theories and methodologies

Propulsive Energies

CHADWICK ALLEN

ALAS, I MISSED THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE A FIRST READER OF TOMMY ORANGE'S PHENOMENAL DEBUT, *THERE THERE*, AND THUS TO BECOME a literary influencer by dashing off exclamatory reviews or crafting pithy posts on social media. Although I was gifted a hardback soon after the novel's publication in 2018, and although I meant to read it swiftly, *There There* sat among a stack of "must reads" for more than a year. By the time I cracked the spine, early readers had already swayed the public and moved on. Nonetheless, I was determined to form my own opinion, so I avoided professional assessments. What I could not avoid was the general buzz surrounding Orange and his work.

In one register, public discourse buzzed overwhelmingly positive but was often less than fully informed, exclaiming the arrival of a significant new voice in Native literature (Orange is Southern Cheyenne) and declaring the Native American novel as we have known it since the heyday of N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize–winning *House Made of Dawn*, Leslie Marmon Silko's syllabus-defining *Ceremony*, and Louise Erdrich's much-beloved *Love Medicine* completely remade. This positive public discourse has been good news for Orange, generating abundant press, prestigious awards, interviews, appearances, and high interest in what comes next. And it has been good news for Native literature too, since Orange has been discussed not only in the company of established, canonical authors but also among a cohort of emerging voices: Layli Long Soldier, Terese Marie Mailhot, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Elissa Washuta, and more.

Buzzing in another register, however, scholarly discourse was better informed but less consistently positive. Instead of exclaiming, it whispered that this new voice in Native literature was interesting, perhaps exciting, but also overconfident and uneven, insufficiently deferential in tone, a little sloppy in execution, and surprisingly naive about established tropes, symbols, and themes. Or was it that this new voice was rather cunning, deploying well-worn conventions and stock allusions in the guise of youthful naivete? At times, scholarly discourse felt begrudging of Orange's success, whispering that the

CHADWICK ALLEN is professor of English and codirector of the Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. He is the author of *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts* (Duke UP, 2002) and *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (U of Minnesota P, 2012).

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proclaimed innovations of the novel's gritty depictions of Oakland, California, and the asserted distinctiveness of its narrative form of rapidly shifting points of view were actually derivative of works by other once-new Native authors, especially of the work of a now shunned Sherman Alexie, who, this discourse pointed out repeatedly, served as Orange's mentor at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. On this point in particular, *There There* seemed to touch a raw nerve. At its most cynical, scholarly discourse whispered that Orange had been chosen—or anointed—as the next big thing less for his talent and more for his ability to fill the gap created by Alexie's very public fall from celebrity and grace.

How could one approach *There There* in a neutral or open way within earshot of all this exclaiming and whispering? I wasn't sure. But I wanted to try.

My first attempt was unsuccessful, largely because of poor planning. I began reading during an academic term in which I was overscheduled and overcommitted. In a single late-night session I worked through the novel's essay-like prologue and the opening chapter of part 1, which is told from the first-person perspective of the character Tony Loneman. My initial assessment aligned with the buzzing I had tried not to hear. I appreciated the voice and format of the prologue and found its content suggestive even if the epigraph from Bertolt Brecht felt pretentious and even if the images of iconic Indian heads and the theme of reclaiming the city as Native space felt familiar—although maybe I found the content suggestive because these elements felt familiar rather than disorienting or challenging. The chapter, however, gave me pause. I wasn't sure how I felt about Tony Loneman's overdetermined, highly allusive name or the specific qualities of his first-person narration, which spotlights the effects of the twenty-one-year-old's fetal alcohol syndrome. And I wasn't sure how I felt about the scenes of Tony confronting reflections of his "droop[ing]," "spread out" face in mirrors and blank television screens (Orange 16). Both the representation of fetal alcohol syndrome and the theme of reflection—how urban Indians can see and thus know themselves as Indians only through mediation—felt heavy-handed, as did the focus on Tony's interactions with violent drug dealers who planned to rob a big powwow being organized by the Oakland Indian Center. On nights following, I turned to other reading. It would be months before I returned to *There There*.

