theories and methodologies

Tommy Orange Has Company

JAMES H. COX

THE RECOGNIZABLE FORMAL STRUCTURE OF TOMMY ORANGE'S *THERE THERE* AND ITS FAMILIAR REVELATIONS ABOUT INDIGENOUS AMERICAN life, as much as the components distinguishing the novel from other Native-authored works that share its concerns, have propelled it to the center of conversations about contemporary Native literature. Yet the excitement about the arrival of a new, talented writer has obscured *There There*'s roots in American Indian literary history, especially its affiliations with novels by other Native authors. 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. *There There* reflects the work of many other Native fiction writers, most prominently Sherman Alexie, but also James Welch, N. Scott Momaday, and David Treuer, among others. He evokes the formal features of many of Louise Erdrich's novels, too, but unlike Erdrich, Orange leaves readers with the overwhelming impression of irrevocably damaged Indigenous communities with dismal prospects for breaking cycles of violence and trauma.

Alexie, one of Orange's mentors in the MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts, makes appearances throughout Orange's book, though before publication Knopf removed Alexie's blurb from the cover following allegations of sexual misconduct against the older writer. Even the cover design—two horizontal black feathers, one beneath each word in the title, on an orange background—recalls the first edition of Alexie's 1996 urban Indian novel *Indian Killer*, which features a black dust jacket with two crossed orange feathers beneath the title. Orange adopts both Alexie's consistent affirmation of American Indians as avid consumers of popular culture and his critical engagement with popular representations of American Indians. To take one of the more explicit indications of influence, *There There* opens with a prologue in which the Indian head test pattern evinces centuries of violence against Indigenous Americans. Orange

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PMLA 135.3 (2020), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.565 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sees the circles and lines on the pattern as "sights through riflescopes" and "a bull's-eye" (3). The test pattern immediately precedes the static or white noise on an analog television after a station stops transmitting a signal. This white noise, like the Indian head test pattern in *There There*, works as figurative visual and aural shorthand for efforts "to annihilate the Spokanes by assimilation or physical destruction" in Alexie's 1993 short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (Cox 155). The bull's-eye, too, evokes the cover of Alexie's other urban Indian novel, *Flight* (2007), on which a young Native man poses with two raised guns in front of the bright yellow bull's-eye of a target. *Flight*'s cover art hints at the possibility of a mass shooting, further linking Alexie's novel to Orange's.

The name of the first chapter's narrator, Tony Loneman, comes so weighted with allusion to literature by and about Native Americans that it intimates parody. The name suggests Tony Hillerman, the non-Native author of mysteries set in the Navajo Nation and one of the objects of Alexie's ire in *Indian Killer*, and the Lone Ranger, who appears in the title and on the cover of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and once in Orange's novel in a reference to the 2013 Disney film about the masked man. When Edwin Black, an aspiring fiction writer and an Internet addict, attempts to download the film, his computer crashes (Orange 64). The episode contains three elements that structure many scenes in Alexie's fiction (an addiction, a screen, and a big-budget film with pernicious representations of American Indians), though Orange updates them for the digital age. Tony Loneman also recalls Jim Loney, the doomed protagonist of Welch's 1979 novel *The Death of Jim Loney*. When Orange introduces a young boy named Lony, he informs readers that the name does not sound like "pony," an implicit reference to Loney (120). The pronunciation lesson reinforces *There There*'s connection to Welch's novel. Tony Loneman's final moments mirror Loney's, too. At the end of *The Death of Jim Loney*, Loney takes two bullets from a tribal policeman's rifle. The second bullet hits him in the stomach, "and as he was falling he felt a harsh wind where there was none and the last thing he saw were the beating wings of a dark bird as it climbed to a distant place" (Welch 179). Wind and birds also appear as Loneman dies from his gunshot wounds.

