

## Convergence: Irony and Urban Indian Epistemologies in Tommy Orange's *There There*

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Tommy Orange's *There There* (2018) uses verbal and structural irony to establish that even in urban Oakland, tribal epistemologies continue to shape the lives of Native youth.<sup>1</sup> Even in the state of California where many tribes do not have physical reservations and have not been granted recognition of tribal status in a contemporary context, Orange uses a television screen, the BART system of mass transit, and the Oakland Coliseum to help establish that the land and seemingly disparate forms, spaces, and times are Native. "An Urban Indian belongs to the city, and cities belong to the earth," he declares in the book's Prologue, "Everything here is formed in relation to every other living and nonliving thing from the earth. All our relations" (11). Orange expands upon Thomas King's pathbreaking circular vision of space in *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), which evokes all the degrees of a circle by ending on page 360 and using the four directions in Cherokee to structure the novel (Goldman 37). *There There* includes even urban youth spaces in a circular configuration, unwinding linear models of time and challenging settler-state cartographic separations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous places.

Orange is an enrolled citizen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, with family connections to Southern Cheyenne in particular. Many of his characters draw on Cheyenne stories, songs, ceremonies, and dances. The novel, a national bestseller which has received the PEN/Hemingway Award among other recognitions, maps contemporary Indian belonging in California despite painful dislocation. Orange explores in fiction a conflictual landscape also delineated by Wendy Rose and Deborah Miranda in poetry and essays. Orange was born in Oakland to a Cheyenne father and a white mother, with Rose born in Oakland of Hopi, Miwok and European descent, and Miranda born in Los Angeles to an Esselen/Chumash father and a mother of French ancestry. "Neither cast-offs, nor mongrels, nor assimilated sellouts, nor traditionalists," Rose declares, "those who are like me are fulfilling in our way a certain level of existence, a pattern in the prophecy" (xii-xiii). Miranda refuses the misconception of Natives as passive respondents and reveals that Indians have all along actively employed Anglo storytellers or ethnographers to narrate their own stories for the future,<sup>2</sup> for descendants such as Orange who now reveal space, time, and irony as aspects of knowing that map the

whole continent as Indian country. Native epistemology is present in supposedly unlikely city spaces like Oakland.

Space, time, and irony collide in *There There*, as exemplified in the way Orange opens and completes the novel with the same character, forming an ironic circle of sacred space and time even while refusing to look away from current pain and violence. Chapter One presents Tony Loneman, a 21-year-old Cheyenne man who remembers gazing into a seemingly non-Native mirror, a blank TV screen. “The Drome first came to me in the mirror when I was six,” Loneman begins. “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. When I asked Maxine, she told me my mom drank when I was in her, she told me real slow that I have fetal alcohol syndrome. All I heard her say was Drome, and then I was back in front of the turned-off TV, staring at it” (15-16). Loneman continues staring at his reflection, which does not feel like his true face: “I tried but couldn’t make the face that I found there my own again” (16). In other words, he recognizes himself, but his visage does not reflect the way he feels inwardly.

His facial contours present a living image of past pain, from which others want to look away: “The Drome is my mom and why she drank, it’s the way history lands on a face” (16). His features, “staring back at me like a fucking villain” (16), create in others a villainous image or expectation of him, and makes “people look at me then look away when they see I see them see me” (16). His inner awareness, not reflected in his outer FAS<sup>3</sup>-mapped features, observes these multiple gazes as they see and do not see reality. Aware of the gaze that lands on the visible and misses the invisible, Loneman is thus also a “medicine person,” according to his grandmother, Maxine. He hears beyond what people say, discerns “what they mean when they say they mean another thing. The Drome taught me to look past the first look people give you, find that other one, right behind it” (17). As the present essay will reveal, his hearing and his gaze, associated with the vision of a medicine person, is ironic in showing the edge between the seen and unseen, the heard and unheard, and it reveals Native epistemologies that emerge anew among urban youth.