I delayed a second attempt until after the term's end, when I could manage longer stretches of time and when the deadline for this essay began to loom. I started over, resolving to keep the exclaiming and whispering at bay. Once immersed in Orange's prose, I discovered that although I continued to sympathize with those who described *There There* as underwhelming or disappointing, I was increasingly drawn to the novel's propulsive energy. Much of this narrative power emanates from the novel's structure, from below the surface of its gritty language and familiar imagery, undergirding its urban content and themes. (The further I read, however, the more I came to admire its surface too.)

After completing my reading and making initial notes, I skimmed through a range of newspaper and online reviews. As a literary object, *There There* can appear something of a mess. Online reader reviews commented on this aspect of the novel in unambiguously negative terms, questioning Orange's rationale for making so many confusing shifts in narrative perspective. Professional reviewers tended to treat this aspect of the novel with more charity, typically attributing the number of points of view and the rapidity of change to a desire to represent Oakland's Indian community as multifaceted and complex.

When reviewers addressed the novel's narrative structure, where my own reading located much of the novel's energy and inter-

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est, two trends stuck out. Reviewers tended to highlight the novel's essay-like prologue, large number of perspectives, and increasingly short chapters as the story moves toward its heavily foreshadowed, violent conclusion in part 4. But few reviewers mentioned the interlude that interrupts part 2, and few analyzed how the novel's structure actually works. Reviewers also tended to state that Orange narrates his story through the perspectives of twelve named characters and that some of these, like Tony Loneman, are narrated in the first person, others are narrated in the third person, and one, Thomas Frank, is narrated in the second person. But these statements are inaccurate. Orange narrates his story through the perspectives of thirteen named characters, not twelve, and one of these, Loother and Lony, is the combined perspective of two characters, bringing the total to fourteen. If we include the prologue and the interlude, both of which articulate viewpoints that are communal rather than singular, the number rises to sixteen (perhaps more).

Here I should note that I am inclined toward reading practices that concentrate on formal structures and, often, on mathematical relations and other kinds of patterning expressed in and through those structures. My current book project investigates how contemporary Native artists and writers represent Indigenous earthworks (mounds, embankments, and other built environments) and creatively engage the principles that guide their construction. Earthworks principles include the careful layering of diverse building materials to create durable structures, as well as the mathematical encoding of Indigenous knowledges into the physical structures of mounds, complexes, and cities. These principles also include the creation of multiple structural patterns and alignments. Mounds align with one another, for instance, but also with rivers and other natural features of the landscape, with visible movements of the cosmos, with elements of story, with the contours of social, political, and economic systems.[1] Having spent the past decade studying simulations and transformations of earthworks principles across contemporary genres and media, I now automatically scan for mathematical encoding and for patterns and alignments in all manner of Native art, literature, and performance. It seemed natural to attend to *There There*'s formal patterns and sequencing of voices and to configure that data to help reveal the novel's internal alignments and multiple sources of narrative energy and power.

Other essays in this section will discuss *There There*'s depictions of violence in an urban Indian community, the quality of the novel's gendered voices (along with the notable absence of any LGBT or queer voices), the effectiveness of the novel's major symbols and themes. These essays will elucidate the novel's references to technology, media, and popular culture, as well as its literary allusions, especially to other American Indian novels. I hope readers will indulge my focus on additional issues.

