“But the city made us new, and we made it ours”: Reflections on Urban Space and Indigeneity in Tommy Orange’s *There There*

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**Abstract**

Native American writers in the United States have often used literature to celebrate their communities, defy stereotypes, and share their histories on their own terms. In the past few years, this movement has seen another wave, with artists and scholars engaging in literary storytelling to shed light on Indigenous resistance efforts in the United States. Tommy Orange is no exception, writing about urban Indigenous life in his 2018 novel *There There*. While *There There* positions the city as a product of settler-colonialism, the book also illustrates the ways in which urban Indigenous peoples subvert colonial mechanisms by celebrating tribal histories, claiming space, and revitalizing cultural practices within the structure of the city. Together, these themes highlight Orange’s success in sharing how Native communities empower themselves and come together in urban spaces across the United States.

**INTRODUCTION**

Over the past few years, conversations about urban Indigenous life in the United States have increased in both academic and creative spaces. An example is 2019 Pulitzer Prize Finalist *There There* by Cheyenne and Arapaho writer Tommy Orange. Set in current-day Oakland, California, the semi-fictional novel follows twelve working-class Native Americans as they cultivate their urban identities, relationships, urbanity, and survivance. In Tommy Orange’s *There There*, Native Americans resist settler-colonial conceptions of the city by emphasizing Indigenous histories and relationships and reclaiming ancestral lands and spaces. In doing so, they find collective social and political empowerment within the urban landscape.

**HISTORICAL & THEORETICAL CONTEXT**

Indigenous peoples have been systemically displaced and erased from ancestral lands for centuries. During the early stages of European settler-colonialism, through organized armed conflict along the East Coast, forced starvation, and purposeful spread of disease, colonizers drove Indigenous communities from their original homes, sacred spaces, and families, thus perpetuating an economic and political system that relied on both Indigenous genocide and the enslavement of African peoples. Not only did colonizers displace Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands, but their violence compromised Indigenous social and political relationships as well: Indigenous studies scholar Christine DeLucia notes in her book *Memory Lands* that early colonial efforts “dislocated Natives from traditional homelands and kinship networks,” emphasis ours.
In the 19th century, the United States government furthered attempts to eradicate the original inhabitants of North America through enacting policies such as the Indian Removal Act and the Indian Appropriations Act. Andrew Jackson, who spent the majority of his time as an Army general fighting against Creek and Seminole Nations, rallied behind American imperialism such as Manifest Destiny and “Westward Expansion.” In May 1830, Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which would attempt to forcefully remove Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole Nations living in present-day Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, and Tennessee to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River.ii

Throughout the 1830s, US troops forced tens of thousands of Indigenous people to march thousands of miles away from their homes and histories toward unfamiliar territories. While those removed were promised transportation, food, and medical attention on the journey, many starved and froze to death.iii Indian Territory offered no connections to ancestral lands or cultures. The new Cherokee Nation became known as Tallequah; without their mountain streams, the Cherokee Nation rebuilt itself with access to only two major waterways, thus naming their new capital Two Is Enough. Meanwhile, white settlers encroached on fertile lands of the southeast—rupturing reciprocal relationships with the land and instead extracting natural resources for profit.

Two decades after the Indian Removal Act, Congress created the Indian reservation system with the Indian Appropriations Act of 1851. Under this policy, the United States government used federal funds to force Native peoples onto limited plots of land called reservations, once again codifying Indigenous subjugation and cultural erasure into law. White citizens then pursued political and economic domination on stolen land, denying their Indigenous counterparts access to practice their cultures and traditional beliefs on their sacred homelands.

