

Lesson Plans and Resources for *There There* by Tommy Orange

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 - “How to Talk to Each Other When There’s So Little Common Ground” by Tommy Orange
 - Book Review from The New York Times
 - Book Review from Tribes.org
 - Interview with Tommy Orange from Powell’s Book Blog

These resources are all available, both separately and together, at www.freelibrary.org/onebook

Please send any comments or feedback about these resources to Larissa.Pahomov@gmail.com.

OVERVIEW AND ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

The materials in this unit plan are meant to be flexible and easy to adapt to your own classroom. Each chapter has discussion questions provided in a later section.

Through reading the book and completing any of the suggested activities, students can achieve any number of the following understandings:

- A person's identity does not form automatically – it must be cultivated.
- Trauma is intergenerational -- hardship is often passed down through families.
- A physical place can both define and destroy an individual.

Students should be introduced to the following key questions as they begin reading. They can be discussed both in universal terms and in relation to specific characters in the book:

Universal

- *How has your family cultivated your identity? How have you cultivated it yourself?*
- *What trauma has impacted your family? How have you had to deal with what happened to older generations*
- *How does Philadelphia define you? How does Philadelphia hold you back?*

Book-Specific

- *What are Orvil, Edwin, Blue, and others looking for as they explore their Indian identities?*
- *How are the younger generations of characters impacted by the decisions of their elders?*
- *How does Oakland define these characters? How does Philadelphia hold you back?*

Many of the reader response questions and suggested projects relate to these essential questions, and they can be looped back to frequently.

IN-CLASS INTRODUCTION

This lesson is designed to provide students with a one-class introduction to the book. The lesson can be used to start off a class reading of the text, or to encourage them to read it independently.

As a recipient of One Book resources, the Free Library requires that you devote one class period to introducing *There There* to students, either using this lesson or your own plan.

Introduction

1. Have students take five minutes to answer the following prompt on paper:

What do you know about Indians – aka Native Americans -- in the United States today?

2. Have students share their answers with the class, explaining both what they know and where they got that information. (If students are uncertain, make it comfortable to share their uncertainty. If students are feeling certain about information that is untrue or somehow insulting, ask them to examine their information source.)

If there are students of Indian heritage in the class, invite – but do NOT require – them to weigh in with their own experiences.

3. Show a copy of the novel and introduce the author, Tommy Orange, through this seven-minute video. While watching, keep track of how Orange's life and experiences overlap with your original list.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXCbmuIFD8M>

Discuss: Does Orange match what you think of Indians today? Where does his experience seem similar or different from yours as a resident of a large city?

4. Distribute copies of the novel. Turn to **page 8** and read the sections “Hard, Fast” and “Urbanity.”

Start with the line that ends the section: “Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere.”

Continue the discussion from the video – how does this compare and contrast with your understanding of living in a city? How about your own family's personal history with Philadelphia?

Extension: Have students split into small groups and explore one of the websites in the “Oakland” section of the online resources. Report back about how this information has deepened their understanding of contemporary Indian life in California.

Correlation to Common Core Standards for Grades 11-12

INTRODUCTION LESSON + DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reading Standards for Literature

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
2. Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
10. By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11–CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently

Speaking and Listening Standards

1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

VOCABULARY

Reading Standards for Literature

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

Language Standards

4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 11–12 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.
6. Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

ANALYTICAL + CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Writing Standards

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences
4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.)
5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1–3 up to and including grades 11–12 on page 54.)
9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

READER RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Prologue – pages 3-11

What historical episodes are shared in this chapter? How do you think these stories might preview what will happen in the book?

Who do you think is narrating this section? What role does that voice play in the novel?

Tony Loneman – pages 15-26

What is the Drome, and how has it impacted Tony's life?

What does Tony agree to do for Octavio and his friends? Why do you think he agrees to this?

What does Tony see in the mirror at the end of the chapter? Why do you think he doesn't dance at powwows anymore?

Dene Oxendene – pages 27-44

What does Dene like about tagging? What's his tag, and why do you think he chose this one?

How does Dene's uncle Lucas impact his life? Does he offer creative inspiration, or is he a burden to the family, or both?

Why is Dene inspired by Getrude Stein's proclamation about Oakland, that "there is no there there?" How does he relate her experience to that of Native people in Oakland?

What kind of project is Dene proposing to the grant board? How do they react?

Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield – pages 45-61

Why do Opal, her sister Jacquie, and her mother go to Alcatraz? What do they find there?

What does Two Shoes have to say about Indians and the way they are treated? Why do you think Opal's teddy bear talks to her in this way?

What choices do Opal and Jacquie have to make at the end of the chapter? Which direction do you think each sister wants to go in, and why?

Why do you think Opal gets to tell her story in the first person ("I"), while other characters are in the third person?

Edwin Black – pages 64-78

Why does Edwin want to contact his father? How does he react when he finds him, and why do you think he responds in this way?

When Edwin talks to his mother, why does he feel like “something in me reached back to remember all that I’d once hoped I’d be, and placed it next to the feeling of who I am now” (75). What were his aspirations?

Why does Edwin feel “something like hope” by the end of the chapter?

Bill Davis – pages 81-87

What does Bill think of Edwin? Do you agree with any of his take on young people?

Why is Bill so threatened by the drone at the end of the chapter?

Calvin Johnson – pages 88-97

Why is Calvin hiding out at his sister Maggie’s house?

