History, Heritage, and the Urban Native Experience in Tommy Orange’s *There There*

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the ways in which Tommy Orange’s novel *There There* communicates ideas that allow the transfer of intergenerational knowledge to sustain Native futurities. By creating a future imaginary critical of the past and attentive to the present, the author disrupts settler futurity and restructures the ways in which we think about Indigenous futures. The emphasis on Indigenous presence, with a focus on the twenty-first-century experience of urban Native Americans, allows the author to merge tribal epistemologies with European theories of the postmodern. My critical examination of Orange’s narrative reveals how analysis of the particularity of Native experience may identify the narrative pillars of the postmodern thought and incorporate them into a framework of interpretation that promotes Native perspectives. The goal of this article is not simply to apply Western techniques to the examination of an Indigenous text, but rather to identify a distinctly Indigenous imaginary, which locates itself at the cross-section of diverse critical theories.

Keywords: Native American literature; Native history and heritage; urbanity

Tommy Orange’s novel *There There* rewrites the narrative of Native American cultural erasure not by resistance but by participation in contemporary culture, using its rhetorical tools to reconfigure historical perspectives and call for a different future while engaging both Native and European discourses. From a critical Indigenous and anti-colonial standpoint, Orange’s narrative employs the narrative pillars of postmodern thought to identify and unseat colonialist perspectives and promote an Indigenous one. I recognize the risk in perpetuating the colonial gaze by looking at Orange’s novel using key postmodern concepts, such as metanarrative, deconstruction, and simulacrum, as any critical approach associated with conventionally Western, as opposed to tribal, modes of thinking is potentially problematic. However, the goal of this article is not to apply European techniques to the examination of an Indigenous text, but rather to examine the ways in which Orange’s text destabilizes the Eurocentric origin of such concepts in order to identify a distinctly Indigenous imaginary, which successfully locates itself at the cross-section of diverse critical theories. I argue that Orange avoids the confrontation between Native American nationalism and postmodern theory by revealing the fragmentation and dislocation of Native

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American experience to be an outcome of ongoing settler colonialism. The author constructs his argument through a narrative that escapes the limitations of binary rhetoric, resituating these theories in terms more reciprocal than adversarial. By challenging the claim to “authenticity” implied by literary nationalism and contesting the colonizing tendencies of European forms, he fosters diversity and pluralism as crucial to the Native present and future. Orange’s border dismantling manifests itself in narrating a decolonial Native presence that is not circumscribed by settler-colonial imaginaries but that does recognize Western methodological paradigms. The fact that this approach has found applauding audiences on all sides of the ethnic divide (as shown by the important literary awards the novel has won or been nominated for)² speaks to the success of his endeavor.

**Confronting Cultural Stereotypes of Native Peoples**

The fragmented form of postmodern discourse is peculiarly appropriate as an aesthetic mode for representing cultural fragmentation that occurs as a result of colonialism. Such a strategy allows the author to merge tribal epistemologies with European theories of the postmodern, as both recognize the similarity of structural principles and are informed by the history of intercultural change and transformation, while fostering the preservation and creation of social and cultural durabilities. Jean-François Lyotard’s rejection of metanarratives of history performed by mainstream society parallels Orange’s challenge to a White, Western standpoint, shifting Native representation from a victimized to a strategic one. In the Prologue, the author provides a historical overview of how Native populations were systematically stripped of their identity, rights, and land by colonialist forces in America: “They tried to kill us. But then when you hear them tell it, they make history seem like one big heroic adventure across an empty forest” (51). Through repeated use of the pronouns “they,” “them,” “we,” and “us,” the binary juxtaposition between “them”—White colonists—and “us”—Native communities—intentionally avoids any play of relativity in order to strengthen the narrator’s critical position. Although predicated on the settler-colonial history of the United States, this dichotomy implies a broader dimension of the conflict as a global phenomenon, at the same time highlighting the distance between official and personal history and between collective responsibility and the value of particular experience. It also implies an uneven balance of power and gestures to forces beyond individual control. What is within the narrator’s reach, however, is telling a counter story, one in which he defies the principles of Manifest Destiny, according to which America was seen as an “empty forest,” vacant and ready for the taking. The narrator’s story not only acknowledges Native presence on the American continent long before European colonization, but it also allows him to tell it in his own words, because his people have

