too” (9). Many contemporary Native American novelists center their works on this emerging identity, strengthening the claim that stories of these individuals’ lives may bolster and challenge notions of authenticity through representation in storytelling.

Even amid great tragedy, *There There* seems only to begin the story of the Urban Indian. The character in the novel who best embodies this potential for future storytelling is Dene. He tells the grant interviewers:

What I want to do is to pay the storytellers for their stories. Stories are invaluable, but to pay is to appreciate. And this is not just qualitative data collection. I want to bring something new to the vision of the Native experience as it's seen on the screen. We haven't seen the Urban Indian story. What we've seen is full of the kinds of stereotypes that are the reason no one is interested in the Native story in general, it's too sad, so sad it can't even be entertaining, but more importantly because of the way it's been portrayed, it looks pathetic, and we perpetuate that, [...] but it makes me mad, because the whole picture is not pathetic, and the individual people and stories that you come across are not pathetic or weak or in need of pity, and there is real passion there... (Orange 40)

Dene represents the power of story to remember what has been lost to history's erasure. Marija Krivokapić and Sanja Runtić comment, "Even though it is based on individual interviews with twenty-first-century Oakland Natives, Dene's project is historical and collective in many ways. He inherited the work from his late uncle, who started documenting experiences of urban Natives living in Oakland whom he met through a mutual acquaintance" (4). In remembering and recording stories from long ago and the recent past, Dene and Orange build community and make people feel less alone. Loneliness is central to the novel's construction of identity. Orange portrays the self as built through connection with others and, conversely, group identity through a plurality of lived stories. Loneliness presents itself as an issue to be rectified between the characters within the novel and through the existence of *There There* in the world.

Tony Loneman, for example, reveals how pain, loneliness, and distance from the community can be healed through story. Tony's sense of cultural identity is not so explicit, but he does have a deep feeling of connection to how Indigenous People have been treated over the years because of their identity. When Maxine reads Louise Eldrich with him, he feels that he

“[gets] it way down at that place where it hurts but feels better because you feel it, something you couldn’t feel before reading it, that makes you feel less alone, and like it’s not gonna hurt as much anymore” (Orange 20). Even though the history of his people feels distant to him, and though the recollection is painful, the power of storytelling for Tony is that he regains a sense of community within himself. Though the reason for the hurt is unjustifiable, the hurt is something that binds together undeniably. Tony finds in community and experiences a fractured sense of identity, but David L. Moore sees these two issues as inextricably linked, asking, “Identity or community? Certainly they interweave” (92-3). Moore suggests “that not only is healing of Indian community a goal and a context of Indian writing but that dialogical dynamics of Indian community form the very method, content, and structure of many Native narratives” (93). *There There* heals on multiple levels: its characters experience healing, modeling it for the world, and impacting real people.

Tony’s death allows his story to become one of redemption through recognizing his true identity without the Drome. After life, he finally sheds his body and the plethora of “authentic” Indian identities embedded within. As he “watches himself from above,” presumably in some sort of afterlife or limbo space, Tony “looks at his body and remembers that it was never actually really him. He was never Tony just like he was never the Drome. Both were masks” (Orange 288). The connection between the mask and the Indian Head introduced in the prologue reminds audiences of the challenges of a developed sense of self outside the image seen by society and even outside of what we see in the mirror. Tony, never understanding who he is outside of visible representations of abuse and addiction, finally realizes in a realm free from violent, white society that there is something that exists as “him” even beyond his name, his body, the Drome, and the masks forced upon him. While Orange does not embark on a full philosophical treatise

on the substance that really makes up a person, we are still struck by the harsh reality that Tony never glimpses this in life. He does not have the luxury of conceiving himself epistemologically; for him, existence is ontological and constrained to outward markers of Otherness. The novel's ending can thus be read with cautious hope that, although tragic, Tony's fate goes beyond redemption in preventing the violence, albeit his freedom comes at a great cost. On the one hand, this conclusion seems to indicate that there is no solution in life for Indigenous peoples just to live. On the other hand, the imagery in the final paragraph remains largely hopeful, with Tony hearing the birds singing "inside him, where he is" (Orange 290). Here is a beautiful exemplar of *There There*'s double potential: those like Tony may recognize that they exist apart from the imposed mask or authenticity, and those who have never questioned their existence may develop an empathy for the consequences of colonial violence

The tragic end of *There There* forms a frame narrative with the prologue, revealing that the stories told within the frame, while valuable for representation, also challenge white audiences. Dene's fate, for example, remains uncertain: Will the storyteller survive to continue collecting and curating the kinds of stories Orange does? Though the violence in the novel comes from within members of his community, it serves as a reminder of the historical violence repeated over the last several centuries and referenced by the characters whose stories Dene seeks to tell. Though Dene's storytelling methods are comparable to Orange's in their modernity, Dene ends the novel as one of the wounded, and it is unclear whether he recovers. In wearing the regalia and participating in the dance, Orvil embodies yet another, perhaps more complicated, role of a storyteller. Concluding the novel with no certainty on Dene or Orvil, Orange crafts a commentary on the uncertainty of the future of Native American storytelling.