Maggie says that “being bipolar is like having an ax to grind with an ax you need to split the wood to keep you warm in a cold dark forest you might eventually realize you’ll never make your way out of” (88). What do you think she means by this description?

When Charles shows up, what does he demand from Calvin, and where do they go next?

Why does Octavio embrace Charles at the end of their drinking session, and why doesn’t Charles like it?

Jacquie Red Feather – pages 98 - 117

At the start of the chapter, Jacquie has been ten days sober, “and ten days is the same as a year when you want to drink all the time” (99). What does this mean?

What is the nature of Jacquie’s relationship with her sister Opal, now that they are both adults?

What does Jacquie say when she runs into Harvey at a meeting? What does he say in response, and what offer does he make her? Why do you think that he does this?

Orvil Red Feather – pages 118-133

Why does Orvil want to learn about being indian, and why do you think his grandmother Opal refuses to teach him?

Why do the boys keep their plan to go to the powwow from their grandmother?

What’s the significance of the spider legs in Orvil’s leg?

Interlude – Part 3 – pages 134 – 155

The four subsections of the interlude are titled “Powows,” “Blood,” “Last Names,” and “Apparent Death.” How do these sections cover what’s already happened? What do you think they foreshadow about the rest of the book?

Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield – pages 160 – 170

What happened to Opal when she was around the same age as Orvil?

Why did Opal and Jacquie end up going their separate ways?

What does it mean when ti says “Opal got big to avoid shrinking” (170)?

Octavio Gomez – pages 171-186

Why does Octavio think he feels sick? Why does Fina think he’s sick, and what does she do to make him better?

What is Octavio’s problem with his uncle Sixto? How does he confront him about this?

Daniel Gonzalez – pages 187 - 196

Daniel says that “Manny’s not here or there. He’s in the middle of the middle, where you can only be when you can’t be anywhere.” What does he mean about his brother?

Why is Octavio so affected by Manny’s death? Do you think that Octavio is a benefit to or a harm to Daniel and his mother?

Why does Daniel’s mother cry and say she’s sorry when she finds the envelope of cash?

Blue – pages 197 – 207

Why does Blue leave her home and adopted family in Oakland hills? Why does she move to Oklahoma, and why does she marry Paul?

After Paul starts hitting her, what does Blue mean when she says both that “I stayed and kept staying” and also that “I’d been gone since that first time he laid hands on me?” (199).

What advice does Geraldine give Blue in the car on the way to the Greyhound bus station? Do you think Geraldine’s perspective is helpful to Blue?

Thomas Frank – pages 208 – 225

How does Thomas get to “the State,” and why does he like that condition?

Why is Thomas fired from his job? Do you think this was fair?

The chapter for Thomas Frank is the only one written in the second person, making “you” the character as you read. Why do you think the author made this choice?

Part Four – Powwow

Why are the prizes in gift cards instead of cash?

How do each of the group of thieves – Tony, Calvin, Octavio, and, Charles, and Carlos – feel about what they’re planning to do?

Why do you think the group turns against each other in the end?

Do you think Orvil Red Feather survives the shooting? Why don’t you think that the book reveals whether he survives or not?

What does Blue figure out about Harvey and Jacquie Red Feather by the end of this section? What questions remain unanswered for her?

Why end the book with Tony Loneman? Do you think his death is tragic or beautiful, or both?

Reading Group Guide Questions ([provided by the publisher](#))

1. The prologue of *There There* provides a historical overview of how Native populations were systematically stripped of their identity, their rights, their land, and, in some cases, their very existence by colonialist forces in America. How did reading this section make you feel? How does the prologue set the tone for the reader? Discuss the use of the Indian head as iconography. How does this relate to the erasure of Native identity in American culture?
2. Discuss the development of the “Urban Indian” identity and ownership of that label. How does it relate to the push for assimilation by the United States government? How do the characters in *There There* navigate this modern form of identity alongside their ancestral roots?
3. Consider the following statement from page 9: “We stayed because the city sounds like a war, and you can’t leave a war once you’ve been, you can only keep it at bay.” In what ways does the historical precedent for violent removal of Native populations filter into the modern era? How does violence—both internal and external—appear throughout the narrative?
4. On page 7, Orange states: “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.” Discuss this statement in relation to how Native populations have been defined in popular culture. How do the characters in *There There* resist the simplification and flattening of their cultural identity? Relate the idea of preserving cultural identity to Dene Oxendene’s storytelling mission.
5. Tony Loneman’s perspective both opens and closes *There There*. Why do you think Orange made this choice for the narrative? What does Loneman’s perspective reveal about the “Urban Indian” identity? About the landscape of Oakland?
6. When readers are first introduced to Dene Oxendene, we learn of his impulse to tag various spots around the city. How did you interpret this act? How does graffiti culture work to recontextualize public spaces?
7. Discuss the interaction between Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield and Two Shoes that occurs on pages 50–52. How does Opal view Two Shoes’s “Indianness”? What is the import of the Teddy Roosevelt anecdote that he shares with her? How does this relate to the overall theme of narrative and authenticity that occurs throughout *There There*?
8. Describe the resettlement efforts at Alcatraz. What are the goals for inhabiting this land? What vision does Opal and Jacquie’s mother have for her family in moving to Alcatraz?
9. On page 58, Opal’s mother tells her that she needs to honor her people “by living right, by telling our stories. [That] the world was made of stories, nothing else, and stories about stories.” How does this emphasis on storytelling function throughout *There There*? Consider the relationship between storytelling and power. How does storytelling allow for diverse narratives to emerge? What is the relationship between storytelling and historical memory?
10. On page 77, Edwin Black asserts, “The problem with Indigenous art in general is that it’s stuck in the past.” How does the tension between modernity and tradition emerge throughout the narrative? Which characters seek to find a balance between honoring the past and looking toward the future? When is the attempt to do so successful?