A basic map of the novel's macrostructure can be rendered like the following:

Prologue
Part 1
  Four chapters
Part 2
  Four chapters
  Interlude
  Four chapters
Part 3
  Five chapters
Part 4
  Twenty-five chapters

Several repetitions, patterns, and potential relations are immediately discernible. It is well known, for instance, that many Native intellectual and spiritual systems associate the balanced number four (2×2, or the first and only even prime number made two-dimensional) with elements and cycles of the natural world (e.g., the cardinal directions

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and the primary seasons) as well as with ritual and other ceremonial activity (e.g., highly scripted actions intended to restore balance, harmony, or health).[2] It is not a surprise, then, that the number four often appears as a structuring device in works of Native literature. Many contemporary novels, memoirs, poems, collections, and anthologies are organized into four parts (or multiples of four). What is interesting here is how Orange's prologue and interlude add complexity to an explicitly four-part structure, as well as how the number four both does and does not repeat as the narrative develops. The first half of the novel adheres to an expected pattern of balance: part 1 is composed of four named chapters, while part 2 is composed of eight, the double of four (4×2, but also the cube of four's prime factor, $2 \times 2 \times 2$, or two made three-dimensional), for a total of twelve (4×3). The interruption of the interlude, however, means that part 2 consists of nine structural elements rather than eight (3×3, the square of the second prime). Moreover, the interlude creates a central hinge or fulcrum within part 2: four named chapters before the interlude balance four after it. In contrast, the second half is structured around the odd number five (the third prime). Part 3 is composed of five named chapters, while part 4 is composed of twenty-five (the square of five, which is 5×5, or five made two-dimensional), for a total of thirty (5×6, or $5 \times 2 \times 3$).

Additional complexity is revealed by adding the novel's sequencing of new and repeated narrative perspectives across the named chapters:

Prologue
Part 1
  Four chapters (four new perspectives)
Part 2
  Four chapters (four new perspectives)
  Interlude
  Four chapters (four repeated perspectives)
Part 3
  Five chapters (four new perspectives plus one repeated perspective)
Part 4
  Twenty-five chapters (one new perspective plus twenty-four repeated perspectives [4×6])

The enhanced map demonstrates how the sequencing of perspectives creates a pattern across the named chapters that aligns with the novel's macrostructure (four numbered parts plus a prologue), a pattern we can express mathematically as $4 + 1$. Instead of shifting abruptly from the even number four in the first half to the odd number five in the second, the novel is structured more consistently—and more complexly—through variations of the pattern $4 + 1$. (The twenty-five chapters of part 4, for instance, represent $4 + 1$ repeated $4 + 1$ times.) We might speculate that $4 + 1$ and its variations align thematically with the novel's central depiction of a community tipped out of balance, just beginning a process—perhaps a ritual process—of making its way toward some version of harmony and healing.

A separate map can indicate the order in which the novel introduces its narrative perspectives, the frequency with which each recurs across the chapters, and the sequencing of the shifts in first-, second-, and third-person narration (table 1). The novel's forty-two named chapters are narrated from the perspectives of thirteen distinct characters, one of which, as already noted, is actually that of a pair.

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Table 1
Each Narrative Perspective in Order of Appearance, the Number of Chapters Narrated from Each Perspective, and the Person in Which Each Chapter Is Written

Perspective	Number of Chapters	Person of Narrative Voice
1 Tony Loneman	four	first, third, third, third
2 Dene Oxendene	four	third, third, third, third
3 Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield*	five	first, third, third, third, third
4 Edwin Black	three	first, third, third
5 Bill Davis	two	third, third
6 Calvin Johnson	four	first, third, third, third
7 Jacquie Red Feather	four	third, third, third, third
8 Orvil Red Feather	three	third, third, third
9 Octavio Gomez	two	first, third
10 Daniel Gonzales	three	first, third, third
11 Blue	four	first, third, third, third
12 Thomas Frank	three	second, third, third
13 Loother and Lony	one	third

*Opal's full name is composed of five words and eleven syllables (eleven is the fifth prime), numbers that align with the five chapters narrated from her perspective