² For example, Orange has won the PEN / Hemingway Award, American Book Award, John Leonard Prize, California Book Award, and the Pulitzer Prize, while staying on bestseller lists.
been “defined by everyone else” for so long (7). In an interview, Tommy Orange explains the need to correct the mainstream version of history: “As native writers, there is a certain feeling that you have to set the record straight before you even begin […] It’s been told wrong, and not told, so often” (Alter). Craig S. Womack worried that the postmodern tendency to “decenter everything, including the legitimacy of a Native perspective” (Red on Red 6), might result in the total annihilation of that perspective, but postmodernism does not negate history. Rather, it questions history through its different literary realizations. Although Orange’s characters negotiate Native traditions in a modern setting, in which the idea of a tribally specific context might be blurred, his novel illustrates how the search for a Native-specific imaginary may involve postmodern tools in ways that do not reinscribe settler colonialism and settler futurity, in a process whereby Native literature is enriched due to a new framework of interpretation rather than made ahistorical.

In the Prologue, the narrator provides narrative accounts of the past that counter the popular version of history, such as the national myth of Thanksgiving as a celebration of “eternal friendship” (4) between Pilgrims and Natives, a peaceful harvest festivity that brought the two communities together. The narrator debunks the sanitized version of the origin of Thanksgiving, stating that the reason for the celebration was the signing of “a recent land deal” (4), which began years of White colonization and subsequent extermination of many Native communities. “Thanksgivings like these happened everywhere, whenever there were what we have to call ‘successful massacres’” (5), such as the destruction of an entire Pequot village in 1637, or the massacre at Sand Creek, where a “[v]olunteer militia under Colonel John Chivington […] did more than kill us. They tore us up. Mutilated us. Broke our fingers to take our rings, cut off our ears to take our silver, scalped us for our hair” (8). The innumerable examples of physical cruelty and brutality—Native people were shot, killed, had parts of their body cut off, and houses set on fire—defy the official version, which presents Thanksgiving as a pleasant and peaceful encounter in the spirit of mutual trust and cooperation. For Native communities, this celebration marks the beginning of the cultural and physical genocide of Indigenous peoples. Orange’s narrative deconstructions of the key moments of Native and American history are used in the novel to take issue with “totem transfer” narratives (Fee 17): stories “codified as myth and used to propagate nationalist narratives of settlement and naturalize Indigenous disappearance” (Hunt 75). Not only do they reveal, establish, and confirm the patterns of relationships between settlers and Indigenous populations in settler-colonial nation states such as the United States that ensure settler futurity, they also conceal the violence and power premised on White epistemological supremacy that characterizes these contacts.

A Thanksgiving table, at which Pilgrims and their Native American guests sit side by side enjoying a bountiful harvest, is only one example
of popular cultural representations of Native people in the official discourse. Their image, however, changed with the movement west, and depended largely on how much of a threat Native tribes posed to White settlers: initially represented as bloodthirsty savages, then as noble warriors, the Indigenous people finally withered to a pitiful, “sad, defeated Indian silhouette” (7)—the Vanishing Native American, who is destined to sacrifice his lifestyle for the making of America. The narrator challenges a largely glamorized view of the American Indian as a powerful, unflinching, and brave warrior, as well as his tragic representation as a dying race, because both have been fabricated by White people and serve to further their agenda. Even though Native Americans have largely been removed from their ancestral land and official history, there is still ample room in the American imaginary for Native memorabilia. One such area of White interest is logos and mascots: “our heads are on flags, jerseys, and coins” (7). These acts of cultural appropriation, together with the commonplace tendency to commercialize Indigeneity, continue the exploitation of Native culture and maintain the imbalance of power. In a postmodernist mixture of high and low cultural references, the narrative juxtaposition of the realities of the tragic Native history and the triviality of popular culture items, alongside such mass culture figures as John Wayne and Mel Gibson, demonstrates how Native presence in American society has been defined by and reduced only to those spheres that were deemed desirable by the White majority.