The Healing Potential of Native American Literature

Since its publication nearly four years ago, *There There* has been regaled by the general public. Melanie Benson Taylor notes its immediate reception as a work “consumable by a composite audience [of] book clubs and even first-year college students [embracing] it as a template for resilience in the face of transformation” (592). But these readers, though certainly still able to benefit from reading the novel, were not necessarily Orange’s target audience. Before writing, he worked at a youth suicide prevention program similar to the ones discussed in *There There*. In an interview with Heather Shotton, Orange states that part of the reason he included the life-affirming speech in the novel is due in part to the reaction of the youth he worked with: “a really amazing reaction, an emotional reaction, from kids that generally did not do that for anything” (57). If stories can help depressed and struggling youth find reasons to live, self-identify, feel less alone, and get excited to read more about people who look like them, then more people should be pouring their whole selves into storytelling. The book’s characters also heal from sharing their stories with each other. Sometimes sharing stories functions as a release, like Jacquie at the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Other times, it allows for human connection and support, like with Blue and Edwin. And hopefully, it continues to help Indigenous people on the verge of violence and self-harm in real life. What the conference speaker in the novel hopes to do is shift the focus from just avoiding suicide to becoming a life-affirming vessel for change. He warns the audience that these youth “[are] making the decision that it’s better to be dead and gone than to be alive in what we have here, this life, the one we made for them, the one they’ve inherited” (Orange 105). What they have been sold over and over is the Indian Head and a bleak future of addiction, racism, poverty, violence, and utter loneliness, but novels like Orange’s shift the focus to the speaker’s ultimate question: “How do we instill in our children the will to live?”

Stories, including novels, heal because there is a wound in the first place. In this case, Orange identifies “the wound that was made when white people came and took all that they took [that] has never healed. An unattended wound gets infected. Becomes a new kind of wound like the history of what actually happened became a new kind of history” (Orange 137). Because they challenge authenticity assumptions, provide representation, and make people feel less alone, the salve for this festering wound is stories. Orange addresses both the suppression of such stories and the power of telling them when he writes, “All these stories that we haven’t been telling all this time, that we haven’t been listening to, are just part of what we need to heal” (Orange 137). While one of the greatest violences Orange addresses is the ongoing erasure of Native Americans through the cartoonish images of traditional Indians, it certainly is not the only wound that needs to be healed. Harvey states, “We all been through a lot we don’t understand in a world made to either break us or make us so hard we can’t break even when it’s what we need most to do” (Orange 112). The penultimate chapters in *There There* reflect the violence against Indigenous communities through suppression of story: many characters feel disempowered by the lack of reassurance mirrors give; they have lost family members who could offer love and support but instead leave an inheritance of pain, and the shooting at the powwow shows that they cannot partake in community storytelling in the one dedicated place that should be safe.

The powwow holds the most significance in *There There* as a metaphor for storytelling. Orange writes, “We made powwows because we needed a place to be together. [...] We keep powwowing because there aren’t very many places where we get to all be together, where we get to see and hear each other” (135). Especially in 2023, when mass shootings frequently destroy these spaces of safe, shared cultural expression, the last section of *There There* feels all too familiar. Even though the ending is largely a tragedy, Juniper Ellis believes it to be ultimately

hopeful: “The whole nation is enfolded in the circle opened by the bullet holes, the open wound of history and the present. The ending is not separate from hope, nor from pain and rage. A decolonial metamorphosis urges readers to hear the spoken and the unspoken, with space, time, and irony spinning around a wound and toward potential healing” (13). We see freshly reunited family members sharing a hospital waiting room, Tony Loneman changing course to fight for a community, and stories finally being shared. Right before she dies, Opal’s mother tells her, “Opal, you have to know that we should never not tell our stories, and that no one is too young to hear” (Orange 57). The purpose of these stories, she continues, is to “understand where we came from, what happened to our people, and how to honor them by living right, by telling our stories. She [tells Opal] the world was made of stories, nothing else, just stories, and stories about stories” (Orange 58). The ending of *There There* magnifies the dual potential of its entirety: despite the damage inflicted through white society’s expectation of authenticity, Indigenous Americans challenge both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous audiences to see them clearly, while building community and identity through storytelling.

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