Seven of the forty-two named chapters are narrated in the first person, one is narrated in the second person, and thirty-four are narrated in the third person.[3] First- or second-person narration occurs only in the initial appearance of a particular perspective; when that perspective recurs, it is always as third-person narration. Similar to the interlude, which creates a hinge or fulcrum within part 2, the seventh named perspective creates a hinge or fulcrum in the sequence of thirteen: six perspectives precede Jacquie Red Feather's and six follow.[4] Moreover, Jacquie's is one of only three narrative perspectives gendered female. The others are that of Jacquie's half sister Opal and that of Blue, the daughter Jacquie gave up for adoption (whose birth name was Crystal). The female narrative perspectives occupy the third, seventh, and eleventh positions in the sequence of first appearances, creating a structural balance. Two male perspectives precede Opal's, followed by three male perspectives that precede Jacquie's, followed by three male perspectives that precede Blue's, followed by two final male perspectives. The resulting pattern is a palindrome: 2M – 1F – 3M – 1F – 3M – 1F – 2M. Moreover, the combined number of chapters narrated through female perspectives, thirteen (5 + 4 + 4, which aligns with the 4 + 1 pattern that undergirds the novel's macrostructure), aligns with the total number of perspectives, creating another kind of structural balance.

Finally, a more elaborate map can combine much of the data about the novel's macrostructure and the sequencing of its narrative perspectives, as well as additional data about the composition of the prologue and interlude (table 2).

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Table 2
The Composition of Each Part of the Novel, including the Prologue and Interlude

Chapter	Character	Person of Narrative Voice
Prologue (five subtitled parts, twelve total parts)		first
Part 1: Remain		
1	Tony Loneman (first of four)	first
2	Dene Oxendene (first of four)	third
3	Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield (first of five)	first
4	Edwin Black (first of three)	first
Part 2: Reclaim		
1	Bill Davis (first of two)	third
2	Calvin Johnson (first of four)	first
3	Jacquie Red Feather (first of four)	third
4	Orvil Red Feather (first of three)	third
Interlude (five subtitled [and total] parts)		first
5	Tony Loneman (second of four)	third
6	Calvin Johnson (second of four)	third
7	Dene Oxendene (second of four)	third
8	Jacquie Red Feather (second of four)	third
Part 3: Return		
1	Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield (second of five)	third
2	Octavio Gomez (first of two)	first
3	Daniel Gonzales (first of three)	first
4	Blue (first of four)	first
5	Thomas Frank (first of three)	second
Part 4: Powwow		
1	Orvil Red Feather (second of three)	third
2	Tony Loneman (third of four)	third
3	Blue (second of four)	third
4	Dene Oxendene (third of four)	third
5	Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield (third of five)	third
6	Edwin Black (second of three)	third
7	Calvin Johnson (third of four)	third
8	Daniel Gonzales (second of three)	third
9	Jacquie Red Feather (third of four)	third
10	Octavio Gomez (second of three)	third
11	Edwin Black (third of three)	third
12	Thomas Frank (second of three)	third
13	Loother and Lony (first and only)	third
14	Daniel Gonzales (third of three)	third
15	Blue (third of four)	third
16	Dene Oxendene (fourth of four)	third
17	Orvil Red Feather (third of three)	third
18	Calvin Johnson (fourth of four)	third
19	Thomas Frank (third of three)	third
20	Bill Davis (second of two)	third
21	Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield (fourth of five)	third
22	Jacquie Red Feather (fourth of four)	third
23	Blue (fourth of four)	third
24	Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield (fifth of five)	third
25	Tony Loneman (fourth of four)	third

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The novel's structures and sequences create multiple patterns, multiple kinds of centers, and multiple relations among narrative perspectives and increasingly violent events. But I imagine some readers must be wondering: To what end? How do configurations of data contribute to interpretation? Where, exactly, is the payoff?