Having not yet solved the “Indian Problem” one hundred years later, the United States attempted to eliminate the reservation system, and with it, tribal sovereignty altogether. Between 1952 and 1972, under the Urban Relocation Program, the Bureau of Indian Affairs offered “one-way transportation and a couple hundred dollars”iv for Native Americans to leave their reservations and find jobs in the city. In his essay “Uprooted: The 1950s plan to erase Indian Country,” historian and journalist Max Nesterak outlines these federal attempts at erasure:

“The goal was to move Native Americans to cities, where they would disappear through assimilation into the white, American mainstream. Then, the government would make tribal land taxable and available for purchase and development. The vision was that eventually there would be no more BIA, no more tribal governments, no more reservations, and no more Native Americans.”v

Throughout Indigenous removal and relocation, the city represented the end of the line for Native cultures. To the United States government, Indigenous communities, beliefs, and practices would not survive in the face of the “modern,” fast-moving, technologically-advanced city environments. In “Massacre as Prologue,” Orange opens his book with the violent nature of urban relocation: “Getting us to cities was supposed to be the final, necessary step in our assimilation, absorption, erasure, the completion of a five-hundred-year-old genocidal campaign.”vi

Indigenous scholars and organizers, such as Ada Deer (Menominee) and LaNada War Jack (Shoshone Bannock), successfully lobbied against reservation termination efforts during the 20th-century self-determination movement, a grassroots movement characterized by the Occupation of Alcatraz, the Bureau of Indian Affairs takeover, the Wounded Knee Occupation, and other protests and occupations around the United States. Today, there are currently 574 federally-recognized Native nations and 326 reservations within the
bounds of the US settler-imposed boundaries. Although a large percentage of Native Americans live in cities today, Indigenous scholars argue that problematic narratives of urbanity and Indigenous peoples still persist in the minds of the American public. In her essay “Contesting the Settler City,” Anishinaabe sociologist Dr. Julie Tomiak writes that white, settler-dominant cities propagate “normalized understandings of Indigenous peoples as incompatible with progress and modernity.”

By reducing Native people to ancient relics of the past, settler-colonial understandings of geography erases the fact that cities provide space for Native people to organize and develop urban Native culture.

**URBAN INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE AND SURVIVANCE IN TOMMY ORANGE’S THERE THERE**

Orange rejects urban Indian erasure by highlighting Indigenous histories and relationships within his home city of Oakland. There There is set sometime in the late 20th century or early 21st century, a time in which Native stereotypes and false narratives, such as sports teams’ mascots, are popularized in the American imagination. National news media, films such as Disney’s *Pochahontas* and *Peter Pan*, and public school curriculums portray Native Americans as living in “underdeveloped” wilderness. Combatting this narrative, Orange exclaims: “Urban Indians were the generation born in the city… We came to know the downtown Oakland skyline better than we did any sacred mountain range, the redwoods in the Oakland hills better than any other deep wild forest.”

Here, Orange deconstructs the primitive, “ecological Indian” stereotype. Born in cities, raised under skyscrapers and skylines, urban Indigenous people carry a strong relationship with their urban homes. An urban Cheyenne and Arapaho person himself, Orange defies the idea of the colonial city—an urbanity unfit for the Indigenous—thus highlighting a uniquely Native understanding of the city’s nature.

While he waits an interview, Indigenous storyteller Dene Oxendene encounters a non-Native man who asks: “No one’s really from here, right?” In response, Dene “wants to explain that they’re not the same, that Dene is Native, born and raised in Oakland, *from Oakland.*” Dene emphasizes that the city of Oakland sits on the traditional and ancestral homelands of his own community. He understands he is really *from Oakland*, as the city occupies the homelands of the Chochenyo Ohlone. While this non-Indigenous man understands his coming to the city, Dene understands the city came to him.

Through this interaction, the reader can understand that not only do Indigenous peoples exist in cities, but that cities exist within much longer, deeper Indigenous histories.

Orange also spotlight on the complex Indigenous kinship networks form in the city. Each of the novel’s twelve main characters—Tony Loneman, Dene Oxendene, Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield, Edwin Black, Bill Davis, Calvin Johnson, Jacquie Red Feather, Orvil Red Feather, Octavio Gomez, Daniel Gonzales, Blue, and Thomas Frank—live in complex relation with one another. Dene deals drugs with Octavio; Opal and Jacquie are half-sisters; Octavio and Daniel are cousins; and Charles owes money to his brother Charles, who also works with Octavio. At the end of the novel, the
urban Big Oakland Powwow, a gathering of food, song, and urban Indigenous dance, Orange expertly brings this unconventional family together under one roof.

