theories and methodologies

Orange Is the New Red

MELANIE BENSON TAYLOR

Just 'cause you feel it
Doesn't mean it's there.
—Radiohead, "There, There"

THE AMERICAN READING PUBLIC'S RESPONSE TO TOMMY ORANGE'S DEBUT NOVEL *THERE THERE* HAS BEEN APTLY DESCRIBED AS "RAPTUROUS" (Canfield and Greenblatt). Orange has been lauded as "the luminary who will reignite the Native American literary movement" (Woronzoff), the mastermind of a rare "literary hit" (Grey)—a "new kind of Native American epic" (Whitton) sure to usher in "an exciting new era for Native American fiction" (Woronzoff). But if Orange is in fact the ambassador to a new field of American Indian literature, is there any "there there"—and where, exactly, is it?

The title of the novel, which is set in Orange's present-day Oakland, California, is drawn ostensibly from Gertrude Stein's famous pronouncement "There's no there there," which has largely been understood as an expression of disappointment at seeing her idyllic childhood home torn down and built over. Like Stein, though, the Cheyenne and Arapaho author isn't exactly commenting on the disturbing vacancies created by industrial capitalism; nor is he decrying the modern city in general, or Oakland in particular. Instead, and rather unlike his literary foremother, Orange seems to both eulogize and resurrect what remains in the rubble of removal—both in Oakland and in Native communities throughout North America. But many of the book's glowing reviews have overplayed the novelty of an American Indian writer emerging from an unexpected place—as if we did not already have a robust archive of Indigenous authors writing searingly for decades about urban exile, cultural alienation, and postmodern malaise. Orange's message may have been a revelation to mainstream American readers, but it did not surprise those of us paying attention to Indigenous writing of the past century or more.

Responses to Orange's stylistic achievement have been similarly bemusing but also revealing. The title of a prominent *New York*

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

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.590 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Times review by Colm Toibin—"Yes, Tommy Orange's New Novel Really Is That Good"—answers the rhetorical question that no one was asking, at least not publicly: Could a contemporary Native American novel written by someone other than Louise Erdrich or Sherman Alexie be stylistically "good"? Nearly fifteen years ago, David Treuer argued persuasively for Native American literature to be read and assessed as literature, not simply as cultural artifact;[1] if critics now are at least sporadically more inclined to evaluate Indigenous style, their appreciations remain scrambled in odd ways by identity politics. Bobae Johnson, for instance, locates Orange's influences entirely "outside the overwhelmingly white canon of authors taught and discussed in America," citing such techniques as "switch[ing] between first and third person" and even, in one chapter, second person within a narrative containing "no discernible beginning, middle, or end." Surely Johnson knows that these techniques are at least as old as modernism itself; but the invention of an Indian avant-garde substitutes for what is otherwise inexpressible. To make a really "good" Native novel, it seems, an author must reject white models and mainstream rules. Form must slavishly mimic content: "Even the book's challenging structure is a performance of determined resistance," another critic avers (Charles).

The real, incontrovertible gift of Orange's novel is, ironically, his refusal to submit to any rules at all and his evasion of facile categorizations and stereotypes. In some ways, a Native author seems best poised to represent—and, more important, to refuse—the traumatic conscriptions of postsettler, advanced-capitalist America. Ron Charles extols the way "[e]verything about 'There There' acknowledges a brutal legacy of subjugation—and shatters it." Even the book's bleak, blood-soaked ending, with a body count rivaling that of a Shakespearean tragedy or a Quentin Tarantino film, has been interpreted as ultimately expectant. As Elisabeth Woronzoff puts it, Orange "at once denudes the reality of cultural genocide while evoking a glimmer of encouragement." For Barbara Hoffert, the disastrous powwow is both an inevitable and a "beautiful" ending: "grand yet wrought with the violence that cannot be separated from Native history."

