theories and methodologies

# No Spoiler Alerts

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TOMMY ORANGE'S 2018 NOVEL *THERE THERE* WAS SO WILDLY POPULAR THAT I HAD HEARD THE PLOTLINE—OVER THE COURSE OF A WEEKEND, a dozen Native characters are drawn together for a powwow in Oakland that ends in a mass shooting—before I had time to read it. And before I read it, and because the ending was all that I really knew about it, I was a bit skeptical about its reception. As a Native person I wondered if the novel was popular in part because of the spectacular massacre at the end. Was the novel providing the therapeutic violence that Americans were craving, the image of Indians killing themselves and each other? Or was it validating a narrative we're already too familiar with—that Indians are once and always doomed, that we're just born to be victims? Tragedy is a dominant gene. I admit that these initial anxieties reflect rather low expectations of readers, but a lifetime of dealing with mainstream attitudes about Indians—the very stereotypes that the book itself shines a bright light on—had conditioned me to such thoughts. I know that I am far from the only Native person to brace myself for the possibility that it was the violence, not the critique or the artistry, that contributed to its popularity, and it was a relief to see that Orange himself had a question or two of this nature (Shotton 58). This is one of the risks that writers, and particularly Native writers, have to take: when Native writers expose the structures of violence that people are living with every day, they take a risk that a reader may, willfully or not, choose to feel pity or pleasure or both rather than turn a critical eye on the larger system, the thing that is hurting everyone.

That was my reaction before I read the book. After I read the book, I only thought about what a brilliant, lyric, and fearless work it was, and that everyone—EVERYONE!—needed to read it. Fortunately, most of the world, including prize committees at the National Book Critics Circle, PEN America, and the Center for Fiction, was already on board. My brother, who has lived in Germany for the past twenty-five years, is reading *Dort Dort*, and the global circulation of this Native text is a thrilling moment. Orange writes with great

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elegance, wit, and compassion for his characters, while unflinchingly showing how violence moves in and through their lives. The prologue details the long history of Indian wars, from King Philip's War to the massacre of Cheyenne families at Sand Creek in 1864, and to the real and representational circulation of the Indian body slaughtered, dismembered, and displayed on pikes, on streets, in jars, and on television screens. Visual technologies such as the camera, the mirror, the television, and the drone circulate through the text as constant reminders that to be an Indian in America is to be the target of a bullet or a stereotype or both. The Indian Wars disproportionately impact Indigenous peoples, but they are also the foundation of every form of violence that has proliferated in the Americas since colonization began. To read *There There* and see only a mass shooting of Indians at the end is to miss a much larger critique of American society and foundations. The novel has something vital to show about urban Indians, and it has much to say about Indian wars and urban wars and a very long history of gun violence in America.

Yet to consider the novel's attention to violence in its most dramatic and most quotidian forms is not to suggest that the work is only *about* violence. Indeed, the novel has everything to do with living; as the prologue puts it, "we did not move to cities to die" (9). The book is set in Oakland, California, a crossroads of Indian dispossession and relocation, and just as there is a prologue to the novel, there is a prologue to contemporary Native life in Oakland. The very name "Oakland" refers to the oak savannahs that have fed Ohlone people since long before colonization. To the Ohlone population in Oakland who survived the Spanish missions and then the gold rush, add the Natives who arrived after other wars—after Korea or Vietnam, Termination or Sand Creek—and remade their communities. Those past wars came with them: "we stayed because the city sounds like a war, and you can't leave a war once you've been, you can only keep it at bay" (9). Violence is part of the texture of the book, but so are tenderness, humor, and love, and all the everyday things that people do while living in conflict zones, occupied territories, and militarized encampments. In *There There*, the characters are living through war, and wars are living through them.

What does it mean to *live* through war? I want to tread lightly here; the last thing I want to do is to sound like another non-Oaklander saying some messed-up thing like *Oakland is a war zone*. Oakland is home because the novel's Indian characters live, love, work, and conspire there. When Dene Oxendene, a young documentary filmmaker, asks a hipster (fittingly named Rob) the quintessential question of Indian identity, *Where are you from?*, Rob extols his cheap West Oakland rent and jokes that "no one's really from here, right?" (38). Dene chafes at Rob's casual derision and bro-eyness, which reflect misrecognition; Dene "is Native, born and raised in Oakland, *from* Oakland" (39). Dene's identity is inscribed as both Native and native, even as it is invisible, or willfully incomprehensible, to Rob. Colonization and gentrification both thrive on the idea that *no one is really from here*. But Oakland in the novel is home, and it comes with all the complexities of the term. Standing Rock is home too, for others, which didn't prevent it from becoming a war zone during the extended Native protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016–17. A war that comes to your home is exactly what an Indian war is.