Reflecting Native Epistemology in the Narrative Structure

A discourse that represents the divided subjectivity of the postcolonial perspective is appropriate as an aesthetic mode for representing the cultural fragmentation and ambiguity that occur as a result of settler colonialism. The narrative traits of There There, such as circularity, fragmentation, and temporal disorder, highlight the dominant tonality of the text, which is in dialogue with postmodernity. Traditional Native oral storytelling, described as “episodic in which different stories overlap, converge and diverge, informing each other with new significance as they are meaningfully interrelated by storyteller and listener alike” (Brill de Ramírez 334), evokes the characteristic features of postmodernism. So does what Craig S. Womack calls an “Indian narrative,” which he describes as “circular, non-Aristotelian, lacking a beginning, middle, and end” (“A Single Decade” 18-19). Arnold Krupat claims that “the use of the master’s tools, as it were, in conjunction with Native tools constitutes the most powerful hybrid or mixedblood strategy available against cultural colonialism” (624; emphasis in original). In line with these arguments, I find Orange’s text to be informed both by particularly Native and distinctively Western intellectual tropes, which position “American Indian narratives” as prior to settler-colonial discourse while challenging the idea of exclusive Western ownership of narrative forms and themes.
There There has four chapters, introduced by a Prologue and interrupted by an Interlude. The Prologue and Interlude provide additional information about the history of White colonization and Native American extermination, cultural appropriation, challenges to identity, urban Native communities, and powwows. These two sections not only supplement the fictional narrative but also highlight problems of vital importance to Native communities, which were often overlooked in official discourse. The decentered storyline resorts to multiple threads rather than adhering to one; there are twelve different protagonists who tell their stories, oscillating between first- and third-person narrative voices. Tony Loneman’s perspective begins and ends the novel, at first showing his deprived urban life, which in the closing scenes at the powwow finds meaning and dignity: “if you get a chance to die, to save someone else, you take it. Every time” (290). In fact, the Oakland powwow may be seen as a variation on the “homing in” plot (Bevis 582), in which characters recover Native traditions and personal bonds, finding fulfillment and value among their own people. The author, however, subverts the positive meaning of this act by making it a site of loss and destruction at the hands of the shooters, thereby providing evasion instead of closure. This climactic scene is reminiscent both of the past—the massacres of Native people, but this time with Native perpetrators—and the present—the mass shootings in the present-day United States, in which the motives and behavior of a group of young criminals might be representative of any of the ethnicities which make up American social reality. The binary juxtaposition of past and present is also reflected in the language: when talking about the past, the narrator uses the passive voice, which signals lack of agency and gestures to a Native position as a powerless pawn in the hands of the grand narrative: Native people are “depicted” (3), “forced,” “hanged,” “poisoned,” “seized,” “caught,” “beheaded,” “dismembered” (4). However, when the narrator talks about present-day urban Native Americans, the change into active voice testifies to Native viability and adaptability: now, it is “we,” who “found,” “started,” “brought,” “bought,” “joined,” and “populated” (9). In this way, the narrator not only sets the past against the present but also shows Native people regaining a sense of agency.

The division of the novel into two parts, one informative (Prologue and Interlude) and the other fictional, replays juxtaposition as one of the key text construction strategies employed by the author. In this way, a metanarrative of settler colonialism is challenged by the stories of individuals who have borne the brunt of this policy and testify to its destructive effect on Native communities. However, the choice of a polyphonic narrative foregrounds the complexity of Native agency and the diversity of the Native community. Orange’s narrative focuses on relationality, the idea that the individual is defined through a variety of relationships, and identifies storytellers through their relations and ancestral ties. Individual stories represent the present through intergenera-
tional ties, thereby establishing and maintaining communal bonds. The personalized narrations, in which lineage and familial sites of memory shape individual voices, reflect and produce kinship memory. They become sites of memory because they not only record individual memories of the community but also construct a common social memory for its members. By thus becoming a vessel for kinship memory, the novel assists in the formation of community identity, while revealing that the boundaries between common and individual are fluid. The inclusion of personal narratives signals their importance for Native presence but also hints at the future, which will be told in Native peoples’ own words. Thus, Orange’s novel demonstrates how a sense of shared history forms a basis for continuity, fostering self-determination and promoting the autonomy of Native worldviews.