Alexie's ruminations on toxic Indigenous masculinities, especially in the 1995 novel *Reservation Blues*, also might have inspired Orange. Tony Loneman bears more than a passing resemblance to Michael White Hawk, the young adult male character with fetal alcohol syndrome in Alexie's novel. Orange and Alexie describe their characters as big, strong young men prone to violence. Young Native men in Alexie's fiction often attempt with little success to reconcile their own self-conception with popular representations of Indigenous masculinity. Some of Orange's characters face the same struggle. When Orvil, an aspiring powwow dancer and one of Lony's brothers, searches the Internet for an answer to the question "What does it mean to be a real Indian" (Orange 121), the question echoes the refrain "What is an Indian?" from Alexie's "One Good Man" in the 2000 short story collection *The Toughest Indian in the World* (217). In the story, a Spokane college student's father and a male professor argue over the answer to the question. The father emphasizes a commitment to one's family, and the professor insists on militant activism—he claims to have participated in the occupation of Alcatraz, where Orange sets one of his novel's early chapters—as the defining characteristics of indigeneity. For Alexie and Orange, the search for real indigeneity and the search for healthy, nontoxic masculinity are inextricable and simultaneous. Their conflation of these searches tends to make Native women in their fiction either bystanders, victims, or potential sources, in often obscure ways, of healing for men.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.565 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Orange pays explicit homage to Alexie when Edwin Black tells his friend and half sister Blue that he "started writing a story the other day" about a Native guy named Victor (244). Blue recognizes and objects to the allusion to Victor Joseph, a main character in some of the short stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, *Reservation Blues*, and Alexie's 1998 film *Smoke Signals*. Victor's friend Thomas Builds-the-Fire hails him frequently in the film with a memorable "Hey, Victor!" Following Blue's incredulous response to the name, Edwin changes it to Phil. In the next chapter, Orange alludes to an iconic scene in *Smoke Signals*, which follows Victor and Thomas on a road trip to recover Victor's father's ashes. On the morning of the day that they plan to rob a powwow, four young Native men in Orange's novel sit down at a Denny's, and two of them order the Grand Slam, the same meal that Thomas fondly recalls eating years earlier while having breakfast with Victor's father. By alluding to the scene in *Smoke Signals*, Orange implies a brotherhood among his characters and Alexie's, but he shifts the tone from whimsical to ominous.

There There also follows a model evident in Alexie's as well as in Welch's novels: Native men control the plot, often by committing violence against themselves or others. Yet by adopting a narrative structure with multiple voices and perspectives (Orange calls the structure "polyphonic" in a *Buzzfeed* article by Anne Helen Peterson), Orange also expresses a debt to Erdrich, the most celebrated Native author of multivoiced novels. The first edition of her first novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), has six first-person narrators telling the story in most of the fourteen chapters. Erdrich takes a similar approach in other novels such as *Tracks* (1988), which contains nine chapters with two alternating first-person narrators, and *Four Souls* (2004), the sequel to *Tracks*, which has three first-person narrators in its sixteen chapters and its epilogue. Orange's novel comprises forty-two chapters: seven in first person, thirty-four in third person, and one in second person. The first-person chapters end after chapter 16, after which the chapters become consistently much shorter as the narrative propels readers toward the mass shooting that Orange announces in an interlude, written primarily in first-person plural, between the eighth and ninth chapters.

Like Erdrich in *Love Medicine*, Orange in *There There* organizes the chapters to create mystery about the biological relationships of some of the characters. After reading Orange's interlude, however, we anticipate that even as the biological family relationships come into focus, the imminent shooting will turn any reunion into a tragedy. Violent crimes—domestic abuse, sexual assault, homicides—occur frequently in novels by Native authors, but they rarely overwhelm the narrative. Erdrich's novels, for example, do not dwell on violent spectacle, instead focusing on the characters' efforts to cope, heal, or, in the case of *The Round House* (2012), seek justice or revenge. *Tracks* opens, for example, with "an elegiac description" by Nanapush, one of the novel's two narrators, of "the horror of depopulation and genocide" (N. Peterson 984, 985). Nanapush's lamentation, delivered as an oral history for the benefit of his adopted granddaughter Lulu, lasts only two pages and situates readers at the beginning of a long healing process. *There There* also begins with such an accounting in a nine-page prologue summarizing the horrors of American Indian history. While Orange's novel ends like *Tracks* with a family reunion, the horror continues unabated in the form of bullets striking Native bodies.

By announcing the mass shooting in the interlude, Orange creates the distinct impression of its inevitability. Orange observes, in the interlude's proleptic elegy,

> We've expected the shooter to appear in our lives in the same way we know death is and

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.565 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> always has been coming for us, with its decisive scythe, its permanent cut. . . . The tragedy of it all will be unspeakable, the fact we've been fighting for decades to be recognized as a present-tense people, modern and relevant, alive, only to die in the grass wearing feathers. (141)

Alexie and other Native writers have faced objections to their ostensibly bleak narratives, particularly in the 1990s. Early in Alexie's career, Louis Owens observed that "the most popularly and commercially successful Native American works thus far," including Alexie's, "are the direct heirs of the modernist tradition of naturalistic despair" (81). Drawing on William Faulkner's representations of Indigenous peoples in Mississippi, Owens categorizes these works as part of the "'Chief Doom' school of literature" (82). Gertrude Stein's contribution to the title (her assessment of Oakland: "there is no there there") and one Native character's reading of Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway during his time in San Quentin point to modernism as one of the possible sources of Orange's grim conception of Indigenous Oakland. Tony Loneman's musician of choice, MF (Metal Face) Doom, also reveals in the first chapter a streak of fatalism in the novel. The scale of the violence in Orange's novel, its place at the end of the narrative, and the novelist's decision to open wounds from gunshots at the same moment that a large extended family finds itself together for the first time all situate *There There* within a long literary history of tragic Indigenous narratives tilted toward predetermined catastrophe.