For a long time I had a sticky note in the front of my copy of *There There* on which I had written just two words: *drone Drome*. The drone and the Drome are always circulating through the book. The drone is a symbol and weapon of war, and the Drome is the embodiment of history, its human face. They move in concert, along with everything else that circulates (blood, bullets, buses, and bikes) in the

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book. Standing Rock and Oakland come to "sound like a war" in part through the presence of the drone, the "eye in the sky" that can signify surveillance or witness or both. Once identified with military operations in foreign wars, the drone, or UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle), is now ubiquitous in domestic settings as a commercial tool and a consumer toy. Not entirely divorced from its military origins, the drone has also been deployed by civilians in protest zones like Standing Rock as a form of countersurveillance. At Standing Rock, protesters used the drone footage they captured on their smartphones to monitor and respond to police aggression and to share images through social media around the world (Horton 104). Such practices of "sousveillance," or surveillance from "below"—that is, by the less powerful—disrupt the unidirectional power of state structures such as the military and police (Schnepf 748).

In *There There*, the drone is neither inherently oppressive nor potentially liberating. Its function is atmospheric. The drone's movement in and out of the frame is a persistent reminder that the drone constitutes a conflict zone by its very presence. When Bill Davis, a maintenance worker at the Oakland Coliseum, first sees a drone, he's not sure what it is: "He thinks he sees something . . . A small thing. An unnatural movement" (Orange 82). The thing that is "definitely not a seagull" reappears a few pages later, and Bill, a military veteran, recognizes "a drone plane like they'd been flying into terrorist hideouts and caves in the Middle East" (86). The drone here compresses time and space; a foreign cave and a domestic baseball field (complete with *home base*) become adjacent and interchangeable settings. Bill's perception that the drone is "unnatural" and "not a seagull" works against the naturalization of the drone in everyday life.

The drone is a visual technology with a sonic presence. To drone is to make a continuous low hum, to emit a constant tone. And the hum of the drone is the sonic texture of war. That the novel will end in a modern-day massacre is suggested in the prologue's opening riff on the Indian Head test pattern that used to appear on television screens at the close of the broadcast day.[1] "If you left the TV on, you'd hear a tone at 440 hertz—the tone used to tune instruments—and you'd see that Indian, surrounded by circles that looked like sights through riflescopes" (3). Here the description of the Indian Head is both visual and sonic, and the emphasis on tone—the tone used to tune—sets up the introduction of Tony Loneman, whose assonant name (tone, tony, lone) is already attuned to the pitch; it matches the vibration of violence that begins and ends with the Indian head in the riflescope. Tony is a central character who helps orchestrate the massacre after Octavio, a drug dealer, draws him in. Octavio entices Tony in part by showing him a 3D-printed gun, and when Tony shoots it, he experiences "a ringing, inside and out, a single tone drifting far off, or deep inside" (24). It is the tone, "far off, or deep inside," of history.

While the drone moves through the background of the novel, the Drome moves in the foreground. "The Drome first came to me in the mirror when I was six," Tony says, describing the moment he realized, for the first time, how fetal alcohol syndrome had shaped the features of his face. What he calls a mirror is actually a dark television screen, where he sees how others see him: "There's too much space between each of the parts of my face—eyes, nose, mouth, spread out like a drunk slapped it upon reaching for another drink." Tony's face is evidence of prologue, of the things that came before, or, as he aptly puts it, "The Drome is my mom and why she drank, it's the way history lands on a face" (16). In his first-person narrative, Tony asserts that the Drome is his power, his medicine, "what gives me my soul" (18), and also a source of anger. Tony fantasizes that "maybe I'm'a do something one day, and everybody's

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gonna know about me. . . . [T]hey'll finally be able to look at me, because they'll have to" (19). These dark imaginings are fueled by a desire to be seen. If the Drome is history, then it is a history that not everyone can countenance. Tony knows this, and he knows how to catch people staring at him and then looking away. In that fleeting transition he can see their weakness; he, too, can harness the power of looking.

The novel's idiom is cinematic, which beautifully produces the plot's whirlwind-like structure, moving in slow motion on the outer rim and in rapid takes at the core. This is how the pace of the book works: the early, longer chapters form the deliberate outer flank that introduces the characters and sets them in motion, and the short, brisk cuts are the intense action at the center, at the destination point for the characters and the plot. Along with the characters, the drone and the camera lens circulate, dispassionately recording what they see. The aspiring filmmaker Dene reflects on the film *Requiem for a Dream*: "aesthetically it's rich, so you enjoy the experience, but you don't exactly come away from the film glad that you watched it, and yet you wouldn't have it any other way. . . . This unflinching stare into the void . . . is the kind of thing only a camera can keep its eye wide open for" (239). This "unflinching stare" is precisely what Orange, through the cinematic rendering, provides his readers.

Many of the central characters in the book are drawn to their own reflections, caught in the existential riddle of self-measurement, what W. E. B. Du Bois termed "double-consciousness," or "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (5). More often than not, such assessment involves a blank television screen, a reminder that the surface that reflects is also the surface that produces and reproduces images of Indians. That effect is true even when Orvil Red Feather, a teenager preparing to dance at the powwow, studies himself in a mirror: "He's waiting for something true to appear before him—about him. It's important that he dress like an Indian, dance like an Indian, even if it is an act . . . because the only way to be an Indian in this world is to look and act like an Indian" (Orange 122). Orvil's grandmother, Opal, with whom he lives, resists such external measures. She tells Orvil that nothing makes them "more or less Indian. More or less real Indian. . . . 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" (119).