To examine the elements of space, time, and irony in turn, first, in Orange’s approach to space, the city emerges as a decolonial Indian hub, a place of self-definition for Natives, especially young people who are choosing their identities and making something new out of where they are, defying limitations that have been ascribed to them. In her ethnography of urban Indians in Northern California, *Native Hubs* (2007), Renya Ramirez cites activist Laverne Roberts, who proclaims that the city “acts as a collecting center, a hub of Indian peoples’ new ideas, information, culture, community, and imagination that when shared back ‘home’ on the

reservation can impact thousands of Native Americans” (2). Orange’s novel focuses on a powwow, one key form of such a hub, and offers a contemporary expansion of observations shared by Ramirez. Far from losing Indian identities as they converge on the Big Oakland Powwow in Orange’s novel, or move between cities, the urban becomes Indian. “Like a hub on a wheel,” Ramirez and Roberts argue, “urban Indians occupy the center, connected to their tribal communities by social networks represented by the wheel’s spokes” (Ramirez 2). Despite sometimes feeling violently dislocated, Orange’s young people actively claim their place in the urban center, with their shared connections and relatedness.

Orange’s city and his Big Oakland Powwow, upon which all twelve of his major characters converge, function as loci for contemporary Native resurgence. In other words, as advocated by Coulthard’s refusal of settler-state frameworks of recognition, Orange refuses to replicate the ‘colonial divisions’ that contributed to the urban/reserve divide” (Coulthard 176). Unsettling maps that divide Indigenous and non-Indigenous places, the city is also Indian. Urban homelands are built into the structure of the novel, which consists of four sections, Remain, Reclaim, Return, and Powwow. Remain and Reclaim are unabashedly set in the city; Return shows Indians finding some way to get back not to reservations but to the city, for the powwow; and Powwow shows all twelve characters converging on the Oakland Coliseum, which becomes Indian space reimagined.

Second, in analogously reconfiguring temporal terms, the novel unwinds linear time and does not privilege a teleological forward movement. The twelve characters, like the twelve months of the calendar, reappear in the narrative, though not always in the same order, structuring time as cyclical and recurring. Present, near past, and distant past unfold in the same narrative plane. The first chapter, for instance, introduces a printed 3-D gun that readers learn will be used to rob the powwow. With dramatic irony built into its structure, the novel follows twelve contemporary characters who navigate their ways to the powwow—which readers but not characters know will be a life-and-death confrontation. About halfway through the novel, an Interlude announces: “The tragedy of it all will be unspeakable, the fact we’ve been fighting for decades to be recognized as a present-tense people, modern and relevant, only to die in the grass wearing feathers” (141). The Interlude is one of only two sections, along with the Prologue, not written from the perspective of one of the main characters, and this signaled violence intensifies the tension and dramatic irony introduced from Chapter One. Two thirds of the way through the novel, without transitions to indicate a movement back in time, a chapter gives the origin story of the gun from Chapter One; it was printed from a 3-D printer that was itself printed from a 3-D printer (187,

191). In the novel's final thirty-odd pages, the robbery unfolds and the gun fires in short chapters that shift from one character's perspective to another, one perspective per chapter, hitting and bringing together in life and death many of the urban Indians whose stories the novel has featured.

In its structure and non-chronological and non-hierarchical arrangement of chapters, the novel exemplifies some of the epistemologies identified by Tomson Highway, who suggests that "time, in Aboriginal mythology,<sup>4</sup> is one vast circle" and "on that circle—of time—moreover, there is no beginning, there is no middle, there is no end" (*Mythologies* 43, 44). The circle, moreover, offers "a womb, to give the notion some visceral perspective," within which "lies the vast expanse of space, the vast expanse of land, the vast expanse of ocean, the vast expanse of air, the vast expanse of sunlight" (Highway, *Mythologies* 43). Such a presentation folds time into space and displaces "one straight line" of "time, in Christian mythology" (Highway, *Mythologies* 43). Orange's novel makes the shift that Deloria calls for in *God is Red* (1994): "Most Americans, raised in a society in which history is all-encompassing, have very little idea of how radically their values would shift if they took the idea of places, both secular and sacred, seriously" (76-77). In the closing section of the novel, thanks to the powwow, the coliseum transforms from a sports venue in which Indians have been caricatured as mascots into sacred space, an ironic circular enclosure that is Native earth and also a site of violent reckoning with history.

