theories and methodologies

Digital Tribalography

STEPHEN ROSS AND STEVEN B. SEXTON

THERE THERE IS SO NOTABLE PARTLY BECAUSE IT VALIDATES AND DOCUMENTS THE URBAN INDIAN EXPERIENCE AND COMPLICATES THE BACK-to-the-land narratives of such classics as *Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), and *House Made of Dawn*, by N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa/Cherokee): "Being Indian," the narrator says, "has never been about returning to the land" (Orange 11). In place of this conventional narrative, *There There* embraces and authenticates the experience of Natives who have grown up in the city and are more at home there than in the countryside. Two key terms here need clarification already. First, we write "countryside" rather than "community" because Orange challenges the conventional opposition between urban Indians and those from "community," as though community were the sole privilege of rural existence. In fact, Orange's novel locates community—all Native community—in the contemporary interpenetration of the urban and the technological. Second, for Orange the term *urban* doesn't just refer to those living in the city. Instead, the urban is a function of the contemporary world, in which access to the Internet effaces the place-based spatial logics that have long aligned authenticity with location in traditional—inevitably rural—settings: "Plenty of us are urban now. If not because we live in cities, then because we live on the internet" (9). The urban is connectedness in the midst of displacement, of the placelessness of online existence. Those who live in cities are ipso facto urban; those who do not are virtually urban, regardless of locale.

In this redefinition of the term *urban* as a function of digital interconnectivity rather than simply a city setting, *There There* offers a powerful pushback on the logics of place conventionally linked to Native belonging, and yet it does not dispense entirely with the specificity and significance of place. The specificity of its setting is both relevant and immaterial. On the one hand, it is set in Oakland, distinctly not San Francisco or Silicon Valley. Against San Francisco's silicon slickness, Orange's Oakland presents a blue-collar utilitarian ethic. On the other hand, the very proximity of Oakland

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

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.581 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to Silicon Valley—a site virtually synonymous with digital connectivity and placelessness—reminds us that the novel's characters can transcend the specificity of place and inhabit an Oakland that is shot through with deterritorialized sites of belonging hosted on servers distributed around the world. In this both-and approach to the importance of place, *There There* gives us digital technologies that afford the prospect of community in both the presence and the absence of physical proximity. The Internet is not an obstacle to belonging but a possible means to it, a potentiality that supersedes locality. It effaces physical distance and barriers for both good and ill, connecting some characters with tribal knowledge they would otherwise miss entirely and yet giving others the means to do harm. It is both deracinating and reracinating, complex and varied: where some characters find community and belonging online (Tony Loneman and Orvil Red Feather), one squanders years of his life pursuing a sense of himself by tracking down and contacting his biological father (Edwin Black), and another uses the Internet to make the 3D-printed guns that show up in the novel's violent conclusion (Daniel Gonzales).

To understand how Orange's novel uses digital technologies in these complex ways, we borrow from LeAnne Howe (Choctaw) the notion of "tribalography": the means by which Native people tell the story of the tribe in myriad genres and modes and without regard to conventional divisions between, for example, fiction and nonfiction. Orange's novel elaborates the multimedial nature of tribalography, exploiting the concept's potential as a mode of resistance and resurgence—perhaps especially where it must contend with the legacies of violence, abuse, and dislocation. Reading *There There* in this way illuminates something of what makes the novel so important and illustrates tribalography's sophisticated adaptability as a critical methodology.

Tribalography as Resistance

Tribalography has been taken up by a number of critics in a variety of modes. It is variously a "theory" (Rader vii), a "methodological approach" (Doerfler 65), a "literary praxis" (Romero 22), and even a "genre" (Howe, "Blind Bread" 330), while others claim that "the true beauty of the idea" lies in "its motion to story peoples together" (Meland 29). This variety is due in part to the flexibility of Howe's original definition: "Native stories, no matter what form they take (novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, history), seem to pull all the elements together of the storyteller's tribe, meaning the people, the land, and multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieus (present and future milieus mean non-Indians)" ("Story of America" 42). Below, we highlight three key aspects of tribalography as they pertain especially to how we might read *There There* and how *There There* in turn revises and expands Howe's motile concept.[1]