For those who might struggle to find beauty or "encouragement" in Orange's relentlessly sober denouement, other critics gesture toward slippery, simplistic equations of Indigenous "survival" with buoyancy. Erica Wagner insists, "There is hope in this book, hope in the strength of stories told and stories that are finally heard." Steve Whitton similarly endorses the wisdom of one of Orange's characters: "the only way to set the past right was 'being able to understand where we came from, what happened to our people, and how to honor them by living right, by telling our stories.'" Finally, while Orange's characters bemoan the fact that Native people and lands "all over the Americas" have been "developed over, buried . . . unreturnable" (Orange 39), "there's a hint of optimism buried beneath the obliteration," Woronzoff claims, citing characters like Orvil and Dene who are "proactive about reclaiming their cultural histories" and "galvanized by reconnection." These are curious ways of interpreting a novel in which *connection* and *reconnection* are words that conjure, above all, the volatile wire ends of digital communities rather than tribal ones, and in which characters come together in a violent pageant of pantribal disharmony, only to blow apart in gruesome ways and expire one by one, emphatically alone. These communities are sutured by obliteration and denial; silence and subversion; living, surviving, speaking, and dying. As Jeremy Carnes puts it, "Orange makes clear that what connects these people" is, quite simply, "the fact that they are living" (238). A frail connection, indeed.

If such a vision inaugurates a new Native American literary tradition, it is an utterly

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.590 Published online by Cambridge University Press

terrifying one. Yet this is precisely *not* how *There There* has been understood: in our excessively utilitarian state, terror must be twinned with reparations, or else we struggle to place and comprehend it. Such heady hopes make the novel an irresistible exercise in redemption, one consumable by a composite audience. Book clubs and even first-year college students have embraced it as a template for resilience in the face of transformation; as one university official put it, describing the selection of Orange's book as the common text for their 2019 incoming class: "'There There' is a perfect complement to the first-year experience at the University of Idaho, where understanding one's place, identity and purpose is a crucial part of this transition" (Podplesky). When Orange won the prestigious PEN/Hemingway award that year, it was precisely because the judges—fellow authors Cristina Garcia, Dinaw Mengestu, and Scott Simon—found the novel "as acutely attuned to our current cultural and political condition as it is to the indelible legacy of violence that brought us here." Their "us" refers demonstrably to all Americans, not just Indians, betraying the continued, heterotopic utility of the Indian symbol as a perennially malleable "cultural and political" trope.[2] As the judges put it, Orange's characters, "despite tragedy, heartbreak and loss, reside in a remarkable world of hard-earned grace" ("Breakout Novelist"). To be palatable, pain must coexist with hope—an imperative that applies not just to non-Native readers but to an Indian audience as well. Indeed, Orange reports the "warm and embracing" reaction of fellow Natives—a kind of "exuberance and joy" for what he has accomplished (qtd. in Shotton 58).

The alternately self-flagellating and self-possessive gestures of both the elite and the evicted have a way of serving a redundant agenda—that of rerooting, represencing, for a collectively unmoored, postmodern America teeming with Steins and Oranges, and Wendell Berrys. Indeed, as Berry once put it in an elegy for his Kentucky home, as well as for the Indians and southern white ancestors who occupied it, modernity estranges us from the landscape such that "*we are still not here*." By appropriating and mishandling the land, settlers insured that they would never truly possess it; and while there is no rectifying the original sin of Removal, "Surely," he muses, "there could be a more indigenous life than we have" (628; italics mine). Indeed, anthropogenic crisis has thrust Indians back into a predicament that has always necessitated their healing alterity. Orange began writing his novel in earnest following the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) confrontations at Standing Rock. He remembers seeing "elders getting hit with rubber bullets on national TV while trying to pray for clean water"—the dark underside of their resuscitated relevance, and a stark renewal of the brutality against Indigenous people that continues mostly systemically, in what Orange identifies as the "systemic violence" of representation (qtd. in Shotton 58). For the first time since the American Indian Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the DAPL protests brought not just national but global scrutiny to Native Americans' involvement in ecological and economic issues. Thousands of Indians from hundreds of communities traveled to Standing Rock to support the cause, flanked conspicuously by American politicians, celebrities, and veterans and spreading their message through social media campaigns. Underlying the public response was a perception of corporate greed unjustly overriding Indigenous values, and the subtext throughout was of Indians as static ciphers for antiestablishment and anticapitalist idealism. Beginning with the Boston Tea Party, when the aggrieved colonial American subjects of the British Empire donned Mohawk disguises to protest their subjugation, Indians have functioned simplistically as foils for not just our hopes but also our deepest fears as Americans. At their most dangerously idealistic, such borrowings

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.590 Published online by Cambridge University Press

imply that, as Alan Trachtenberg once put it, "America can be revived, rejuvenated, by recognizing a native school of thought. *The Indian can save America*" (307; italics mine).[3]