Third, irony begins and then pervades the narrative. With the opening sentences of his Prologue, Orange confronts brutal historic and ongoing attempts to erase Indigenous people through crude physical and epistemic violence, presenting through "the native humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind, and moral courage" (Vizenor, *Native Liberty* 100, 85) a hard-hitting challenge to dominant mapping of space and time. Irony is not always humorous, and humor is not always ironic (Hutcheon 4, 25; Andrews 17-21), but the two may coincide. Orange's irony laughs but does not deny the very real death that it faces. One of Orange's significant contributions is pointing out a deadly irony that is accruing for the entire country and structures the novel. Contemporary mass shootings echo historic massacres of Indians: "the bullets have been coming from miles. Years" (141). And not just for Indians, but for everyone who walks this earth.

Orange's novel grounds irony in a historic and ongoing unsaid: the unacknowledged violence that founds settler nations. In so doing, the novel extends Hutcheon's observation in her 1994 theory, that irony arises "in the space *between* (and including) the said and the unsaid" (12). In Orange's hands, by pointing beyond what is seen to the unseen, beyond what is heard to the unheard, irony potentially moves beyond dominant

narratives, both white and Native, to confront genocide and contemporary pain, and to establish urban Indian ways of knowing and being, especially for youth. Orange claims online spaces inhabited by many young people as Native hubs, offering wry electronic forms of Indian country. One young Cheyenne man borrows his mother's Facebook account to discover who his father is; another watches YouTube videos to learn powwow dances and Googles: "What does it mean to be a real Indian" (121). Orange's electronic spaces, too, comprising an unseen "cloud" of information and connectivity, are connected with the earth, making visible for his characters "all our relations."

Congruent with observations offered by Jennifer Andrews in her study of Native women poets, in Orange's novel irony can reveal social reality and reality that is beyond human social structures. Such incongruities and invitations to reconsider what is real may be "startling or uncomfortable," and may also allow "reconciliation, bonding, and celebration" (Andrews 21, 19) of Native ways of knowing and being. Orange's irony and humor are more than individual, pointing to what Hutcheon calls discursive communities, Andrews terms "community structures and values," and Vizenor identifies as a collective: "You can't act in a comic way in isolation," Vizenor declares, "there has to be a collective of some kind" (Hutcheon 17, Andrews 19, Vizenor "Trickroutes" 295). When the said and the unsaid rub against one another and explode to make visible a third meaning, in that flash of recognition irony's edge can both reveal and bridge the abyss between contexts and communities, or between what is and what might be.

Using irony to present online regions, the city and, indeed, the entire country, as Indian space acknowledges and helps heal trauma created by the Indian Removal Policy, which began in 1952 and removed as many as 100,000 Indians from reservations, functioning as "a latter stage in the colonization of the continent" (Rosenthal 13) by encouraging Indians to move to cities such that as of early twenty-first century United States "the majority of the 2.1 million Indians live in cities" (Fixico 4). Often Indigenous populations have first been moved onto reservations and separated from cities; this late stage in colonization attempts in turn to dissolve the connection with reservations by absorbing Indians into city anonymity. Orange focuses on Oakland, which was, along with San Francisco and San Jose, one of "the first cities earmarked as relocation sites" (Lobo *et al.* xxii). The Policy was presided over by Commissioner of Indian Affairs Dillon Myer, who qualified for this work by having served during World War II as director of the War Relocation Authority, overseeing the "uprooting from their homes tens of thousands of Americans of Japanese descent and herding them off to concentration camps or 'relocation centers' in the California desert" (Moisa 23).