First, tribalography illuminates how Natives conceptualize narrative by assuming that stories, "no matter what form they take," matter regardless of their genre and whether they are fiction or nonfiction. This assumption directly challenges modern Western structures of narrative that dictate how stories are to be regarded and understood. In *There There* it appears in Daniel's entry into online coding communities and Edwin's quasi-mystical sense that "sometimes the internet can think with you, or even for you, lead you in mysterious ways to information you need and would never have thought to think of or research on your own" (Orange 65). Most strikingly, the Internet furnishes Orvil with the very tribal knowledge he otherwise has no access to: "virtually everything Orvil learned about being Indian he'd learned virtually" (121). These new digital modes give tribalography powerful currency by fusing

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.581 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contemporary communications technologies with a specifically tribal sense of belonging.

Second, tribalography uncovers the content and subtext of these stories, since Native stories often include the storyteller's tribal elements. Native stories tend to be grounded in how Indigenous people relate to one another and to the land. Dene Oxendene's documentary film project indexes precisely this element of tribalography in its determination to record urban Native stories in Oakland. It depends on a particular place but constantly transcends that specificity in its use of digital technologies. It is shaped by the particularity of Oakland but raises that particularity to a broader level of significance. The result aims to validate urban experience (of which Oakland experience is one version) as just another way of relating to the land—a novel but still tribal context.

Third, tribalography relates to what the stories do: they connect tribal elements to the "past, present, and future milieus." It thus challenges modern Western notions of linear time, opening up dimensions in how we tell and regard stories. Native stories help all of us remember who we were, recognize who we are, and imagine who we will become. In *There There* Tony Loneman first sees the ravages of the past in his present state when he recognizes the effects of fetal alcohol syndrome on his face, reflected in a blank TV screen: "Back home, in front of the TV, before I turned it on, I saw my face in the dark reflection there. It was the first time I saw it. My own face, the way everyone else saw it" (Orange 15). This fusion of the present and the past finds an alternative future, however, when he puts on tribal regalia and again sees himself, again reflected by the TV screen, not as someone to be pitied but as a proud performer:

> I pulled my regalia out and put it on. I went out into the living room and stood in front of the TV. It was the only place in the house I could see my whole body. I shook and lifted a foot. I watched the feathers flutter on the screen. I put my arms out and dipped my shoulders down, then I walked up to the TV. I tightened my chin strap. I looked at my face. The Drome. I didn't see it there. I saw an Indian. I saw a dancer. (26)

As Howe says, the present and future include non-Natives. They also, we argue, include nontraditional technologies and modes of self-discovery. Moreover, as Orange makes clear, these three aspects of tribalography not only are useful for Native self-understanding and self-expression, they also help resist settler colonialism.

Tribalography opens up new ways of understanding and telling stories. Today, there is very little debate about whether Native American literature includes genres of non-Indigenous origin, since appropriating—even just accepting, often under duress—foreign practices and artifacts, like literary genres, is simply how a people and their culture survive and develop. Before colonization, stories existed orally, but as more Indigenous people acquired literacy, they appropriated genres from Euro-American colonizers to tell their own stories. When Howe states that tribalography connects the stories' elements—which is to say tribal elements—to past, present, and future milieus, she adds: "present and future milieus mean non-Indians." Tribalography connects tribal elements to milieus that include a non-Indigenous presence, at least in present and future stories. This is simply the reality Indigenous people face, being surrounded by a settler-colonial world: the tribal elements tribalography pulls together include once-foreign elements. And yet Indigenous people and nations remain distinctive as Indigenous and tribal in a ubiquitous settler world because of "the creative ability of Indian people to gather in many forms of the socio-political colonizing force which beset them and to make these forms meaningful in their own terms" (Ortiz 8). Like digital technologies,

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.581 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tribalography can be at once local and general, permeated with nonlocal elements and yet locally adapted to create community. By reminding us that some elements of Indigenous stories were originally non-Indigenous, tribalography helps us resist the notion that these elements need to be devoid of anything non-Native to be considered tribal. Thus, tribalography invites us to consider the non-Indigenous presence and how Indigenous people have adopted—indigenized—elements that were once foreign but now can be considered tribal.