11. Discuss the generational attitudes toward spirituality in the Native community in *There There*. Which characters embrace their elders' spiritual practices? Who doubts the efficacy of those efforts? How did you interpret the incident of Orvil and the spider legs?
12. How is the city of Oakland characterized in the novel? How does the city's gentrification affect the novel's characters? Their attitudes toward home and stability?
13. How is femininity depicted in *There There*? What roles do the female characters assume in their community? Within their families?
14. Discuss Orvil's choice to participate in the powwow. What attracts him to the event? Why does Opal initially reject his interest in "Indianness"? How do his brothers react to it?
15. Discuss the Interlude that occurs on pages 134–41. What is the import of this section? How does it provide key contextual information for the Big Oakland PowWow that occurs at the end of the novel? What is the significance of this event and others like it for the Native community?
16. Examine the structure of *There There*. Why do you think Orange chose to present his narrative using different voices and different perspectives? How do the interlude and the prologue help to bolster the themes of the narrative? What was the most surprising element of the novel to you? What was its moment of greatest impact?

To the Powwow

Name: _____

Each character has their reasons for going to the powwow, and what this reveals about their character. Include page numbers!

Character Name **Reasons for attending Powwow** **What does this reveal about them?**

Character Name	Reasons for attending Powwow	What does this reveal about them?

Indian Identity

Name: _____

Each character in the novel has a unique attitude towards their Indian identity – commentary that comes out either through their own dialogue or the narrator. Collect these moments of commentary and analyze.

**Character + Their Attitudes towards
being Indian (+ page #)**

Analysis: What does this show about the character?

SUGGESTED ANALYTICAL ASSESSMENTS

These prompts could be used for traditional essay assignments, or for responses across a variety of mediums (live presentation, digital stories via Powerpoint or video, etc.)

1. The New York Times Review of “There There” says the following

Nothing in Orange’s world is simple, least of all his characters and his sense of the relationship between history and the present.

How do the present-day stories of the characters relate to the historical references made in the prologue and interlude chapters? Pick one of the subsections in these interstitial chapters (“Indian Head,” “Blood” etc.) and analyze its connections to the rest of the book.

2. The novel features several branches of interconnected and often broken families. Pick two characters who are related by blood and explore their connection. According to the novel, what caused their relationship to develop to its current state? Support your claim with direct evidence from the text.
3. In an essay for Time Magazine, Orange writes the following:

I think reading books is a good place to start thinking about and understanding people’s stories you aren’t familiar with, outside your comfort zone and experience. A novel will ask you to walk in a character’s shoes, and this can build empathy.

How did Orange’s book help you build empathy for his characters, or not? Track one of them specifically and analyze how their presentation helped you connect with them.

4. In his chapter, Orvil Red Feather Googles the question “What does it mean to be a real Indian?” He is just one of several characters who grapples with what it means to be Native American. What answer(s) do you think the book provides to this question? Support your claim with evidence from the text.

SUGGESTED CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

1. At the end of the novel, several characters have lost their lives, and others are facing the aftermath of the shooting. Select one of the characters affected and write an additional chapter for the book, set five or ten years into the future. What do they have to say about that day later in their life? What other issues or mysteries have been resolved for them?
2. “There There” follows several characters leading up to one central tragic moment: the powwow. When have you experienced a dramatic or challenging moment? Write an essay explaining what happened in the hours or days leading up to that experience.
3. At the start of the Thomas Frank chapter, several sentences begin with the phrase “before you were born.” Write a short narration about yourself using the same framework. Before you were born, what happened? Where did your parents live, what were they doing, what did they think about you? This does not have to involve an interview with them – be creative.

4. In an essay for Time Magazine, Orange writes the following:

I think reading books is a good place to start thinking about and understanding people’s stories you aren’t familiar with, outside your comfort zone and experience. A novel will ask you to walk in a character’s shoes, and this can build empathy.

Who do you think is overlooked in Philadelphia? What kinds of characters from our own city deserve empathy? Create a set of descriptions of who you think deserves to be in a “There There” set in Philadelphia.

5. In his interview with Powell’s books (included in print resources) Orange says that he finds himself “caught between” his white and native identities: “You kind of are both and neither, because you’re not enough, not white enough on the white side and not Native enough on the Native side.” What identities do you find yourself caught between in your life, and why?

ONLINE RESOURCES

AUTHOR PROFILES

AUDIO

Interview with Spokane Public Radio

<https://www.spokanepublicradio.org/post/interview-tommy-orange>

VIDEO

Tommy Orange on PBS News Hour

A quick interview introduction to the author.

<https://www.pbs.org/video/tommy-orange-1532649629/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXCbmuIFD8M>

Tommy Orange reads “There There”

The author reads an excerpt from his novel.

<https://www.pbs.org/video/there-there-a-reading-by-tommy-orange-jyudml/>

OAKLAND

Giving and Underrepresented Community and City a Place in Literature

An interview with Tommy Orange specifically about his history with and writing of Oakland, the city where he lived for a decade before publishing “There There.”

<https://www.citylab.com/life/2018/09/tommy-orange-there-there-oakland/569866/>

In Oakland, Native American Traditions just a Drumbeat Away

A slice of life description of the Intertribal Friendship house and powwow culture in Oakland. Includes a slideshow of photographs.