This polyphonic multigenerational novel resists one idea of what being Native is supposed to mean, instead offering ambiguity, indeterminacy, and confusion, which characterize a contemporary urban life: Native families are broken, blood ties are re-acknowledged, and friendships are fragile. Such a narrative pattern reflects Native epistemology, with storytelling seen as a process whereby individual stories fit into a web of overarching ones. The nonlinear structure of the novel, which allows the characters to move across time and space, is crucial to its narration of Native ways of preserving and transmitting knowledge. Hybridity, which is also a hallmark of postmodern writing, is seen in the merger of the genres of fiction and history, with a subplot depicting Jacquie and Opal accompanying their mother to Alcatraz Island during the Native occupation of 1969-1971, when a group of Native Americans tried to reclaim the abandoned prison island, which had originally been their tribal territory. Humor and irony appear throughout the text and serve as means of resistance and survival, to borrow Gerald Vizenor’s language (Vizenor and Lee 85). For example, Opal’s Teddy Bear story cleverly makes a connection between the history of Native people and a popular toy: “We’re not so different. […] Columbus called you Indians, for us it was Teddy Roosevelt’s fault” (51). The juxtaposition of important and trivial makes the tragic history more palatable, whereas its irony relies on shared context with the readers, who are acquainted with the American past and also ready to challenge the dominant narrative and engage in self-reflection. In this sense, irony allows the protagonists to reclaim sovereignty over their own visions of the world.

The trope of a journey, with all the characters meeting at the final destination which is the Big Oakland Powwow, is part of a sense of motion permeating the text, where nothing is fixed or certain. Opal and Jacquie remember their mother: “She’d always been crazy, in and out of work, moving us all over Oakland, in and out of our dads’ lives, in and out of different schools, in and out of shelters” (49). The mother’s mobility may be seen as a performative reiteration of a traditional Native lifestyle, given that, according to Markus M. Müller, “a (semi-)nomadic
lifestyle would have been the [Native American] norm originally” (1). This “indigenous motion,” to use Luis Owens’s phrase, is a mode of indigenous being (164), with homing, to use Vizenor’s language, and wandering as natural phases of life. Mother’s restlessness may also evoke the history of collective displacements of Native communities, such as the introduction of the reservation system, residential schools, and termination and relocation policy. Finally, a repeated failure to find a permanent home may result from the feeling of alienation in an urban habitat and problems with employment, housing, and human interactions. From the Native perspective, motion “is also the way change is provoked and tribal selves and communities are maintained, as well as how both are brought forth into reality. As Vizenor reminds us, Native transmotion is not only lines on a map, it is a tribally sovereign worldview, a way of life” (Sinclair 148). However, the Western insistence on permanent location as norm destabilizes the Native conceptual flexibility of home in an attempt to bend it to the European standards.

Redirecting the Representation of Native Americans to Urbanity

The narrative focus on contemporaneity directs the readers’ attention to the novel’s very subject: Native urban community—it does not aim to educate non-Native readers about Indigenous ways. This focus on the twenty-first-century experience of urban Native Americans expands the Indigenous worldview, which is grounded in a specific geographic location, and relies on Native traditions which reappropriate urban America to Indigenous presence. The author’s strategy is thus consistent with the textual reappropriation of what are commonly considered to be postmodern Eurocentric narrative forms. The assumption of such a perspective affords a representation that asserts Native sovereignty and fosters cultural continuity from the Native viewpoint. My subsequent discussion aims to show how the author avoids the risk of cultural essentialism by constructing the urban condition as both a problem and a solution for Native communities. He uses a figure of the fragmented postmodern subject, which is located in its social aspect, urbanity, not only to signal unsystematic cultural structures but also to identify diversity of experience and multiplicity of perspectives as desirable. As postmodern thought is based on difference rather than bipolarity, its propensity to elide ultimate responses makes it a fertile breeding ground for new frameworks of representation, such as the ambivalent relationship of Native people to the city as a site of home and simultaneously the reminder of its loss.

