theories and methodologies

Hacking Colonialism

MATT COHEN

Listen: Dread, panic, and horror are the great teasers, and tragic wisdom is our best chance in a dangerous world.
—Gerald Vizenor, *Postindian Conversations*

Until that day . . .
Until all are one . . .
Continue the struggle . . .
—Optimus Prime, in *The Transformers: The Movie*

"AMERICAN PEOPLE ARE BEING PUSHED INTO NEW SOCIAL FORMS BECAUSE OF THE COMPLEX NATURE OF MODERN COMMUNICATIONS AND transportation, and the competing forms are neotribalism and neofeudalism," the Standing Rock Sioux thinker Vine Deloria, Jr., wrote in 1970 (14). That insight was inspired in part by the work of Marshall McLuhan, which also led Deloria to suggest something even more provocative:

> Indian people are just as subject to the deluge of information as are other people. In the last decade most reservations have come within the reach of televisions and computers. In many ways Indian people are just as directed by the electric nature of our universe as any other group. But the tribal viewpoint simply absorbs what is reported to it and immediately integrates it into the experience of the group. . . . The more that happens, the better the tribe seems to function and the stronger it appears to get. Of all the groups in the modern world Indians are best able to cope with the modern situation. (10)

Suggesting that his readers learn from the ethics of Indigenous tribalism, Deloria situated the Native experience of the information age in a long arc of colonially induced technological flux. Maintaining community had always been a matter of hacking the latest colonialist tools to make them serve Indigenous viewpoints.

Tommy Orange's *There There* offers its readers both comic and tragic wisdom out of the mixed blessings of colonial information

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systems. "Plenty of us are urban now," Orange writes in the book's intense prologue (9). "If not because we live in cities, then because we live on the internet. Inside the high-rise of multiple browser windows" (9–10). The "us" refers to Native people, but the statement, like the novel as a whole, speaks to the broader reconfiguration of social forms that Deloria referred to half a century ago. *There There* is built around network structures—historical and biographical links in the narrative design that complement the dependence on digital technology in the story. Something bad is happening to how we make identities and communities, the novel suggests with this unsettling combination, and its story of what is happening in Native Oakland might help all of us be resistant adopters.

The structure of *There There* looks simple from a distance. After the prologue, four main parts (a traditional arrangement) hold chapters labeled with a character's name; an interlude briefly interrupts the second part. Up close the novel gets more complex. Moving back and forth in time, and told in first, second, and third person, the novel is multiperspectival and asynchronous, drawing comparisons to the works of William Faulkner and Louise Erdrich, to Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* and Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*. The narrative's drive toward the climax at a powwow, combined with the fractal picture of Oakland that emerges across the chapters, is reminiscent of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, with its Dickensian, convergent arc through a series of seemingly disparate characters and histories.

But *There There* also has the feel of a work emerging from a networked culture. The novel emphasizes the network of the characters, more than any single one. Search for the novel online and you will relentlessly be told that there are twelve characters. Really there are more: no one seems to count Orville Red Feather's brothers Lony and Loother, who share a chapter; neither Harvey nor the mother of Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield and Jacquie Red Feather is given a chapter, but they are pivotal characters. This book compels you to learn the family connections that make for history and drama. It mobilizes the suspense of discovered kinship but also a sense of responsibility for understanding deep and sometimes deliberately obscured connections. ("Interpersonal relations" is one of the book's Library of Congress subject headings.)