Small wonder, then, that readers would take the frailest bait of hope amid Orange's widespread carnage and use it to launch a new Native American literary movement—a *new* New Age Indian for the twenty-first century. As Tobias Grey reports, Orange's book "has made Native American identity a hot topic of discussion"; he cites the bookseller Katharine Solheim of Unabridged Books in Chicago, who declared, "I've had more conversations with customers surrounding that issue this year than I've had in my entire life." What are they learning about this "indigenous" life, exactly, from Orange's book, which steadfastly refuses to supply easy answers or burnish stereotypes? The quest is decidedly metaphysical rather than material: indeed, if we are paying attention, it becomes clear that we are liberated not by repossessing but by relinquishing physical spaces. As the Afropessimist scholar Jared Sexton puts it, "the indigenous relation to land precedes and exceeds any regime of property—landlessness. And selflessness is the correlate. No ground for identity, no ground to stand (on). . . . This is not a politics of despair brought about by a failure to lament a loss, because it is not rooted in hope of winning. The flesh of the earth demands it: the landless inhabitation of selfless existence" (593). In other words, if we are to arrive anywhere new and generative in both Indigenous and African American studies—and in the sometimes fractious interstices between them—we must uncouple notions of identity from those of property. In the critical response to Orange's novel, placelessness is thematized but finally routed in strange ways; readers would assert a reterritorialization of sorts, utterly against Orange's sometimes explicit aims. "Being an Indian has never been about returning to the land," he tells us in the discursive prologue; "*The land is everywhere or nowhere*. . . . [It] moves with you like memory" (11; italics mine). Elsewhere, Orange explains, seeming to contradict himself, "Urban Indian life has thrived the way it has because it's kept connection to the reservation" (qtd. in Shotton 57). While he identifies primarily as an Oakland native, he is quick also to claim connection to "Hammond, Oklahoma. That's where my dad grew up" (qtd. in Shotton 56). Yet he refuses to privilege the reservation over the city, because neither is "traditional" and both "belong to the earth" (Orange 11). But this unmoored sensibility of contemporary identity, and notions of sovereignty paradoxically divorced from property, are untranslatable conceits to the American imagination—which is likely what makes Orange's novel such a wonder and a nightmare for many.

Orange's characters are, indeed, resistant agents who defy these histories of extermination simply by "living," connecting, and speaking. Yet they flagrantly enact and suffer more violence, much of it senseless, self-defeating, and divisive—and long before the climactic mayhem at the book's close. Most of all, they are aware of themselves throughout as searching, wounded shells whose identities hinge wholly on "memories we don't remember" (10). Indigeneity is the beginning but not nearly the end of their plight; being Native is just a symptom of a contemporary illness induced by inequitable and exploitative economies, by fields of representational immanence that predetermine and disfigure, and by the myriad, mundane assaults and alienations of modernity. Not all of Orange's speakers are Native, however, and the ones who are bear little in common beyond a tandem circling around an existential void they are taught to fetishize and internalize. As a result, many are morbidly hungry and reflexively overnourished, like the obese (and chronically constipated) Edwin Black, the "six foot four, two forty" thug Charles Johnson (90), the "[s]ix feet, two thirty" Thomas Frank (215), and the

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.590 Published online by Cambridge University Press

emphatically "large" Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield, who "got big to avoid shrinking" (170); these characters choose "expansion over contraction," yet their efforts are rhetorical regalia to patch over the "too-deep, too-wide God hole through you" that is, finally, "unfillable" (217). This latter appraisal appears in Thomas Frank's section, the only narrative in the book composed in the second person and thus an explicit invocation of a collective identity, a miscegenated American fate: "*You*'re from a people who took and took and took and took. And from a people taken. You were both and neither" (216; italics mine).

This is not the prosaic crisis of the mixed-blood, Orange suggests, but the inevitable consequence of living in a land of hollow tautologies—"You're Indian because you're Indian because you're Indian"—and impossible math, where "full-blood, half-breed, quadroon, eighths, sixteenths, thirty-seconds" and "one thousand percent Indian" all come out the same (119, 136, 215). A James Baldwin quotation forms the epigraph to part 3, titled "Return" (the previous sections are labeled "Remain" and "Reclaim"): "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them" (157). Yet, while Orange's characters are aching splinters of an inexorcisable past, they are, just as disastrously, products of an unfolding future, their lives both measured and shaped by the vast quotidian of computer screens, television documentaries, video games, drones, and 3D printers. Characters habitually peer into mirrors and screens to find themselves in poses both antic and accusing; they surf the World Wide Web to learn what it means to be Indian. Color, it turns out, is a mirage of unhelpful pixels; most of the characters muse at some point on the paralyzing decoy of skin and surfaces, the endless variegation of which converges dizzyingly in part 4—"Powwow"—a centripetal pageant of timelessness and placelessness whose laborious stitching and sequins could only explode in terrific, absurd violence.