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/thetake/article/In-Oakland-Native-American-traditions-just-a-8006468.php>

A Native Land: Oakland Pre 1852

A summary of the phases of human occupation of the land now known as Oakland, starting with the Ohlone tribe and then the Spanish settlers.

<https://oaklandplanninghistory.weebly.com/early-history.html>

How to Talk to Each Other When There's Little Common Ground

Tommy Orange – October 25th, 2018

<https://time.com/5434396/tommy-orange-novels-conversations/>

During my book tour this summer, I was asked more questions about my life and Native people than I'd ever thought possible. Most were thoughtful, but occasionally I got questions so ignorant, they were offensive. A white woman asked me whether if she thinks she was a Native American in a past life, is it O.K. to practice our ceremonies? I told the woman no, and said Native ceremonies come from Native experience and are there for us to heal, to understand Native experience. I saw her after the reading, and it seemed she wanted to talk, but she didn't want to talk enough to wait more than five minutes for me to finish my conversation.

Ignorant questions are frustrating to people of color because in movies as well as in literature, the white male is the default representation. This country has been ruled by white men and made to benefit white people above all else since its inception. It is deeply damaging to the psyches of oppressed communities who suffer because of this history to hear lies about what this country means and has meant. It's not even agreed upon that this country's origins are steeped in slave labor, genocidal bloodshed and the taking of land from a people, even though these are facts most if not all historians would agree are facts. The onus is always on us, we the oppressed, to challenge a system that wants to conserve its traditions and traditional values. We come to understand that if we want to be included in the American conversation, we have to work twice as hard while being told that we're lazy, or that the government gives us money, and then told that we're angry if we bring up the problem of racism in public spaces or when it doesn't feel like the right time. So we keep putting off these conversations, or we're having them on the Internet, where it's too easy to be anonymous and therefore cruel and selfish. It's like car drivers behaving dangerously on the road, simply because they're hidden behind metal, glass and distance. In our more personal online spaces we fill our feeds exclusively with people we agree with. If there is conflict below a post or tweet it never feels like a conversation—only like road rage.

So if we can't seem to find ways to talk in person, or online, when and where and how do we talk? I think a novel is a kind of conversation. Both the writer and the reader bring their experience to the page. The reader's experiences and ideas can be reshaped, challenged, changed. I know, I'm a writer, so of course I think the answer is books, but I think reading books is a good place to start thinking about and understanding people's stories you aren't familiar with, outside your comfort zone and experience. A novel will ask you to walk in a character's shoes, and this can build empathy. Without empathy we are lost. I tend to read mostly novels and have come to understand the world better through the lens of novels. When someone else's world is different from our own, we see how we are the same. We not only become more empathetic to their experience but we see how we are equal. We also see how much upper-middle-class white male writing has been the only thing taught in schools, the only experience for so long—most of the time anyway. I think institutional change can come by teaching women, teaching writers of color. We will all be better for it. I like that novels ask us without seeming to ask us to think about other people, to understand the many-storied landscape of this country we live and die in—with or without truly knowing or understanding them.

New York Times Review – There There // Colm Toibin, June 19 2018

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/19/books/review/tommy-orange-there-there.html>

In George R. Stewart's "Names on the Land: A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States," there is a single mention of Oakland, Calif.: "Across the bay from San Francisco was a stretch of flat land scattered with magnificent California live oaks. In Mexican times it had been known as Encinal del Temescal, 'oak-grove of the sweat-house.' The Americans who planned a town there may not have known Spanish, but they could see the trees. In simple description they called it Oakland."

In Tommy Orange's "There There," an ambitious meditation on identity and its broken alternatives, on myth filtered through the lens of time and poverty and urban life, on tradition all the more pressing because of its fragility, it is as if he seeks to reconfigure Oakland as a locus of desire and dreams, to remake the city in the likeness of his large and fascinating set of characters.

The title of his book comes from Gertrude Stein — who, one of the book's characters discovers, "found that she was talking about how the place where she'd grown up in Oakland had changed so much, that so much development had happened there, that the there of her childhood, the there there, was gone, there was no there there anymore."

In this big, noisy novel filled with absences, stray clues, odd traces, Orange has managed to fix his attention fiercely on Oakland as a place of pure stability. "I feel bad sometimes even saying I'm Native," one of the characters says. "Mostly I just feel I'm from Oakland." Toward the end of the book one of the characters "is the fire and the dance and the night," but in the next sentence "he's standing in front of a BART map."

Orange makes Oakland into a "there" that becomes all the more concretely, emphatically and fully so in a novel that deals, in tones that are sweeping and subtle, large-gestured and nuanced, with what the notion of belonging means for Native Americans.

In an eloquent prologue, Orange writes of the relationship between Native Americans and the city: "Plenty of us came by choice, to start over, or to make money, or for a new experience. Some of us came to cities to escape the reservation. ... The quiet of the reservation, the side-of-the-highway towns, rural communities, that kind of silence just makes the sound of your brain on fire that much more pronounced."

The idea of unsettlement and ambiguity, of being caught between two worlds, of living a life that is disfigured by loss and the memory of loss, but also by confusion, distraction and unease, impels some of the characters, and allows the sound of the brain on fire to become dense with dissonance. Orange's characters are, however, also nourished by the ordinary possibilities of the present, by common desires and feelings. This mixture gives their experience, when it is put under pressure, depth and a sort of richness.