The video game and the social media feed, then, seem equally important metaphors for thinking about how the narrative comes across to us. It's almost as if we've blocked the rapist Harvey, for example, and can learn about him only indirectly through our other friends, because he has no chapter of his own. The end of the book leaves us wanting to learn not the fate of one character but the fates of several, because they are profoundly linked; once the shooting starts, the chapters all become brief, third-person slices of the action, grimly reminiscent of watching a replay of a violent multiplayer online game. Even flipping back to earlier chapters to reconstruct kinship ties feels a bit like scrolling.[1]

Colonialism, of course, is the administrator of the sprawling network Orange is hacking. After its prologue, *There There* subtly but relentlessly draws connections between specific elements in people's lives and the traumatic strata of state-sponsored displacement, dispossession, and genocidal violence. "How you ended up getting fired was related to your drinking, which was related to your skin problems, which was related to your father, which was related to history," we are asked to understand in the drummer Thomas Frank's chapter (217). Instead of a place that restricts movement, the city in *There There* is a networking space that makes possible a resistance to massacres, whether literal, cultural, or bureaucratic. "We didn't get lost amid the sprawl of tall buildings, the stream of anonymous masses, the ceaseless din of traffic," Or-

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ange writes. "We found one another, started up Indian Centers, brought out our families and powwows, our dances, our songs, our beadwork" (9).

History qua history, however, is palpably held off in the novel's fictional space: unlike in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, say, or Gerald Vizenor's Oakland novel *Dead Voices*, the chapter titles don't come with dates. The most obvious parallel to the novel's catastrophe, the massacre at Sand Creek in November 1864, is vividly described in a paragraph in the prologue but brought up only once, in passing, later on, while subsequent Cheyenne and Arapaho military resistance victories such as Red Cloud's War or the Battle of Little Bighorn aren't mentioned. The political specificities of the Alcatraz occupation are sidelined, and while there are stories, songs, and ceremonies in the novel, few of these trace back to public events or tribal turning points. This narrative strategy is at least double-edged, steering away from previously dominant tendencies in Native-authored literature even as it opens a pathway for readers unfamiliar with the contemporary landscapes of Native America.

"I would rather not speak with history but history came to me," Joy Harjo writes in a poem about visiting the site of English settlers' notorious May 1637 massacre of Pequots on the Mystic River in what is now Connecticut (63). Like Harjo, Orange is punctual in his reminders that Gertrude Stein's description of Oakland, "there is no there there," evokes a feeling of evacuation that is built on an earlier theft of place. The function of reading the novel, of grappling with its complex network protocols, is foregrounded as a component of colonial resistance. Reflecting on her activist mother, Opal remembers, "She told me the world was made of stories, nothing else, just stories, and stories about stories" (58). For Indigenous people, the stakes of literary representation are high. The baseball bat Opal uses to take out Ronald so he won't rape her sister is named "Storey" (166). As Julian Brave Noisecat put it in a review of *There There*, "that expectation—that you, the reader, will remember each and every one of these Indians—feels like a statement: Remember us. We matter." That expectation trains our colonized attention span to focus.

"We've been defined by everyone else and continue to be slandered despite easy-to-look-up-on-the-internet facts about the realities of our histories and current state as a people"—the prologue dares its readers to verify online the grotesque old stories it's telling, knowing curious readers will find those and more horrors there (Orange 7).

The history of Native adaptations to colonial technologies, for communication and otherwise, dates back to early colonial encounters, with mixed results. Orange tells us about Ousemaquin, sachem of the Wampanoag, one of the managers of the networked communities surrounding the Plymouth settlers who helped prevent war and steer knowledge and resources to Algonquian people for decades after the English separatists arrived. He also tells us about that massacre at Mystic of hundreds of Pequots, transmitted to the Atlantic world as a triumphant byword through the networks of settler-colonial publishing. At one of *There There*'s turning points, Octavio picks up a white 3D-printed gun and aims it at his friends—antisocial media—and it seems "like some plastic message from the future about shit getting into the wrong hands," a message the past sends us powerfully, too, not just about technology but about literature (189).

The technological landscape of *There There* is vast, referencing everything from Bitcoin to virtual reality goggles to drones to Internet addiction. Cell phones appear as frequently as cigarettes in a Bogart movie. Like many of us, the characters learn about almost everything—constipation, code, ceremonial dance—from the Web. Yet Orange is careful to remind us that not everything can be found

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there: search online for "spider legs lump" and, like Orvil's brother Loother, you won't find anything illuminating. That you will dig up only Orange's own story about finding spider legs under his skin both underscores the Janus-faced nature of the new information cosmos and enacts the points he makes about identity: through the Web you might become more like yourself, but also more like it.