Orange's presentation emphasizes that Indians are beings who move to cities rather than objects to be removed from reservations, and that they actively participate in and renegotiate city spaces. He hence extends an observation offered by Vine Deloria, who also challenges relocation policies in the context of examining "Indian Humor," and jokes that policies failed because Indians returned from the cities to their reservation homelands (*Custer* 158): relocate an Indian even as far as the moon, and "'He'll figure out some way to get back'" (*Custer* 158). Orange expands Deloria's observation, which blends humor and irony without naming irony as part of its focus, into a novel-length national joke that shows the project of Indian removal has failed: cities, too, are Indian territory.

Orange disrupts attempts to confine Indigeneity to reserves, which would presume to map cities and the rest of the country as settler state, a tactic studied by Wilson and Peters in Canadian contexts (398). Johnson, too, notes that the divide between the urban and the reserve or reservation is itself "a creation of the settler-state," one that attempts to manufacture boundaries that confine the Native geographically and temporally as rural and primitive and make the city by contrast modern and non-Indigenous (217, 218). Moreover, Fixico implicitly rebukes ignorance that would create separations between Indigeneity and cities when he notes that cities have long been part of Indian experience, epitomized by mound-building Indians who created such massive urban centers as Cahokia, east of what is now St. Louis (ix).

In the opening pages of his novel, Orange uses deadpan understatement to confront "the Indian Relocation Act, which was part of the Indian Termination Policy, which was and is exactly what it sounds like" (9). Relocation began in the 1950s during "the Eisenhower administration as a means of getting Indians off the reservation and into the city slums where they could fade away" (DeLoria, *Custer* 157). The approach was painfully similar to the biological absorption of Native populations advocated by A.O. Neville in 1930s Australia—policies exposed in the 2002 film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and in the inspiration for the film, Doris Pilkington Garimara's book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996). But if the Indian Relocation Act was intended to blend Indians into anonymity in cities, Orange demonstrates that urban Indians did not "disappear" (8). What was "supposed to be the final, necessary step in our assimilation, absorption, erasure, the completion of a five-hundred-year-old genocidal campaign," failed (8). Moreover, Orange revisions the city and the very premise of the Indian Termination Policy. Remember, "Cities belong to the earth," he declares in the Prologue, "buildings, freeways, cars—are these not of the earth?" (10). The city becomes a new Native land: "It's my only home," his heroic anti-hero, Tony Loneman, declares in the first chapter, "I wouldn't make it nowhere else" (18).

The novel rubs together past and present, the urban and the land, exemplifying one of the ways to create irony. Indian removal failed, despite prolonged and aggressive attempts to separate Indians from the land and reduce them to a feathered image. The Prologue thus begins with the “Indian Head test pattern,” which was broadcast by American television stations until the 1970s after regular programming stopped. In the novel’s opening paragraph, Orange sets up and fires an Indian Head test pattern joke: “you’d see that Indian, surrounded by circles that looked like sights through riflescopes” (3). His humor targets the target placed on Indians. Multiplied on all American TV screens, the Indian is shown in profile, wearing a head dress and long hair, made accessible for country-wide precision shooting: “The Indian’s head was just above the bull’s-eye, like all you’d need to do was nod up in agreement to set the sights on the target” (4). But then Orange delivers his ironic double-voiced punchline: “This was just a test” (4).

Onscreen it is just a test, but the ubiquitous presence of this pattern also reveals “the truth of what happened in history” (Orange 7). The form of the test pattern collapses chronological time, with the next paragraphs creating friction between the Indian head figure and the historical violence that removed Native heads from living bodies. The temporal perspective pivots to 1621, when colonists invite Massasoit, a Wampanoag chief, to a feast. “*That* meal is why we still eat a meal together in November. Celebrate it as a nation,” Orange notes wryly, “but that one wasn’t a thanksgiving meal. It was a land-deal meal” (4). A feast two years later “meant to symbolize eternal friendship,” resulted in “two hundred Indians ... dead” “from an unknown poison” (4). For Indians, colonists created a lineage of betrayal: Massasoit’s son, Metacomet, was later beheaded, and his “head was sold to Plymouth Colony for thirty shillings—the going rate for an Indian head at the time. The head was put on a spike, carried through the streets,” and “displayed at Plymouth Fort for the next twenty-five years” (4-5). Colonists celebrated “successful massacres” in Manhattan, it is said, “by kicking the heads of Pequot people through the streets like soccer balls” (5). The vicious joke refused by the text here is that Indian heads have had a “going rate” assigned to them for five hundred years, have been displayed for entertainment, on spikes, kicked through the streets of New York, or projected on American TV screens. Confronting such violence asserts the wholeness of Indian heads remembered, connected to living bodies and cultures in the present.