On its own, a powwow in the city like the Big Oakland Powwow illustrates the contemporary survival of Indigenous cultures within the urban landscape. During the powwow, Edwin meets his long-lost father Harvey, Blue suddenly discovers that Jacquie is her mother, and Jacquie notices Orvil’s name on the list of dancers, realizing that she will see her now-teenage grandson for the first time in years. These interpersonal collisions in the novel fashion the city as a place where Indigenous peoples come together to form familial and community bonds, exposing the failure of the settler-state’s attempts to erase Indigeneity with colonial cities. While Indigenous life in the city is meant to fade steadily in the past, urban Natives actually reunite and reassess what it means to be family.

_There There_ further resists settler spatialities with its focus on the reclamation of colonized spaces in the city. The most obvious example of this is the novel’s connection to the 20th-century Occupation of Alcatraz. From November 20th, 1969 to June 11th, 1971, the Indians of All Tribes organization crossed the San Francisco Bay to claim “The Rock” (Alcatraz Island) for all tribal nations in North America. For nineteen months, Indigenous peoples held the island and demanded that the government return title over the land back to them. Similar to the urban Natives in _There There_, the Indians of All Tribes they created a self-sustaining society with food and cash donations from supporters across the country. Like Alcatraz, Oakland stands as a site of continued decolonization and Indigenous futurisms.

Today, Native people from hundreds of Native Nations regard the Occupation of Alcatraz as a hallmark event in Native American self-determination. Orange deftly weaves the legacy of Alcatraz into Opal and Jacquie’s early childhood memories. Opal recounts her mother coming home early from work one day to say: “‘Pack your things… We’re going over to where they built that prison. Gonna start from the inside of the cell, which is where we are now… We’re gonna work our way out from the inside with a spoon.’” Suddenly, Jacquie and Opal spend their adolescence exploring the dilapidated prison and observing official meetings and press conferences where Indigenous leaders voiced their demands to the United States government as the whole world watched. While the island and prison represent colonial surveillance, land seizure, and incarceration, Opal’s mother’s aspirations—to “work our way out from the inside with a spoon”—highlights an anti-colonial movement, and the tools of resistance, consistently at work across urban landscapes.

**CONCLUSION**

In _There There_, Orange successfully illustrates the uniquely Native families, histories, and stories of Oakland in the effort to raise awareness of the existence of Native American peoples and their stories in urban places. Through developing his discussion of Indigenous histories, and community bonds, the reclamation of colonial spaces and institutions, and resurging abundance of cultural knowledges and practices in the city, he gives the reader a modern image of the long-lasting strength which characterizes speaks to the contemporary diversity and strength of Indigenous peoples across cities in the United States. At the same time, he creates violent, shocking, and intense moments to illuminate to his readers the ongoing inequities that Indigenous communities are still fighting. In the end, his work challenges us to understand the city as not a postcolonial space but instead as a geographic tool of the ongoing settler-colonial project that Indigenous peoples navigate within and, as Orange puts it, make “new and ours.”

Cherokee Historical Association Staff, “What was the Trail of Tears?”, 2014, https://www.cherokeehistorical.org/unto-these-hills/trail-of-tears/what%20was%20the%20trail%20of%20tears?


The “ecological Indian” stereotype describes the way that early anthropological research and Western media construct romanticized narratives of Indigenous peoples and their natural environments. Today, this trope is often used to project Western conservation ideals upon early Native communities and limit Native existence to rural, untouched landscapes. See https://www.kcet.org/shows/tending-the-wild/the-problem-with-the-ecological-indian-stereotype.


Ibid., 48.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid., 48.

Ibid.

Ibid., 255.