Orange challenges the White-generated, stereotypical representations and introduces urban Native Americans as one of the contemporary realizations of Native presence in American society. According to the United States Census Bureau (2010), more than 71% of Native Amer-
icans live in urban or suburban environments, a migration which began in 1953, when the U.S. Congress established a new policy towards Native Americans, which was called “termination.” This policy decreased subsidies to Native Americans living on reservations, in fact eliminating much government support for the tribes, and ended the protected trust status of all Native-owned lands, “open[ing] up access to natural resources on tribal lands” (Pollak 86). The program supported the intentional placing of Native orphans into the homes of White families, a theme represented in the novel by Blue, Jacquie Red Feather’s daughter. Born out of rape, Blue is given up for adoption and raised by a White family. The Indian Relocation Act (1956) intended to encourage Native Americans to leave reservations, acquire vocational skills, and assimilate into the general population: “Plenty of us came by choice, to start over, to make money, or for a new experience. Some of us came to cities to escape the reservation” (Orange 9). Government efforts to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream culture through a voluntary urban relocation program had widespread consequences for all parties concerned, as “the general public was not ready socially to accept American Indians” (Fixico, Urban 164). Relocated tribe members became isolated from their communities, faced racial discrimination and segregation, could only get low-paying jobs with little advancement potential, faced higher expenses, and suffered from lack of communal support. In the cities, they were also confronted with other minority groups from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, who came to make America their new home: “Native migrants were often lumped together with ethnic Mexicans and other peoples of color, or they learned to avoid racial prejudice by passing as white” (Rosenthal 105). Off-reservation, “American Indians were deIndianized and forced to assume roles as non-Indians in a foreign environment – something many lacked the ability to do” (Fixico, “Dislocated” 207). There was often nowhere they could return to, as their reservations had been dissolved.

“But the city made us new, and we made it ours” (8), argues Orange’s narrator, defying the predominantly negative account of the consequences of the relocation and showing the opportunities the change created. Native peoples began to form intertribal communities, “started up Indian Centers, […] bought and rented homes, […] went to school, joined the armed forces, [and] populated Indian bars” (9), and in Minneapolis, they founded the American Indian Movement (1968), a pan-Indian advocacy group organized to address issues related to sovereignty. Nicolas G. Rosenthal observes that “[t]he city offered some respite from federal policy, but in turn Native people found a world in which non-Indians dominated social, cultural, and political life and where the presence of living Indian people garnered little consideration or respect” (104). In the novel, the relocation, which “was supposed to be the final, necessary step in [their] assimilation, absorption, erasure, the completion of a five-hundred-year-old genocidal campaign” (8) turned out to
deliver a new and thriving space where Native culture could be regenerated. In a subversive way, *There There* acknowledges not only a Native historical claim to the land, albeit urban, but also restores Native people as the original inhabitants of that land. This was possible, as the novel demonstrates, because of the reliance on kinship, which enabled the relocatee’s survival. When families break apart, extended members of the family pick up the pieces and carry on: Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield takes care of Jacquie’s grandsons when Jamie, their mother, dies and Jacquie struggles with alcohol addiction. Sidney Stone’s observations support this claim: “many Indians create [a sense of belonging] in urban areas by developing complex networks that work to foster a sense of responsibility for each other and build community even as they maintain connections to reservations” (qtd. in Rosenthal 168). It is no longer “a central heroic figure (solely a male until recently) struggling against either internal or external forces” but the communal perspective, which sees “an individual human being as [part of] her/his community and the larger biosphere” (Sellers 404). In this vein, Orange’s novel promotes kinship as a core value in maintaining social relationships and Native women as those who make its bonds amendable.