There There as Tribalography

Perhaps the most salient fact driving *There There*'s power is that the novel is a blisteringly up-to-date form of tribalography, identifying indigeneity as a fact of the present, with a real future. In *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) remarks on how a character in Geary Hobson's *The Last of the Ofos* sees Native Americans everywhere:

> In a settler colonial world that insists upon Indigenous absence, this isn't just a statement of personal observation: it's an affirmation and an invocation alike. . . . In a world that so often wants to see us only as historical artifacts, writing about the now is a powerful refusal to disappear into the symbolic frontier of the settler colonial imaginary. (56–57)

A part of settler colonial logic, as Patrick Wolfe argues, is the elimination of the Native. If colonizers have decided to settle, they need to establish their own native roots. Land acquisition is necessary, as is eradication of the land's Indigenous inhabitants. Though the vanishing Indian is a common trope in the American imagination, *There There* shows just how vibrantly Indigenous people have survived the political and social programs designed to eradicate them.

The novel's setting declares this survival and resistance. The novel tells a contemporary story set in Oakland, whose characters are the children and grandchildren of the termination and relocation eras of federal Indian policy. Their parents and grandparents, the generation immortalized in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, did not simply vanish. Instead, they established new Indigenous communities: "We found one another, started up Indian Centers, brought out our families and powwows, our dances, our songs, our beadwork" (Orange 9). Refusing the imperative to assimilate or die, they adapted, and adapted the city to themselves: "We did not move to cities to die. The sidewalks and streets, the concrete, absorbed our heaviness. The glass, metal, rubber, and wires, the speed, the hurtling masses—the city took us in" (9). Nodding toward this history of the urban Indian present, Orange forcefully repudiates the tendency to view the urban Indian as a sign that assimilation was working. Rejecting the binary opposition of those Natives who would retain their traditions and cultures (rez or traditional) versus those who would assimilate (urban or progressive), Orange insists on complexity: "They used to call us sidewalk Indians. Called us citified, superficial, inauthentic, cultureless refugees, apples. An apple is red on the outside and white on the inside. But what we are is what our ancestors did. How they survived" (10). Orange himself is Cheyenne and Arapaho. His family is from Oklahoma, yet Oklahoma is not the traditional homeland of either tribe, meaning that Orange's own ancestors faced two removals, the first in the nineteenth century when they were moved to what is now Oklahoma, the second in the twentieth century when they were moved to San Francisco. He is both a native of the Bay Area and a transplant whose ancestors reimagined—indigenized—their new environments to create new Indigenous communities and culture as a means of survival.[2] At the same time, displacement produces difference in the midst of continuity. Orange differs from his ancestors just as they

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.581 Published online by Cambridge University Press

differed from their own displaced ancestors, since adapting to the city means changing how Indigenous community is produced: different contexts necessitate different practices. Again, the dialectic of place and placelessness, locality and generality, defines the real contradictions and resolutions produced by individuals and groups on the ground.

This dialectic assumes its most contemporary manifestation in *There There*'s digital tribalography. Characters in the novel repeatedly use technology to generate new tribal elements and to revive old ones. They demonstrate Howe's claim that tribalography fuses tribal elements with formerly alien elements, which allows them to generate new tribalographical stories, stories of both the present and the future, and to remain distinctive as Indigenous in a settler-colonial world. Advanced technology, particularly in telecommunications, is fundamental to this operation, both in *There There* and for Native people more broadly today. "The mushrooming technological advances of the past half-century have changed everything. That's when everything suddenly started looking very bright for the future of the sovereign Indian nations of North America, more than half a century ago" (Birchfield xii).[3] *There There*'s saturation with modes of digital tribalography bears out the truth of D. L. Birchfield's claim: Edwin's four-year quest for a sense of belonging—and to discover the identity of his father—through obsessive Web surfing; Orvil's watching *YouTube* to learn how to dance; Daniel's exploration of multiple identities in online communities, writing e-mails to sustain his sense of connection with his dead brother Manny, 3D printing the guns Octavio uses to rob the powwow, and flying a drone with virtual reality goggles to observe—and intervene in—the action; the use of cell phones to stay connected and to reconnect (or, in the case of Blue's abusive partner, to track); and so on. Over and over, *There There* shows that it is a novel in which the urban Indian experience is inseparable from digital technology, and even the time-honored American tradition of the final shoot-out is enabled by digital technology.