Orange is fully alert to the possibilities that the pure lack of nostalgia, which he rigorously insists on, will offer his novel. He relishes the paradoxes his characters inhabit and embody. "We are the memories we don't remember," he writes. "We know the sound of the freeway better than we do rivers."

Jacquie Red Feather, when she has checked into a hotel after a flight, for example, ponders on the meaning of home, remembers how her mother spoke about "getting back home to Oklahoma. But home for Jacquie and her sister was a locked station wagon in an empty parking lot. Home was a long ride on a bus. Home was the three of them anywhere safe for the night."

Orange uses the word “Indianing” as though it were a choice, and something you have to be grown up to do, “like drinking or driving or smoking or voting.” His character Orvil Red Feather discovers the word “pretendian” online, and later invokes the idea of “Indians dressed up as Indians.”

Orvil looks in the bedroom mirror “with his regalia on all wrong. It isn’t backward, and actually he didn’t know what he did wrong, but it’s off. He moves in front of the mirror and his feathers shake. He catches the hesitation, the worry in his eyes, there in the mirror.” He knows that the woman who cares for him would disapprove if she saw him. He is deeply unsure of himself: “He’s waiting for something true to appear before him — about him. It’s important that he dress like an Indian, dance like an Indian, even if it is an act, even if he feels like a fraud the whole time, because the only way to be Indian in this world is to look and act like an Indian.”

This idea of inauthenticity adds to the delicate drama of the book, makes Orvil’s sense that he is “part of something” all the more poignant and credible, all the more dramatic and engaging.

No one in the novel is fully sure how to look or act, how to live or be. It is as though Orange has taken Orvil’s broken, shadowy heritage and made it not only persistent and pressing, but also offers it as a way of enriching Orvil as a character, someone more fully present and “there” because of the very battle going on in his being between absences and a shivering trace of something that comes sharply from the past.

Orvil, like most of the characters here, is what Orange calls in an interlude “a present-tense” person. And in this present tense, no one is pure. One of the characters ponders on the mixture of conquered and conquering in his own actual body: “You’re from a people who took and took and took and took. And from a people taken. You were both and neither. When you took baths, you’d stare at your brown arms against your white legs in the water and wonder what they were doing together on the same body, in the same bathtub.”

Within the cacophony of voices in this book and the many short chapters each told from the perspective of one of the characters, the structure is not only dictated by the sense of identity these characters share, but by the fact that many of them will meet at a great powwow to be held in Oakland. Thus they are all, as in Chaucer, pilgrims on their way to a shrine, or, as in Faulkner’s “As I Lay Dying,” an extended family crossing the landscape.

Each wants something different as he or she travels to the powwow, from the high-minded to the poignant to the confused to the criminal.

The novel, then, is their picaresque journey, allowing for moments of pure soaring beauty to hit against the most mundane, for a sense of timelessness to be placed right beside a cleareyed version of the here and now, for a sense of vast dispossession to live beside day-to-day misery and poverty. Nothing in Orange’s world is simple, least of all his characters and his sense of the relationship between history and the present. Instead, a great deal is subtle and uncertain in this original and complex novel.

A review of “There There” by Krystyna Printup (Tuscarora, Turtle Clan)

<https://www.tribes.org/web/2018/7/2/native-americanor-indianor-whatever-you-call-us-there-there-book-review>

The first time I revealed in a public place that I was Native (American) I was in 4th grade. It was part of the usual Elementary multicultural day celebration and I was asked to stand in front of the class and present my culture. I spoke simply and stated “I am an American Indian” and presented corn bread as my potluck contribution (as if corn bread is some national identifying Native food.) Before I could sit back down in my seat I was heckled at from a child across the room: “INDIANS ARE EXTINCT -- LIKE THE DINOSAURS! You’re a liar!” It was the first time I questioned my identity, *am I a liar? Am I not Native? What does it mean to be an American Indian?*

Tommy Orange’s debut novel “There There” feels like a reflection of my own childhood and presents a well needed dialogue on the urban Indigenous identity. Orange, an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes of Oklahoma, tackles Native stereotypes and rewrites what it means to be Native American raised *by a city*. In his prologue Orange laments, “They used to call us sidewalk Indians. Called us citified, superficial, inauthentic, cultureless refuges, apples. An apple is red on the outside and white on the inside.” He masterfully captures the true internal dialogue of the plight of the Urban Indian on the journey to find inclusion amongst a whitewashed America.

Orange starts his novel with a grand entry. The prologue, actually an essay, acts as a little history lesson on the cruelty and historical portrayal of the American Indian. You begin “There There” with an understanding that non Native Americans and American Indians share an entangled (really messed up) history. You aren't given much time to digest these horrors and truths before Orange dives you right into the heart of his first character.

The plot slowly weaves twelve main characters of whom share the single goal of reaching the Big Oakland Powwow. Orange presents to the reader, a variety of personalities and erases the monolithic idea of 'the Native' in historical and past tense. He gives each character their own voice while simultaneously updating the archaic persona of who Native people are in the modern world. The tone of Orange’s storytelling feels autobiographical - despite being a work of fiction. Each character's role is gracefully portrayed, while building anticipation by foreshadowing an explosive ending to the novel.