Orange's most richly detailed sections follow artists searching for vision in a world of always already mediated images. Dene Oxendene, the aspiring filmmaker and documentarian, is purposely "letting the content direct" his form (240), but staring without relief into "the void of addiction and depravity . . . the kind of thing only a camera can keep its eye wide open for" (239). Orange's camera is his computer, and what both Dene and his creator record are the disparate narratives that bring the urban Indian story to life—and force us to interrogate its integrity and coherence. Dene is the character who repeatedly muses on both Stein's and Radiohead's versions of the phrase "there there"—because he is profoundly unsure that there is any there there, even (and especially) if "you feel it," and because the stories he collects are finally reenactments of the tags he sees and Sharpies himself around the city: "emt" (an abbreviation of *empty*) and the cryptic "Lens." Together, the tags add up to a reminder that form cannot repair content—that the seer and the seen are ghostly, refracted twins. The graffiti is on the wall, so to speak, waiting to be captured.

Some characters, typically, refuse or fail to see such truths: Opal is nearly blind but eschews corrective lenses; she "enjoys the distance being a blur" and "clos[es] her eyes and ears to the closing of her eyes and ears" (241). It's a reiterative repression, a buffering of the alternate selves and prerecorded stories that, as Tony Loneman puts it in the opening section, stare back at you "like a fucking villain." After meeting his own image "in the mirror"—or, rather, in the "dark reflection" of the turned-off TV—Tony confronts his essential identity: "The Drome," a shorthand for the fetal alcohol syndrome he suffered as an infant (15). Marked indelibly by such inheritances—the blurry "distance" a signifier for both intangible pasts and impinging futures—these characters reify and reiterate their own suffering and addiction, but they simply cannot imagine another reality. "Drome" is also short

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.590 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for "palindrome," and every individual and story here seems to echo and repeat chiasmically, a chronic sameness going forward and backward concurrently. The future is already scripted; the inevitability of disaster at the end of the novel is preordained on every page.

Indeed, Orange's world is finally less haunted by history than freighted by futures that fail to transcend, that spawn immanent new realities and forms. As one character says about a fateful gun created on a 3D printer, it was "like some plastic message from the future about shit getting in the wrong hands" (189). The point is subtle, perhaps, but everywhere in Orange's text are gestures that subjectivity and sovereignty matter, even if they make little sense or difference. Orange has gone on record that non-Native authors should not attempt to write about Indigenous experience (Shotton 59); but he is just as clear, at least in *There There*, that all Indigenous authors may lay claim to is a postmillennial terra nullius. The distinction matters: "You want to drum but also to be heard drumming," Orange's Thomas Frank realizes, "[n]ot as yourself but as the drum" (224). What we have willfully misunderstood about Orange's achievement, it seems, is his powerful delineation of the instrument, the tangle of drummer and drum, the dancer and the dance. In other words, we should be careful not to privilege identity over ideation, fixity over fluidity, presence over aporia, in even the most benevolent gestures of postsettler reparations.

Orange's is an arresting new voice in the American landscape, to be sure, but let's not call it a comeback, or a renaissance, or a rescue mission—or anything more than it is, which is substantially more complex than any of those things, and better for its complexity. His novel presents, at once, a devastating paradox of contemporary Indigenous survival; a shattering vision of American postsettler, capitalist modernity; and the construction of a fierce heterotopia for the twenty-first-century digital real—for everyone and anyone, in an America that is "everywhere or nowhere," here and *not here*. We should arrive at the end of *There There* the way many of Orange's characters reach the end of their narratives: not consoled, but rather with a feeling "not unlike hope" (78)—neither hope nor not-hope but something in the unspeakable, unmappable in-between.

Notes

1. Treuer goes further to claim that Native American literature as a coherent genre does not exist. See his *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* (2006).

2. I am drawing here on Foucault's concept of the heterotopia, as elaborated in his essay "Of Other Places," which distinguishes between varieties of utopias (fundamentally unreal places) and what he termed "heterotopias": "real places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (24). I extrapolate his notion here to capture the function of Native peoples as both space and people, countersite and uncanny refraction of self.

3. Trachtenberg here paraphrases the Lakota chief Luther Standing Bear, who wrote much the same words in 1933 in *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (255).

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.590 Published online by Cambridge University Press