There There's treatment of digital tribalography appears most explicitly in Dene Oxendene's documentary film project. When Dene is first introduced, he is emphatically local, an Oakland native traveling on BART to meet a committee that will decide whether to fund his documentary film project. The project, initially conceived by Dene's late uncle Lucas, proposes to film Native Americans who live in Oakland. Lucas wanted to ask them "to tell me a story about how they ended up in Oakland, or if they were born here," then "what's it been like living in Oakland" (32). Dene wants "to bring something new to the vision of the Native experience as it's seen on the screen," claiming that "we haven't seen the Urban Indian story" (40). Crucially, Dene does not intend to record the Oakland Indian story, but the urban Indian story. Though he is local, the funding is local, and his interview subjects are local, his aim is expansive. It is anchored in an idea of the urban, but it is not limited to any particular city. Locality is necessary but not sufficient; it provides the conditions of possibility, but only so that they can be transcended in the name of a more expansive notion of tribal identity.

Dene explores tribal identity by following his uncle's advice to try out a nontraditional form of storytelling, a new mode of tribalography. Telling Dene his idea, Uncle Lucas urges him to leave the room once the subjects are in front of the camera, to make it "confessional style so that it's almost like they're telling the story to themselves, or to anyone and everyone behind the lens" (32). Again, specificity and universality appear in a dialectic: the subjects will tell the story to "themselves" and to "anyone and everyone." Dene goes Uncle Lucas one better, describing a fluid process that breaks even the traditional constraints of the oral: "I want to put a camera in front of

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.581 Published online by Cambridge University Press

them, video, audio, I'll transcribe it while they talk if they want, let them write, every kind of story I can collect, let them tell their stories with no one else there, with no direction or manipulation or agenda" (40). By leaving the subjects alone, Dene will minimize intervention between the storyteller and audience. It's a dynamic that diverges from traditional oral storytelling but recognizes that multitudinous stories will require manifold modes of telling. Like Uncle Lucas, Dene understands that the Oakland Indigenous stories are multitudinous and will be told in a variety of ways. The story of any Indigenous community is diverse, but the urban Indian story takes that diversity to a new level, since contemporary urban Indigenous communities comprise different Native people from different homelands.

Dene's innovation on his uncle's vision begins with digital technology: he advertises for interview subjects on *Facebook*, which is how he meets Orvil Red Feather. *Facebook* practically defines the placelessness of Internet community, even as it also enables highly specific, sometimes-local groupings to form. Using *Facebook* as a launchpad, Dene describes his project to Orvil precisely in terms of the dialectic between locality and generality that practically defines, or redefines, tribalography: "I'm here to collect stories in order to have them available online for people from our community and communities like ours to hear and see. When you hear stories from people like you, you feel less alone. When you feel less alone, and like you have a community of people behind you, alongside you, I believe you can live a better life" (122–23). There's a lot packed in here. "Our community" is presumed to exist, as are other "communities like ours," and a slippery use of "you" identifies Orvil as the teller and hearer of stories, a particular person and a type of person, someone presumed to feel alone and yet able to produce community precisely by recording his experience of aloneness, all in the name of "a better life," a noble objective that nonetheless assumes urban Native experience to be unsatisfactory. At every turn, Dene articulates a dialectic of individuality and community, place and placelessness, specificity and generality.

Crucially, recording these stories is not Dene's final goal. His quest to create community transcends the local community whose stories Dene will collect not by amalgamating the myriad stories of Oakland's Natives into a heterogeneous but unifying tribalography but by placing the project online so it is available to anyone with access to the Internet. It flirts with digital technology's potential to be "alienating when used to selfish ends" but ultimately affirms its parallel capacity to "make possible a wide range of alliances and exchanges across time and space" (Justice 65). Dene thus joins the ranks of "Indigenous writers [who] have sought to rebuild, reassert, reclaim, and reestablish connections and relationships that return us to ourselves, our lands, and our communities" (65). Dene's project represents more than Natives using social media and a camera. Because of his purpose in using it, Dene indigenizes new technology, expanding what counts as tribal elements and asserting an evolving sense of being Indigenous. The project seeks an undefined, potentially limitless, relevance by adopting—indigenizing—digital media (camera, social media, Web sites) as tribal elements.