These characters, many of whom are related, are working their way towards the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum. The standout main characters are Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield, a postal worker who cares for her sister’s three grandsons, and is traveling to watch her nephew Orvil perform for the first time at the Powwow. Orvil Red Feather, a 'self-taught *Indian*' who's absorbed his culture mainly by “...watching hours and hours of powwow footage, documentaries on YouTube, [and] by reading all that there was to read on sites like Wikipedia, PowWows.com, and Indian Country Today...”. Orvil is constantly seeking answer to the ever confounding personal question: “What does it mean to be a real Indian?” Dene Oxendene, a student who is on a similar mission and is documenting his findings on the question “What does Indian mean to you?” -- while slowly putting his life together after his uncle’s death. With Jacquie Red Feather, her story is told from the perspective of a substance abuse counselor who is on her way to meet her three grandsons for the first time in the wake of her teenage daughter’s suicide. To build a climactic ending the stories of the novel's characters parallel that of Daniel Gonzales, who has created plastic 3-D printed guns and plans to rob the event to repay drug debts.

The story flips back and forth following the perspectives and voices of the cast, and Orange’s rhythmic prose feels musical, as if it pays homage to a powwow drum beat.

Bum bum bum,

Bum bum,

Bum

Bum.

Although the flow of the book may not be intentionally musical it's something that Orange has naturally embedded in him. The sound and soul of Native culture is apart of his DNA, and it clearly shines through every word of the book. Music and rhythm play an important role and the book's title might be a nod to the song of the same title by Radiohead. Highlighting the hook that Thom Yorke wails: "Just 'cause you feel doesn't mean it's there."

"There There" is not a western about cowboys and Indians. We are not cooking fry bread or beading regalia while riding horses with our long flowing feathered braids bouncing within the woods. "There There" is a powwow in itself, a gathering of nations, of tribes, of ideas; a celebration (or in this case tragedy.) Orange has successfully presented to us a new voice for the contemporary Native community and the Urban Native generation. Outlining and sharing a solid perspective of who we are as a people -- and underlining the fact that we are *not* extinct like the dinosaurs, but rather very much alive.

Interview with Tommy Orange – Powell's Books Blog

<https://www.powells.com/post/interviews/powells-interview-tommy-orange-author-of-there-there>

I've spent much of my adult life searching for a Native voice that echoes my own experience as an urban Indian. It was not until I read [There There](#) that I finally found a captivating voice who writes about Native life with both precision and power. The novel's characters capture beautifully the history and truth of being Native in all its nuances, from Dene Oxendene, a documentary filmmaker who honors his uncle's life by capturing the stories of Oakland Natives, to Jacquie Red Feather, a recently sober substance abuse counselor reckoning with her past and returning to her family. Tommy Orange's stunning debut weaves a polyphonic narrative of Native experience, with each character grappling with the hope and heartbreak that comes from hundreds of years of trauma. These voices reach a crescendo at the Big Oakland Powwow in a finale that is both apt and horrifying — much like the untold history of Native Americans. Orange writes surely and resolutely of the Native experience, and he commands the reader's acknowledgment of our history. Powell's is proud to present [There There](#) as our pick for [Indispensable Volume 74](#).

Kate Laubernds: I was so drawn to *There There*. It felt very personal to me, because I'm Blackfeet (Amskapi Pikuni) and Choctaw and grew up in both the Bay Area and Sacramento. Aside from my father and my family on the reservation, I didn't have a lot of exposure to other Natives.

Tommy Orange: Oh wow. Honestly, aside from people from the Oakland community, I don't meet that many Native people who were born and raised in the city, so that's cool to hear. If I hadn't worked at the Indian center in Oakland for eight years, I would have just had my dad and my family in Oklahoma as well.

Kate: I really loved the prologue. It kind of hit me like a rallying cry and felt relevant to my family history, but I can see that it would affect everyone differently. What was your intention in starting the novel this way?

Orange: I feel like, for Native writers, there's a kind of burden to catch the general reader up with what really happened, because history has got it so wrong and still continues to. It feels like you want to get everybody on the same page as where your voice is coming from, and your experience; but at the same time, you're not writing for the general reader.

What I wanted to do was write something that Native people already know about in an interesting and compelling way, so that no matter if you already know the raw information, you still want to read what's there and how it's being put.

Kate: I was discussing with my colleague the Indian head test pattern from broadcast television that you write about in the prologue, and which they really latched on to. It was information that I already knew, but it was delivered in a way that felt very personal. To my coworker, on the other hand, it was an informational but very striking image.

But it's true. When I read some other works by Native authors, it does feel like, *I know this experience*. So it was really refreshing to read something that harnesses that history.

Orange: That's wonderful to hear, because that really was my full intent, to have both things happen — to be able to speak to the Native reader in a personal way, and to the general audience in a way that fills in some, if not holes, then ways of thinking that actively work against Native people and history.

Kate: I found myself identifying with certain details of most of the characters, and I imagine that there are some autobiographical traits in all your characters. Is there one in particular that you most identify with?

Orange: No, I don't think so. I think they're all me in very personal ways, and also totally not me. I could give you a list of details that I pulled straight from my life for every character, but there isn't one particular character that I feel most resembles me.

If you twisted my arm, I guess [I'd say] Dene Oxendene, but only because I got a storytelling project grant and went before a panel. I got that grant two years in a row for a storytelling project that never came to fruition, except for in the novel. They paid me \$10,000 to do it, so I thanked them in the Acknowledgments for giving me money that I only did something fictional with.

Kate: Speaking of Dene, one of the panel judges for his grant application is a more traditional-presenting Indian, and he also seems to be the most critical of Dene's project. I was wondering if you think that the Native community can be just as guilty as non-Natives of judging "Indian-ness"?