One potential payoff is a greater understanding of the centrality not only of the novel's female characters but of its female narrative perspectives. Orange centers Jacquie's perspective within the sequence in which the narrative perspectives appear. Opal's perspective recurs more than any other, appearing five times across the forty-two named chapters (and thus aligning with the 4 + 1 pattern of the macrostructure).[5] Indeed, hers is positioned as the novel's first and final female point of view. And the first recurrence of her perspective, the first chapter in part 3, articulates what the narrator names a "superstition"—what one might call a theory—about the power of numbers (Orange 160). As Opal works her Oakland postal route, the narrator states:

> Opal likes numbers. Numbers are consistent. You can count on them. But for Opal, certain numbers are good and others are bad. Even numbers are generally better than odd ones, and numbers that have some kind of mathematical relationship are good too. . . . Numbers don't lie. Four and eight are her favorites. Three and six are no good. She delivers mail on the odd side first, always having believed it's best to get the bad out of the way before getting to the good. (161)

Orange inverts the logic of Opal's mail route, beginning with the "good" half of his narrative—where the structure is based in the even number four—before moving to the "bad"—where the structure is based in the odd number five. His novel repeatedly posits the question of how contemporary American Indians can know, understand, and maintain relations within a history of violent ruptures and separations. Every character experiences a crisis of genealogy: parents and grandparents are dead, missing, or unknown, children are lost. Opal suggests that numbers prove more reliable than other forms of maintaining and accounting for connections. Orange thus creates a productive tension between the novel's surface of relentless loss and the numerical sequences and mathematical relations that form stable structures beneath.

There There revisits known issues and reexposes recognized problems, exploring them within the particularities of contemporary Oakland. But it does these things, as well, through the kinds of mathematical encoding and the kinds of structural alignments demonstrated in ancient earthworks and in other forms of Indigenous making across media. Each generation questions what it means to be Indian now, whether anyone will be Indian in the future. While Orange adds a new location to the map of contemporary Native America, he offers no simple solutions, no implausible fixes. A more orthodox novel with Orange's themes would plot the characters' convergence at the Big Oakland Powwow not as a recurrence of historical violence but as the only viable means for resuturing familial relations, however imperfectly. Instead of concluding with the trauma of another massacre—Orange's insistence that Indians dressed in regalia will lie dead or dying in the grass of the arena—this other novel would end with young Orvil Red Feather's first steps into the circle of the drum and dance. Even as he foreshadows bullets, Orange exploits the desire for this generative trajectory in the titles of the novel's numbered parts: Remain, Reclaim, Return, Powwow. The four-part structure itself suggests movement toward ritual, harmony, and the sacred. In that other novel, the integrated procession of Grand Entry would signal new beginnings. Orange's ending is more disturbing, but potentially more powerful. However disillusioning the final

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scenes may seem, the novel's lack of closure—no epilogue completes the frame initiated by the prologue and extended by the interlude—opens possibilities for forward momentum, although these are left implicit. The narrative perspectives that survive revolve around half sisters and an estranged, renamed daughter gathered in a hospital waiting room. One counts swings of the double doors leading to the emergency room, praying for the promise of even numbers, but none perceives the uneven movements that structure their actual relations, and none perceives how their separated lives might yet bead or braid together.

Notes

1. For examples of this kind of reading practice, see Allen, "Serpentine Figures" and "Performing Serpent Mound."

2. Primes are those natural numbers that can be divided only by themselves and the number one, and thus they can signify structural integrity or unity. The sequence of primes can be used to evoke structural and thematic relations (e.g., although the numbers seventeen, seven, and four may appear unrelated, seventeen is the seventh prime and seven is the fourth).

3. A fuller analysis would likely reveal that these numbers encode significant relations based in the sequence of primes (e.g., the thirty-four chapters narrated in the third person factor as 2×17, the first and seventh primes, which align with the one chapter narrated in the second person and the seven chapters narrated in the first).

4. The thirteenth narrative perspective, the paired Loother and Lony, appears in the thirteenth chapter in part 4, creating another hinge or fulcrum: twelve chapters balance before and twelve after.

5. Moreover, Blue is forty-two years old; her age aligns with the novel's total number of chapters.

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