Orange’s opening temporal movements offer a bravura example of what Wai-Chee Dimock recently called for in her *PMLA* editor’s column: “the urgent need for a different shape of time,” arising from a “radical view of history as still in progress” (261, 258). Such a call is congruent with Audra Simpson’s declaration in *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life*

*Across the Borders of Settler States* (2014): “the past shall be made dynamic by the demands of the present” (28). A disjuncture between past and present leads to rigidity. Orange’s new irony disrupts colonial logics that would create hierarchies and ostensible separation between past and present, city and earth, Indians and life. Such irony, as Thomas King notes in his consideration of Native humor more broadly, “is not necessarily about happiness, any more than it is about laughter” (“Humour” 175). Distinct from Kenneth Lincoln’s suggestion in *Indi’n Humor* (1993) that in comedy “incongruous parts edge each other” allowing “release from the weight of meaning” and of “the tension” (28, 29), Orange retains tension, using it to reshape time and confront history still very much in progress.

Loneman, pivotal to the novel’s opening and to its intense conclusion, holds history’s pain and the present’s violence in a circular space and time of hope and transcendence. As such, Orange’s depiction expands upon one offered in Tomson Highway’s landmark 1989 play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Highway’s mute character Dickie Bird has FAS and remains associated with past damage, speaking only through scribbled notes and his yearning observations of other characters; in a key scene, he uses a crucifix to rape the trickster/god figure Nanabush—played by a woman in Highway’s play, and “as pivotal and important a figure in our world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology” (Highway, *Kapuskasing* 12). Where Dickie Bird enacts violence, Tony Loneman gives his life to stop the senseless killing of others.

The novel’s structure circles into a space beyond time in which life and death converge, with Loneman also closing Orange’s novel with irony. Even though his visage makes people assume he is a villain, and he has sold weed on the street from age 13, he proves to be a contemporary urban warrior, one who allows Orange to take on historical paintings and photographs that ostensibly preserved warriors for posterity as if Indians would be erased by onrushing modernity. In a joke that Orange does not spell out but writes into the events of his novel, in lieu of a long tradition of noble chiefs portrayed in solemn poses on horseback, captured in an image presumably just before they ride into a disappearing horizon, Loneman takes the train to the Big Oakland Powwow, dressed in full regalia “blue, red, orange, yellow, and black” (234).

The scene also riffs on incongruities similar to those depicted in Terrance Houle’s 2007 *Urban Indian Series*, which features a series of wry self-portraits: number three in the series presents a young Indian man wearing regalia while standing on a commuter train amidst other commuters who wear unremarkable contemporary clothing. The other commuters look past him, not seeming to register his presence at all, while he looks out the window, light reflecting off of his glasses. On his head, he wears a band with a circular medallion formed of four quadrants of color,



orange, blue, red, and white. Other images in the series depict Houle in the same ceremonial regalia, shopping for produce in a grocery store, sitting in an office space in front of a computer while talking on the phone and fielding a manila file someone hands him, taking a bath while reading a magazine, the regalia visible in the foreground just outside the bathtub. The series presents ceremonial attire as a natural part of a contemporary urban Indian's life, the sacred incorporated into the urban routine. The other characters in Houle's series do not look askance or even take notice of the juxtaposition of the sacred and of ordinary city scenes.