Orange: Definitely. My mom is white, so I'm half, and that puts me in a very particular position, caught between... I don't want to say two worlds, because I hate that. It's become such a trope.

I've said this before somewhere else: You kind of are both and neither, because you're not enough, not white enough on the white side and not Native enough on the Native side.

I've gotten a lot of critical glances, remarks, and judgments from Native people who kind of present with that full-blood presentation, and it hurts more when you get it from there than from an innocuous white person asking how Native you are, which has its own problems.

It hurts more when another Native is basically trying to tell you that you don't exist as a part of what they are.

I like what a collective voice can do to create a singular vision.

Kate: I completely identify with that. My mom is also white, but it's interesting having to prove yourself to a community that you half-identify with. This is just who you are.

On a related note, in the novel, Blue and Edwin discuss a short story that Edwin has written, and it's an allegory for the erasure of Natives by whites. After Blue points out the obvious reference, Edwin becomes defensive about whites and his own mother being white.

Orange: I think sometimes people who are both white and Native can get a little overzealous in their language about white people, and want to completely deny the white side.

Blue is almost defending white people, in a sense, telling Edwin, *You don't have to deny or make evil all that whiteness is, just because there is that aspect to it.* He's kind of expressing the nuance of his experience. Edwin was raised by a white mother and doesn't really have a Native background, so he's trying a little bit too hard to

claim the Native side because he lacks it. Do you know what I mean?

There are all these different variations within our community of people striving harder toward that full-blood mentality versus people who use more nuanced language, and people who are super insecure. We have a lot of variation, identity-wise, but I know the Native and white experience and try to speak to that with my characters.

Kate: You chose to feature so many different voices in the urban Indian experience, and I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit more about that.

Orange: I'd known for a while that I wanted to write a polyphonic novel. I think one of the first books that made me want to do it was Colum McCann's [Let the Great World Spin](#), specifically because of the way he braids everyone's stories together and earns the right for it to be a novel, arc-wise. I really appreciated what that felt like as a reader, so before I knew what novel I wanted to write, I knew I wanted to write one like that.

On top of wanting to do it from a writer's standpoint, it was also very personal in the sense that we — Native people — don't see our representation basically anywhere, unless it's negative or stereotyped. But then urban Indians have kind of a double invisibility going on. To really represent [the full spectrum of] that community, it felt like the right and smart way to do it.

Kate: I really enjoyed it. Each character is given their own story to tell that explores many urban Indian experiences, but they all contribute to the overarching story.

Orange: Thank you.

Kate: I watched your craft talk at Institute of American Indian Arts, and you mentioned working with Native youth. I was wondering if that's what inspired many of the younger characters.

Orange: The Native youth that I worked with... it was a different kind of inspiration. A year after I started writing the book, we were part of this Native suicide prevention grant. We did a lot of cool things. One of the things is we took the kids to Alcatraz. We had elders who were there to tell their stories.

Then, at the end of that year, we went to Cal Berkeley and they toured the campus. We ended it with an author reading, and I was asked to do something even though I was definitely not an author at that point. It was just known that I write. I read something from that first year of writing, some of which is still in the actual novel — some made it through.

The youth response — and these youth were not easy to impress, or they didn't react easily — to that reading really made me want to move forward with writing the novel.

I wasn't thinking specifically of the youth when I wrote any of the characters; they all felt like they came from somewhere else. But I was definitely inspired in the sense that the youth believed in something that I did, and I wanted to write something that would connect with them.

Kate: That's when you first started working on the novel?

Orange: I thought of the idea at the end of 2010. I had just found out that I was having a son. I didn't start writing it until basically about a year after that, in 2012. I handed my final manuscript to my agent at the end of 2016 and sold it in 2017, and then went through the editing process for the rest of 2017. It's been about five or six years.

Urban Indians have kind of a double invisibility going on.

Kate: At what point in that process were you going to the MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts?

Orange: I started there in 2014, so I was already a couple of years into writing the novel, and I finished there in 2016.

Kate: How did attending IAIA help you with the novel?

Orange: I think because I'm self-taught and so late in coming to writing, I had some pretty basic gaps in my technique and craft. I didn't have certain vocabulary. I was writing out of instinct. I honed and developed a lot more basic technique in the program. The community in the program was very influential in making me feel like I was a part of something and maybe more inspired and able to believe in what I was doing.

Kate: I imagine having that camaraderie and support from your own community would be very important.

A lot of popular Native art and writing for the non-Native gaze conveys a return to the land, and in many ways this feels lost or inauthentic to a lot of urban Indians. In your prologue, you write, "Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere." How do you see your characters reclaiming what it means to be Native?

Orange: I think it's about trying to move to a place of accepting or feeling like you belong exactly where you are, and that happens to be Oakland. They're trying to be Native as they are, and not as something removed from them.

It's something that I've been working with for a while, growing up in the city, being able to see cities as more than just artificial. Trying to see the city as our environment and part of what we are, and feeling like we can belong with what that is, and not like there's something wrong with it. Like, this is a natural sort of going-back-to-the-rez narrative, but that's not where we came from either. I am just trying to have my characters struggle with what belonging means, what home means, and what being an Indian means all at once, and that [struggle's taking place in] Oakland.

Kate: Do you think that struggle varies generationally? I know from my father, who grew up both in San José and on the Blackfeet reservation, that he always wanted to get back to the reservation. That's where his family was and that's where he felt a connection; but for me, my family is there, and I love to visit them, but it doesn't feel like home. I guess it's about creating your own identity and your own home where you are.