Orange advances our imagination of Indigenous people, particularly the urban Indian, resisting the vanishing Indian trope by insisting that Indigenous people evolve beyond the common and seemingly authentic image of Native Americans, one of buckskin, feathers, and beads. An Indian using a bow and arrow is authentic; one using a digital camera to shoot video to post online is not. Orange's urban Indians resemble Gerald Vizenor's postindian, and Dene's indigenization of *Facebook*, digital cameras, and the Internet becomes a late-breaking act of survivance: "The postindian arises from the earlier inven-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.581 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tions of the tribes only to contravene the absence of the real with theatrical performances; the theater of the tribal consciousness is the recreation of the real, not the absence of the real in the simulation of dominance" (Vizenor 5). Dene's use of digital technology resists the static images of the so-called authentic Indian, these "earlier inventions of the tribes," and installs in their place a contemporary vision of indigeneity. Whereas the imagined Indian described by Vizenor lacks a real referent, Dene's objective—to create community—helps re-create the tribal real. It's a tribal real that is authentic precisely in its renovation of traditional modes of tribalography, in its illustration that tribalography has always been fluid, adaptive, and productive. In *There There* digital technologies enable tribalographies of the immediate present and imminent future, shot through with recent and long pasts both tribal and settler-colonial. It is itself tribalography and showcases tribalography's potential as a critical methodology.

Collaborative Tribalography

Howe's definition makes clear that tribalography is multidimensional. It includes "novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, history." As our analysis of *There There* suggests, it extends to earbuds, drones, VR goggles, oral histories, cell phones, *YouTube* videos, and video games. We think it also includes critical analysis, rhetoric, literary study, cultural critique, history, and theory. All are further means by which tribalography pulls "all the elements together of the storyteller's tribe, meaning the people, the land, and multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieus," Indians and non-Indians. Howe names a single "storyteller," but we began the process of writing this essay by asking, How might tribalography change if we thought in terms of collaboration? And what if collaborators came not just from different tribes, but from either side of the settler-Native divide? How might Howe's inclusion of non-Indians inform the ongoing project of tribalography for Indigenous people? How might it drive settlers to retell their own stories about Indigenous people and—crucially—about themselves?

Seeking answers to these questions, we gambled and simply started working without any predetermined notion of where things would end up. We intuited that it was important for Native and non-Native scholars to collaborate, but not necessarily what would come of our attempt. Appropriately, our practice was digitally mediated from the outset; we have in fact never met in person. Living thousands of miles apart, we started with e-mail and then Skyped, shared documents online, left comments, and gradually evolved our essay. Through this process, we navigated sometimes difficult questions of identity, politics, objectives and priorities, histories and contexts: scholarly, personal, national, tribal, settler-colonial, affective. And, while we had distinct approaches and ideas about the novel, we continually sought convergence. Collaborating in virtual spaces, we stayed attuned to their power to enable new kinds of stories, new modes of tribalography; we found ourselves trying to perform some of them.

We took heart from Howe's insistence that tribalography is anything but a simplistic utopian vision of creation and possibility. Tribalography's concern with the "past, present, and future" means that it includes the legacies of violence, genocide, displacement, cruelty, substance abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, enforced forgetting, and destroyed communities that frame both *There There* and our contemporary political reality. They season tribalography's possibilities but do not determine them—the future remains open. We are likewise inspired by Joseph Bauerkemper's insistence that "tribalography imagines and remembers otherwise, moving beyond mere critique to underscore and to creatively fuel the ongoing transformations constitutive

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.581 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the processes of decolonization" (7). Imagination and memory are twins, working together to create a better future beyond the force of critique. Tribalography thinks about resistance as simultaneously critical and creative. It remains the prerogative of Indigenous people and must be placed in the service of restoration, justice, resilience, and reconciliation (each one a vexed, fraught, and contested term). At the same time, it depends on both Native and non-Native people for its realization: collaboration is in its DNA. In our view, collaboration is vital precisely because though we must perhaps begin with critique and commemoration, we prefer not to end up there. It's time for new stories as well.

Notes

1. These three aspects are by no means exhaustive or prescriptive.

2. Lyons's concept of the "x-mark"—a conditional, perhaps coerced, acceptance of the conditions of settler coloniality—is pertinent here.

3. See also Duarte's notion of "network sovereignty."

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.3.581 Published online by Cambridge University Press