Orange's presentation is more exaggerated in describing the effects of the sacred amidst a city still clad in its own everyday garb. Wearing his regalia on his way to the powwow, even on Bay Area Rapid Transit in the daytime Loneman is "the fire and the dance and the night" (234). In a BART<sup>5</sup> encounter that satirizes the way some Anglo-Americans are more comfortable with the invented prospect of vanished Indians than living ones riding public transit, a woman pretends to ask him for directions. He invites her to the coliseum to see the powwow, but she backs away from connection, interested only in collecting a souvenir encounter, wanting to say later that she "saw a real Native American boy on a train, that they still exist" (235). In seeing Loneman as a real Native American boy, she confirms Loneman's vision of himself in regalia. At the end of Chapter One, he changes into regalia and the blank TV screen/mirror registers the outer transformation he has undergone. No longer does the empty TV screen reflect FAS: "The Drome. I didn't see it there. I saw an Indian. I saw a dancer" (26).

Along with the "real Native American boy on a train," the city through which the train moves itself is haunted by and revealed as a form of real Indian space. The novel's title extends Gertrude Stein's declaration that there is no "there there" in her childhood home of Oakland because so much development has occurred. Orange declares, "for Native people in this country, all over the Americas, it's been developed over, buried ancestral land, glass and concrete and wire and steel, unreturnable covered memory. There is no there there" (38, 39). Memory and land are buried, and yet the novel exposes what cannot be returned, what has been taken. The ancestors remain, in a laser vision created by irony that shows what is there and not there at the same time.

What is still there forms, in the words of Orange's Dene Oxendene, graffiti artist and aspiring documentary filmmaker, "something too big to feel, underneath, and inside, too familiar to recognize, right there in front of you at all times" (29). Dene wants to put urban Indian stories onscreen, helping viewers see what is already there but as yet unseen. As if articulating the novel's purpose, he declares: "We haven't seen the urban Indian story. What we've seen is full of the kinds of stereotypes that are

the reason no one is interested in the Native story.” He insists, “the individual people and stories that you come across are not pathetic or weak or in need of pity, and there is real passion there, and rage” (40). His project, to film unfiltered urban Indian voices, faces, and stories, is polyphonic, many-voiced like Orange’s novel, and like Orange’s novel reveals what has been right there in front of the viewer, and unseen. The multiple voices establish ironic connection—networks of relationship that already exist in the viewer’s or reader’s mind and will emerge for the characters who meet one another at the powwow.

As such, this polyphony invites responsiveness and active understanding, elements also key to the existence of irony. Relationship and responsiveness are the structure of Orange’s dialogue and novel—and also of the other media he depicts, including film, story, ceremony, dance, graffiti. Orange thus creates a living irony that reveals “unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” (12). The phrase is Homi Bhabha’s, offered in his consideration of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). Bhabha suggests that an “act of writing the world, of taking the measure of its dwelling, is magically caught in Morrison’s description of her house of fiction—art as ‘the fully realized presence of a haunting’ of history” (12). Orange helps expand history’s house, fiction’s house, the dwelling places of urban Cheyenne, multiple tribes, and the U.S. nation. History’s haunting comes to life in irony, which performs and calls for responsiveness. The trauma of removal policies, the city as a homeland, urgent new shapes of time, are inseparable from simultaneous awareness of the past and future—a responsiveness that moves toward a sense of responsibility, such as that demonstrated by Loneman in the novel’s closing pages.

From Chapter One, the novel builds toward inevitable violence—itsself a part of spiritual accountability that returns everything to the land. Even a hypermodern gun 3-D printed from the most fabricated material provides for a homecoming. Thus, contemporary gun violence and drug dealing are also inseparable from the past, future, and Orange’s circle of irony. Through his drug dealing contacts and without being given a choice, Loneman is pulled into a group that plans to steal \$50,000 in prize money from the powwow. Midway through the novel, readers learn that the bullets they will use are produced in Black Hills, South Dakota. Layli Long Soldier opens her collection *Whereas* (2017) with a poem that is tribute to this location, He Sapa, which she names specifically as a mountain, not hills: “Its rank is a mountain and must live as a mountain” (6). The bullets’ birthplace conveys a sardonic implicit critique, as the Black Hills are considered sacred by many Native American nations in the United States and Canada, and they are protected by treaty for the exclusive use of the Great Sioux Nation. Such ammunition is produced in