Orange: It's definitely generational, but I think even within our generation there are different camps of what to do. My sister, for example, lives in Oklahoma and is part of the Cheyenne language program. My dad's fluent, but he didn't grow up teaching us Cheyenne because it was more of a time of assimilation, and for various other reasons. But she felt like that's what she wanted to do, and she's going this other way with it. She talks about that as home, and tells me, *When you gonna come home?* I'm always kind of like, *Oakland's home to me.* It'll always be that; even if I love it [in Oklahoma], and love people there, that's not my home.

Kate: Obviously, storytelling is central to Native people and how we define ourselves. One of my favorite parts is in the interlude where you write: "The wound that was made when white people came and took all that they took has never healed. An unattended wound gets infected. Becomes a new kind of wound like the history of what actually happened became a new kind of history. All these stories that we haven't been telling all this time, that we haven't been listening to, are just part of what we need to heal."

Do you think that storytelling has been lost among some Natives?

Orange: It's more that we haven't been hearing all of the different kinds of Native stories, the histories that run counter to the way that the American narrative has been told.

We can't heal from something unless we acknowledge it and accept it for what it is, and if we can't do that together, it feels like the American consciousness is actually denying our basic narrative about what happened. It's really hard to move on and heal together. If we want to not only heal as a Native community, but as Americans too... it's hard to feel like you even want to be an American if your whole narrative is being spoken against or denied or not listened to.

Kate: When the character Tony Loneman decides to wear his regalia in public on the way to the Oakland Powwow, you write, "People don't want any more than a little story they can bring back home with them, how they saw a real Native boy on a train, that they still exist."

Because I'm white-passing, people only approach me when I'm wearing my moccasins or beaded jewelry. Do you think that Natives feel largely unnoticed by the non-Native gaze unless they present themselves as traditional?

Orange: Definitely, and the whole idea of what a Native should look like is so outdated, and on purpose. We have one way that we're supposed to look, and it's very historical and dressed up. It's not contemporary, and there's no allowance for shades from brown to white.

I'll make a point to wear clothing that has Native symbols on it, not only to support Native artists, but also because I like there to be a visible component, because I can be white-passing too. I think it's interesting, this whole jewelry and presenting thing. I'd never worn jewelry before, but then my sister, who makes jewelry, got me this really beautiful necklace. It automatically interfaces with my Native identity, because people will comment about the necklace. It has a Native look to it. There's something interesting about it. I'm not wearing it because I want to have a conversation with strangers about my identity, but it does come up because of it.

Kate: Right. It's part of your identity, and you don't want to put it on for show and have a conversation about it, yet inevitably it's a conversation starter.

You talked a little bit about what had inspired the polyphonic voices of the novel. I was wondering what other books and authors have influenced your writing.

Orange: Bolaño's [The Savage Detectives](#) was a big one for me. One of the early iterations of *There There* was directly related to *The Savage Detectives*, in that whole interview section of the book. I just love how many voices Bolaño expresses, and the way the voices are gathered around to tell a bigger narrative.

[A Brief History of Seven Killings](#) was not so much a direct influence, because I read it late into writing the novel, but it was definitely an affirmation that some people were doing this kind of work — it can be done. I had Marlon

James as a workshop teacher at Tin House in 2015, and he was kind enough to write a blurb for *There There*. That was pretty amazing.

[A Visit From the Goon Squad](#) was kind of the same. It's really contemporary and polyphonic, and comes from different angles. I like what a collective voice can do to create a singular vision.

Those books are the ones that come to mind immediately when thinking about what influenced *There There*. Louise Erdrich has written with different voices. She's an amazing author, and I respect her work deeply. [Love Medicine](#) comes to mind, which I also read a little bit later. I read a lot of the Native canon later on in my reading life, because there are a lot of rez-based stories, and that kind of made me feel more isolated. But after I got over my insecurities, I came to love the Native canon.

Thinking about it, I would have to say [A Confederacy of Dunces](#) influenced me, just because it was the first book that made me want to write a novel. I have to add that book to this list.

Kate: It's funny that you say that, because I was talking to my coworker about that the other day, and I feel like — I haven't read it — there are two camps of people. You either really love that book, or you really dislike that book.

Orange: Yes. My theory about that is that people who are more like Ignatius, but don't want to be, tend to hate it, and once you read it, you'll know what I mean by "like Ignatius."

"Ignatian" is a word that my wife and I have come to use a lot. I think there's something Ignatian about all humans.

Kate: *There There* is a monumental debut that I'm sure has brought a lot of changes into your life. Are you working on anything new at the moment, or are you pausing on writing and working on other projects?

Orange: I have been busy with writing little different types of essays and things that people have asked for, but I am working on two new books.

I sold *There There* last February. When I gave my agent my final version of the book, a giant hole opened up inside of me, and I felt like I was going to die, because I'd been working on a big project for so long. I hadn't realized how occupied it kept some restless part of me, so I immediately jumped into a new book as soon as I finished this one, and since then, another one has come.

I don't want to talk about them too much, because it's early and I'm kind of superstitious about losing energy on stuff. But I am working on two new books.

Kate: I imagine that when you've been working on something for so long, it kind of feels like a child that you're setting out into the world.

Orange: Totally. My book is pretty much the same age as my son, so it's been interesting to have them go hand in hand. But at the same time, it doesn't feel as much like mine anymore. That actually happens with children too. You realize they're their own people.