Orange appears to acknowledge a debt to Erdrich in Tony Loneman's brief remarks on one of her novels in the first chapter of *There There*. Loneman says that his grandmother, Maxine, asks him to read "Indian stuff that I don't always get" to her (20). He concedes, "I like it, though, because when I do get it, I get 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" (20). Loneman recalls his grandmother's powerful emotional reaction to a passage "about how life will break you" from *The Painted Drum* (2005), by her "favorite author—Louise Erdrich" (20). He says, "I didn't know what it meant then, and she saw that I didn't. She didn't explain it, either. But we read the passage, that whole book, another time, and I got it" (21). Yet these passages convey as much ambivalence about as admiration for Erdrich, and they illuminate a wide generation gap between Orange's young Native characters and their elders and, implicitly, between Orange and Native authors of the boomer generation. Erdrich writes primarily for grandmothers, Orange suggests. He writes for young fans of MF Doom.

Erdrich's and Orange's divergent treatment of Native drums produces a remarkable contrast between the two novels. In *The Painted Drum*, Erdrich uses first-person and third-person narration to tell the story of the repatriation of the titular instrument into its creator's Ojibwe community. Forces working through the drum save three children from freezing to death and put the world and the narrative back in balance. Bernard Shaawano, one of the two narrators, observes: "The body of a drum is a container for the spirit, just as if it were flesh and bone. And although love between a man and woman can change and fail, overreach itself, fall prey to suspicions, yet the drum lives on. The drum waits with the patience of unliving things and yet it heals with life itself" (172). Though Orange presents the drum as an important Indigenous instrument, one that like the Indigenous blues of Alexie's *Reservation Blues* produces the "sound of pain forgetting itself in song," the drum groups at the powwow disappear into the background of the shooting in *There There* (Orange 212). By forcefully accentuating bullets over drums, and violent death over ceremony and life, however precarious, Orange works against a powerful desire in

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.565 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Native American and Indigenous literary studies for stories that nourish, to borrow a key term from influential critical reflections on Indigenous literatures by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Daniel Heath Justice.

Yet Orange's embrace of storytelling as fundamental to Indigenous life aligns him with both Alexie and Erdrich as well as most other Indigenous writers. More than fifteen years after Thomas King delivered the Massey lectures on which he based *The Truth about Stories* (2003), that book remains one of the most clearly delineated statements on the role of storytelling in Indigenous life. The refrain of the lectures, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are," expresses an understanding of stories as forces in the world shaping beliefs, actions, and relationships (2). Many of Orange's characters hold a similar view of storytelling. Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield's mother, for example, tells her daughter that honoring their people requires "telling our stories": "She told me the world was made of stories, nothing else, just stories, and stories about stories" (58). When the aspiring filmmaker Dene Oxendene applies for a grant to support a project to collect stories of urban Indians, he tells the members of the selection committee, "What I want to do is pay the storytellers for their stories. Stories are invaluable, but to pay is to appreciate" (40). As Harvey and Jacquie Red Feather drive together to Oakland for the powwow, Harvey, the powwow emcee, tells Jacquie, now reunited by chance with her rapist and the father of her daughter, Blue, about changing the story that he told himself about alcohol: "When we see that the story is the way we live our lives, only then can we start to change, a day at a time. We try to help people like us, try to make the world around us a little better. It's then that the story begins" (112). Dene constructs a storytelling booth at the powwow, where Harvey narrates the ceremony for the audience. Orange thus represents the powwow as a site both of storytelling and of secular ceremony, yet storytelling, like the drumming, dancing, and other communal activities that are the bases of future stories, cannot prevent the violence.