a plant that exists in violation of U.S. government agreements. In a further satiric touch, Loneman rides his bicycle to Walmart to buy the bullets, tossing them into the coliseum in a sock. The guns are small and white, able to slip through metal detectors because they are plastic. Seeing the gun printed from a 3-D printer, the guys “laughed like they hadn’t done since forever ago” (187). One of their friends had died from gun violence, and they laugh as they generate and take into their own hands the devices that have caused them pain. The laughter conveys humor, grief, self-prowess, a seductive intersection of pleasure and danger.

In the Interlude, Orange writes: “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. Not that we’re broken” (137). Orange’s phrasing is key: he emphasizes the need for healing through storytelling and listening, but also the wholeness that is still present in urban Indians. In addressing what has not been listened to, healing becomes possible and non-brokenness is revealed. As Jo-Ann Episkenew declares in *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing* (2009), “we *are* our stories” (13). Stories implicate various audiences: Indigenous communities may, through story, heal “postcolonial traumatic stress response,” while settlers may be cured “from delusions learned from their mythology” (Episkenew 15). Orange and Episkenew underscore that Indigenous people welcome healing from historic trauma and its ongoing repercussions but they are not sick; rather, the colonialism that created such trauma is sick and crying out for a cure (Episkenew 11).

In her theory of storytelling, humor, and trauma in Indigenous literature, Kristina Fagan examines the ways Indigenous stories carry their own implicit, embedded theories and methodologies. In particular, though she does not focus on irony explicitly in this essay, she suggests that storytelling and humor may provide ways to speak about what is otherwise unspeakable, to narrate trauma that otherwise cannot be told, which may be extended to account for the ways irony points to the unspoken. Whereas a Western individualist understanding of post-traumatic stress might prioritize directly narrating past trauma, contemporary literature that actively carries forth Indigenous ethics might instead favor indirect telling through story and humor, which provide ways to honor “the ethic of noninterference,” (208) “the ethic that it is wrong to express anger or grief, especially towards family,” (208) the ethic of restoring original goodness rather than punishing or exacting retribution (209), the observing of privacy, and the prioritizing of what enables community harmony (209). “Through a joke,” she declares, “one can both say something and not say it at the same time” (210). Humor, and in Orange’s case, irony, allow for communicating about trauma indirectly, in ways that carry transformative power and honor Indigenous ethics while making

space for telling the story. Loneman exposes the wounds of past and present—and creates potential healing—with his body and his life.

In the book's closing pages, Loneman disclaims involvement with the gun and bullets, becoming a peaceful warrior by choosing to offer himself to save others. At the coliseum, instead of helping to carry out the robbery, he walks in the opposite direction. Doing so underscores the irony in his name. He is alone and also anything but alone, as he joins his life with the ring of ancestors. His action reveals the whole coliseum as sacred space, with drums at its center and the entire arena encircled by ancestors. In examining urban Indians in Los Angeles, Weibel-Orlando notes that a powwow occurs in a circular sacred space, with the most sacred area at the core, where the drum is "the heart of the powwow, its beat synonymous with the body's life-affirming pulse" (144). In considering consecrated powwow space, George Martin identifies an additional outer circumference, a circular "protective layer of spirits" that "bridges the invisible membrane between physical (seen) and spiritual (unseen) realms. Many Indians speak about ancestors being present at pow-wows and dancing along with them, joining worlds with a drumbeat sounding simultaneously in both" (Browner 98). The drum embodies the energy of the powwow, of Indian vitality in the city, and of ancestors. With his body and his life, Loneman makes visible these sacred circles, demonstrating the interconnectedness and responsibility the book's arc urges readers to recognize. Everyone at the powwow becomes his relations, even if not by blood.