Like these technologies, the plagues affecting characters in *There There*—addiction, missing fathers, abuse, poverty, discrimination, body image issues, gentrification—are products of colonialism. But Orange's characters sometimes use new technologies to heal, reconnect, reflect, and learn. Late in the novel the gamer and code geek Daniel Gonzales sits down to Gmail to write a message to his dead brother Manny in an eerie, touching act of mourning. Even in the act of self-therapy and contemplation, he sounds the warning so many of us keep articulating to ourselves: "We're already like fucking androids, thinking and seeing with our phones all the time" (192). Unfulfilled by her *Facebook* feed and seeking answers about her identity, the powwow organizer Blue imagines an alternative feed, where "she'd find true connection. . . . But there is nothing else to check, there *is* no other Facebook" (238). At the novel's conclusion we are left to suppose that she will make that connection—with her mother and cousins—thanks not to online social networking but to the powwow. In the emergency room after the shooting, for once no one is on a smartphone.

Obviously there's a chance that the centrality given to infotech in this novel will date it. *Facebook* won't be around forever. Still, the bard says, "remember thee? / Yea, from the table of my memory / I'll wipe away all trivial fond records," but despite having long since replaced erasable tablets as memory aids, we do remember thee, *Hamlet* (Shakespeare 1.5.97–99). The deeper story in the novel isn't about technology but about time, attention, the will to live, commitment to togetherness in uncertainty, and kindness. Jacquie remembers her mother telling the story of Veho, the trickster spider, whose message is "See here, the way it's gonna be is, first you're gonna give me all your land, then your attention, until you forget how to give it" (Orange 106). As Edwin puts it, with echoes of Socrates: "I depend on the internet for recall now. There's no reason to remember when it's always just right there, like the way everyone used to know phone numbers by heart and now can't even remember their own. Remembering itself is becoming old-fashioned" (67).

The network is not a new concept in American Indian literature. *There There*'s spiders and webs signal this inheritance—"the spider's web is a home and a trap," Jacquie and Opal's mother tells her daughters; the drone seems like a new, airborne incarnation of the trickster spider (101). The interweaving of media in storytelling, borrowing codes from one medium to use in another, is also not new. But novelty is less important than utility in narratives of survivance. Something about this novel feels unusually attuned not just to the times but to a sense shared by many anglophone readers of an ongoing rearrangement of life that is both social and habitual, as the Internet-mediated world enters its fourth decade. Orange's novel, to the extent that it hacks colonial narrative expectations, creates a bridge for readers who find themselves disoriented by technological innovation, political upheaval, economic uncertainty, anthropogenic environmental disaster, and domestic terrorism.

Part of this has to do with craft at the sentence level. It's not surprising that a writer who is also a musician from Oakland can capture the rhythm of West Coast city streets as entrancingly as he can the sensory kaleidoscope of a powwow. Orange occasionally delivers Sorkinesque monologues with a wink, but he can also write devastating, starkly naturalistic dialogue. Despite this artistic

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control, though, *There There* offers a version of American Indian identity that comes without a master key of authenticity or culture-policing codes—it's hard, in what will feel to many readers like a new way, to parse what "Indian" means in *There There*. Its rendering of female characters as complex, flawed, and powerful but not necessarily spiritual, and its placement of them at the center of the story, are welcome strengths. And the book is funny, free for the most part of rarified vocabulary and loaded with ironic jabs at gentrification, social media, and city politics. Like Vizenor's "tragic wisdom," Orange's is conveyed with sharp, memorable irony.