Following Erdrich's 2016 novel *LaRose*, Orange also includes a rolling head oral story in his novel. The rolling head, part of what Erdrich calls "a Cree/Ojibwe origin story" (qtd. in Treisman), appeared first in her short story "The Flower" in *The New Yorker*, which she incorporated into *LaRose*. The episode in Erdrich's novel has roots in domestic violence in an Ojibwe family: the husband and father, Mashkiig, attacks his wife, Mink, and murders her brothers, and Mink sells their eleven-year-old daughter, the first LaRose, to a trader, Mackinnon. Mackinnon's clerk, Wolfred Roberts, tasks himself with protecting her from his employer. After Mashkiig murders Mink, LaRose and Wolfred join forces to poison Mackinnon, whose head, hair ablaze, follows them as they flee. The head relentlessly pursues LaRose and Wolfred and pleads with them not to abandon him. After battling and escaping her tormentor for years, LaRose encounters the head again in the final stage of her fight against tuberculosis. Too weak to move herself out of harm's way, she outwits the head by separating her spirit from her body and flying away. The rolling head in "an old Cheyenne story" in *There There* also has its origins in domestic violence: a man murders his wife and the water monster with whom he finds her in an embrace (Orange 6). He serves either the monster or the monster and his wife to their children, and a rolling head appears and chases the children. Orange does not clarify whether the head belongs to the murdered woman or the water monster, but he observes that "[i]t wanted more. More of anything. More of everything. And it just kept rolling" (6–7). This rolling head, a violent and dangerous past chasing the Indigenous peoples of Oakland, appears more ravenous than its pathetic and eventually outwitted counterpart in *LaRose*.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.565 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Despite the familiarity of his novel's characters, the representations of Indigenous life, and the novel's form, Orange positions himself in the prologue as an iconoclast departing from the conventions of rural and reservation fiction and breaking down narrow, ahistorical conceptions of Indigenous tradition. This move mirrors Alexie's strategy of authorial self-representation at the beginning of his own career. In the acknowledgments at the end of the novel, Orange even thanks Alexie, the iconoclast of the previous generation's Native writers, "for how he helped this become a better novel" (293). The novel might look and sound sui generis to some readers, but an accounting of both Orange's debt to other American Indian writers and *There There*'s similarities to other urban Indian novels challenges any such pronouncements. American Indian authors have produced stories about urban Indigenous life with much greater frequency than Orange implies. Urban American Indian novels preceding *There There* include Janet Campbell Hale's *The Jailing of Cecilia Capture* (1985), also set in the Bay Area and featuring a participant in the occupation of Alcatraz as a character, as well as Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife* (1998), Treuer's *The Hiawatha* (1999), and Susan Power's *Sacred Wilderness* (2014). Like Alexie's *Indian Killer*, Treuer's novel about three generations of an American Indian family in Minneapolis portrays a painful and at times brutal urban Indigenous experience two decades before the publication of Orange's own harrowing novel.

Indeed, Abel, the protagonist of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), spends time in an urban Indian community in Los Angeles, a city that Momaday depicts as alienating to some Native Americans but habitable for others. Orange's narrative of urban Indian life does not depart radically from Momaday's. Native characters face systemic racism in mid-twentieth-century Los Angeles and early-twenty-first-century Oakland and gather on occasion for social and religious purposes. Orange diverges from Momaday primarily in his representation of the much larger scale of a city's threat to Indigenous people. After the federal relocation policy fails him and a policeman brutally beats him, Abel departs Los Angeles, returns to his home at the Jemez Pueblo, and at dawn joins others for a ritual run after evil. By contrast, Orange funnels his characters to the ballpark and encloses them there, leaving them with limited opportunities to escape from the shooting.

Practicing the art of American Indian fiction requires a careful navigation of the literary and political landscape, as demonstrated by the example of the Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo (formerly San Juan Pueblo) and African American writer Rebecca Roanhorse, whose novel *Trail of Lightning* appeared three weeks after *There There*. Featuring a powerful young Navajo woman as the monster-slaying protagonist in a postapocalyptic world, *Trail of Lightning* and its sequel, *Storm of Locusts* (2019), contain not unprecedented but nevertheless provocative conceptualizations of race, religion, politics, and gender and sexuality in a dystopian Indigenous future. Roanhorse found herself mired in a controversy after twelve Navajo writers protested the novel's graphic violence and Roanhorse's appropriation of Navajo religious beliefs, though other Native writers defended her (Jawort). Roanhorse's and Orange's novels, along with the work of other contemporary Native writers (e.g., Natalie Diaz, Cherie Dimaline, Larissa FastHorse, and Layli Long Soldier), perhaps represent a turning point in American Indian literary history. However, their novels return readers and scholars in the field to previous eras, too, when new Native writers also made headlines, challenged their predecessors, and raised questions about the literary, cultural, and political roles Native fiction plays in the world.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.565 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Note

The author wishes to extend his gratitude to Kirby Brown, Alexander Pettit, and Lisa Tatonetti for their invaluable insights on this essay.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.565 Published online by Cambridge University Press