When he walks in the opposite direction, one of the other members of his group robs the powwow's prize money, only to have two other co-conspirators demand that he give the spoils to them; the three shoot at one another, hitting some of the other characters whose perspectives readers have traced throughout the novel. Loneman steps forward to help, remembering a story in which "the good guys end up winning, but one of them dies, like Optimus Prime had to in *Transformers*" (289). He and his grandmother had watched the VHS together, both of them "laughing and crying at the exact same time" (289). Laughter and tears recognize triumph and loss in the same instant and help create a transformational dimension that is cross-generational, Native and sacred, and the passage also references Nelson Shin's 1986 *Transformers: The Movie*. Optimus Prime gave his life for his friends; Loneman sacrifices himself to save those at the powwow even though he has never met them. Against the backdrop of powwow drums and gunfire, a cartoon film about loyalty among Autobots that transform into vehicles also becomes a vehicle for the sacred, with Loneman transforming into an ironic heartbeat of the powwow.

To keep others from being shot, Loneman lands with his body on the gunman. Bullets fly through him as readers and Loneman move into a space that holds different times: he is also simultaneously four years old and with his grandmother, watching her wash dishes while she sings a Cheyenne song. “*What are we? Grandma, what are we?*” he asks (288). She does not answer. He is blowing dish soap bubbles on her face; she is pretending the bubbles are not there. “You know,” Tony tells his grandmother, “You know they’re there.” In a bravura phrase that refers from Tony’s perspective to the bubbles, and at the same time to the novel’s presentation of contemporary Native people in all the forms their lives take, he says: “Grandma, you know. You know they’re there.” “What’s that?” she asks. She “has some on the side of her face and she doesn’t wipe them off, just keeps a straight face and keeps on washing.” To Tony, it is “the funniest thing he’s ever seen” (288-89). “They’re right there, Grandma, I see them with my own eyes” (289), he tells her. With poignant and painful humor, readers are also invited to see genocidal history and present violence that is right in front of their own eyes.

His grandmother sends him off to play, and on the book’s final page he sprawls with his Transformers on his bedroom floor, telling himself as a four-year-old at home and as a dying twenty-one year old at the coliseum, ““if you get a chance to die, to save someone else, you take it. Every time”” (290). Tony remembers his grandmother teaching him to dance: “You have to dance like birds sing in the morning,” (290), she said. As he dies, he also remains present: “Tony hears a bird. Not outside. From where he’s anchored, to the bottom of the bottom, the middle of the middle of him. The center’s center. There is a bird for every hole in him. Singing. Keeping him up” (290). He is learning to dance in a new dimension. The novel’s closing words declare: “Tony isn’t going anywhere. And somewhere in there, inside him, where he is, where he’ll always be, even now it is morning, and the birds, the birds are singing” (290).

The novel’s closing words leave readers in a timeless circular space of transformation, which is also not separate from irony. Loneman’s heroic act returns readers to the round enclosed by the coliseum and opened by the bullets’ holes. The coliseum is sacred, with temporal and eternal folding into one another; past, present, and future are simultaneous. History, still in progress, expands the circle of irony from the massacres mentioned in the Prologue to present-tense mass shooter targets. The whole nation is enfolded in the circle opened by the bullet holes, the open wound of history and the present. The ending is not separate from hope, nor from pain and rage. A decolonial metamorphosis urges readers to hear the spoken and the unspoken, with space, time, and irony spinning around a wound and toward potential healing.

## Notes

1. The present article follows Tommy Orange's novel in using the terms "Native," "Indian," and "tribal," still employed today in U.S. contexts, while recognizing that locally and internationally many may prefer their ancestors' names for their tribe, or the term "Indigenous."

2. Isabel Meadows, herself born of an English father and a Rumsen Ohlone mother, and considered the last fluent speaker of the Rumsen Ohlone language once widely spoken on the Central Coast of California, thus works against the grain of his expectations and frameworks to use ethnologist John P. Harrington as "a note-taker for communicating with future Indian communities" (Miranda 374).

3. "FAS" stands for "Federal Authentication Service" (The Editor).

4. Highway uses the term "Aboriginal" to discuss Native mythologies in North American contexts, particularly in Canada.

5. "BART" stands for "Bay Area Rapid Transit" in San Francisco (The Editor).

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