Opal's emphasis on survival invites an exploration of what it means to "look like an Indian," especially in the context of conflict, when such symbolic capital can as easily expose or conceal. One of the novel's greatest contributions is its honest exploration of the 1969–71 occupation of Alcatraz through the eyes of Opal and her sister Jacquie, who went to the island with their mother in 1970 after they were evicted from their Oakland home. Their stories of exposure to hunger, cold, reckless drinking, and sexual assault—as well as ordinary and happy memories of the time—force a reckoning with the valorization of the event that elides the occupation's underbelly. The novel's narrative reminds us that "looking like an Indian" can be mediagenic in ways that survival is not and can obscure the particular burdens borne by women and children. At the same time, putting on traditional regalia has powerful internal meaning for those who do it, and the novel is able to hold the myriad possibilities of how "dressing in feathers" can simultaneously signify. Consider, for example, Tony Loneman. What does Tony see the first time he puts on powwow regalia and sees himself in the curved reflection of the television screen? "I looked at my face. The Drome. I didn't see it there. I saw an Indian. I saw a dancer" (26).

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At the end of the novel, Tony is again dressed in traditional regalia at the powwow. He lunges toward the gunman to stop him. At this moment, what does the gunman see? He sees an Indian. Tony, looking at himself, sees something wondrous; the gunman, looking at Tony, sees a target, the sight at the end of a riflescope.

And so we return to the final scenes of the novel. I've often thought that endings involve particularly difficult decisions for any Native novel dealing with violence or history, which is just about all of them. If you end up with a conventionally happy ending, you risk undermining everything you've laid out before, and even your reputation as an artist. For example, the early versions of D'Arcy McNickle's 1936 masterpiece, *The Surrounded*, had a happy resolution, and it was rejected by publishers for years, until McNickle's revisions gave it a much darker turn.[2] And there is *some* hope at the end. Orange's novel, like James Welch's 1986 historical novel *Fools Crow*, is one that you know from the outset will end in a massacre, and it is the artistic and humanistic rendering of the slow storm that pulls you through. Both *Fools Crow* and *There There* build up to massacres of which there are still survivors. Yet some readers miss this and go straight to "everybody dies." The dominant narrative of Indian death that exists in American culture is something that Native writers have to contend with in shaping their own plotlines. Orange's book seems particularly attuned to this concern, and the nonfiction essays of the prologue and interlude that provide metacommentary on the plot are evidence that "the real" is ever injecting itself into the fictive. Orange has indicated in interviews that his decision to end the novel the way he did was influenced by the contemporaneous protest at Standing Rock: "while I was finishing the book, we were watching elders getting hit with rubber bullets on national TV while trying to pray for clean water. And then we are getting attacked by dogs. That just felt true to me at the time. Granted, when the very concept of the novel first came to me, I knew it was not gonna end well. . . . I tried to infuse as much hope as I could" (Shotten 59).

*There There* has been a popular book-club and "community read" selection for diverse audiences, from the University of Idaho to the city of Philadelphia. At the University of California, Berkeley, where I teach, the novel was selected as the one book for all incoming students to read; students and faculty members were provided with copies of the book, and multiple campus events were organized around its themes. When the announcement was made, there was widespread support and delight, yet I heard from a few colleagues who had reservations. One colleague wrote to me that "[t]he presentation of the urban indigenous people in Oakland is a portrait of victimry, without much in the way of redemption" (E-mail message). I didn't—I couldn't—write back. But I wish that I had, to gently ask, *Redemption for whom?*

*There There* is set in an urban Indian community, and it brings to light many historical and contemporary issues that shape Native life. But it is not a portrait of victimry, nor a narrative of resilience. As Dene Oxendene describes his documentary project, "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, and rage" (Orange 40). The novel is a powerful and honest rendering of Indian life and a profound exploration of gun violence at the heart of American society.[3] In 2017, the most recent year for which data are available, there were 39,773 gun-related deaths in the United States (Gramlich). This means that 109 people die every day from guns; more than 700 people die every week. The novel's interlude addresses a willful desire to not see the violence, or, rather, to not see it aimed at ourselves: "as many times as it happens, . . . we

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still walk around in our lives thinking: No, not us, that happens to them, the people on the other side of the screen . . . " (Orange 140). Yet, as the interlude also points out, some of us never have the privilege of that distance: "We've expected the shooter to appear in our lives in the same way we know death is and always has been coming for us" (141).

*What about the ending?* is a question that every reader should ask about this book.

In the end, there's an echo of Sand Creek, as bullets hit Dene's flesh and tent poles.

In the end, Bill is shot and "the world tips over" (277).

In the end, not everyone dies.

In the end, the bullets hit their targets. But those bullets left their chambers in 1864.

## Notes

1. See Tahmahkera for an extended discussion of the Indian Head test pattern, including a description of a comedic send-up of the test on *Moose TV* by Indigenous actors in Canada.

2. The final version of *The Surrounded* is far superior to the initial version, which was titled *The Hungry Generations* (Hans).

3. I thank Chiyuma Elliott for this insight.

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