Reactions to *There There* have been strongly positive in the mainstream critical community, but more mixed among Native readers and those writing reviews on popular platforms like *Goodreads* or *Amazon*. It has so many characters, some say; it's so dark, say others. For some Native readers, such as Alicia Elliott, the poetry of the notion that "the land is everywhere and nowhere" risks being deployed literally in the arguments of conservatives against Native land sovereignty. I'm sympathetic to some of this criticism. But I think many young urban Native folks will find *There There* to be something they can dance to, to paraphrase one of Orvil's chapters. Orange's novel, like many Indigenous literary works, is not merely an artistic act, a craft intervention, a formal innovation, or a redescription of Indian identity. It's an event, an occasion for gathering, both an act and an engendering of community. If non-Native readers listen, and maybe do a bit more than listen, that community doesn't have to be strictly Native. "You have to try, you have to intend," Edwin Black says, "and not only tell yourself but really sit there believing" (62).

"American society is unconsciously going Indian," Deloria wrote in 1970. "Moods, attitudes, and values are changing. . . . The self-sufficient man is casting about for a community to call his own. The glittering generalities and mythologies of American society no longer satisfy the need and desire to belong" (9). If this is the first Native-authored book—or the only one—that a non-Native person reads about Native Americans, it will do good work, even if some readers resist it. Orange's book will likely resonate with many people in the United States and elsewhere who are thinking about the pressure that screen-mediated being exerts on their identities and about the forms of knowledge and self-knowledge, based on social media and the Web, that we've lived with for over a decade now.

The conclusion of *There There* leaves its readers on an emotional cliff as some of its Native characters stand firm and calm in the face of tragedy, some face imminent despair, some are confused and questioning. That we expected the bullets but the characters didn't? That grim joke is on Orange's readers. It mirrors to us the senselessness and vertigo-inducing quality of public violence today, news of which is delivered by the same technologies that connect us with family and friends, even as Orange cancels the myth of American Indians as inherently resilient, resistant, or stoic, the synecdochic repositories of the spiritual for a continent. That we can't make meaning of the end with the codes of narrative closure, that the postdenouement world is in our hands, opens a door between urban Native specificity and the more general fears about Native peoples held by anglophone readers.

In the final chapter of the novel, the twenty-one-year-old Tony Loneman shoots the last powwow attacker and lies on the ground afterward, perhaps dying, perhaps not. He finds himself a child again, playing in his grandmother's house. He's reenacting the end of *The Transformers: The Movie* with his toys, making them "fight in slow motion," much as Orange has done with the shooters in the preceding chapters. "The good guys end up winning, but one of them dies," Tony

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continues, and like Tony's toy characters, we "wish it didn't have to be that way" (289). While this passage could be intended to help us interpret the end of the story, the question mark put on Tony's fate and those of many other characters qualifies the comfort, even as it underscores one of *There There*'s takeaways. "We were made to transform," Tony has his Autobots say to one another (289–90), not just because we don't know, but because, as Josefina, Octavio's grandmother, says earlier in the novel, "We can't know. That's what makes us keep going" (186). Orange's novel tries to train us both to pay better attention and to live generously with one another as we move toward an unknowable future.

"Our heads were on the penny first," Orange writes, "the Indian cent, and then on the buffalo nickel, both before we could even vote as a people—which, like the truth of what happened in history all over the world, and like all that spilled blood from slaughter, are now out of circulation" (7). *There There* puts people and truth back in circulation. With a relentless focus on the latency and flow of history and kinship, no less than of resources and wisdom, it rides the rails of a networked society and creates an eminently shareable text—however dangerous that may be.

Notes

I thank my family—Michael, Katharine, and Daniel Cohen and Nicole Gray—for reading and discussing *There There* with me; some of their ideas are refracted here, as are those of Phillip Round, particularly on Deloria, McLuhan, and Native media.

1. More than one reader who commented on the book online noted that following the story in audio format was difficult because it's hard to revisit earlier sections. For an example on the Web site *Goodreads*, see Suzy. Perhaps to lower this difficulty, the paperback edition added a cast of characters before the novel starts—a choice that to my mind saps the drama and the characterological complexity of *There There*. Harvey is not listed as a main character in the cast.

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