The author’s choice to focus on a particular group of Native characters, who inhabit urban areas of Oakland, breaks the stereotypical mindset that all Natives live on reservations. Susan Lobo attributes the rural focus in Native Studies to the fact that “Native homelands have overwhelmingly been in rural areas […], [to] the strong influence of anthropology on American Indian studies[…]and to generalized popular stereotypes stressing that everything Indian is set on a rural stage, and very frequently colored by romantic views of the past” (xiv). In the field of literature, James Ruppert explains that “[m]uch of the fiction published before the 1990s was based on a modernist paradigm that set up as unalterable opposites the city and the reservation, the white man and the Indian, community and estrangement […,] and the only path to balance, harmony, and identity is a return to the reservation and to connect with ritual and tradition” (187). Orange, however, explores the urban setting, providing a new context in which to identify and explore Native presence, which revises the definition of a traditional tribal land: “all we got right now are reservation stories, and shitty versions from outdated history textbooks. A lot of us live in cities now. This is just supposed to be like a way to start telling this other story” (149; emphasis added). An urban area offered a contradistinction to a reservation as the place that was federally designed to isolate and contain Native people. Deconstructing the stereotypical romance of the open plains as vital to a Native American sense of belonging, Orange’s narrative suggests urbanity as an alternative framework of reference. Moreover, the shift towards urbanity challenges the “assumptions about urban Native peoples—that they are less authentic, more assimilated, and more culturally alienated from their home communities” (Simpson and Smith 12).
narrator recalls how “[t]hey used to call us sidewalk Indians [...] citified, superficial, inauthentic, cultureless refugees, apples [...] red on the outside and white on the inside” (10). The past tense, however, suggests that the present day is different: through a form of “survivance,” they have again managed to adjust to a changing reality and forge their own urban identity, by whatever name it may be recognized.

The shift of focus from the reservation to urban areas deconstructs the stereotyped idea of home and belonging in regard to Native communities. Native homeland was traditionally associated with vast unspoiled rural areas where the buffalo roam, which were later reduced to reservations—in the popular imagination still synonymous with a tribal place of origin. But reservations “aren’t traditional” (11); they are human–made spaces constructed to control Native communities. Neither are urban areas traditional, where Native peoples were relocated to become “productive” members of society. The title of Orange’s novel, There There, signals an intertextual reference to Gertrude Stein’s line about the city of her childhood: “there is no there there” (298), implying that the city she knew as a child had vanished due to gentrification. The fact that the author chooses to reference a White female author of Jewish American origin, recognized for her avant-garde style, eccentricity, and cosmopolitan sentiments, confirms that he is open to an intertextual inquiry, but also raises a question about the common thread between the two seemingly different experiences. Both authors refer to the same location—Oakland, California—and both reference a past that has gone by, but they do so in different ways. While Stein’s mournful tone communicates her recognition of the irretrievable past, Orange also perceives “unreturnable covered memory” (39), but at the same time finds merit in the continuation of a Native urban presence. His observation challenges longing and grief as the only lenses through which to look at Native history, shifting the readers’ gaze to here and now, where Native land emerges not as “a conceptual floatation device [but as a] locatable, walkable, material” space (Tuck and McKenzie 148).

When asked about their personal history, Calvin Johnson answers: “Mostly I just feel I’m from Oakland” (148); Tony Loman asserts: “It’s my only home” (18), and Dene Oxendene sees himself as “Native, born and raised in Oakland, from Oakland” (39; emphasis in original). Relating to their lifelong place of residence, the protagonists question the necessity of reclaiming the Native past as a stereotypical vision perpetuated by George Catlin’s paintings or Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows, the trope which Jodi A. Byrd calls “Indianness,” “past tense presence [...] spectral, implied, and felt, but remain[ing] as lamentable casual[ity] of national progress” (11). Countering racial stereotyping should not, however, divert attention from Native American present–day reality, as “[t]hey’ve been fighting for decades to be recognized as a present-tense people, modern and relevant, alive” (141). Urbanity, the narrative argues, provides such an opportunity because it is seen not as a disruption of
Native history but as its continuation: “An Urban Indian belongs to the city, and cities belong to the earth” (ii). So it is not the question of blood quantum, bloodlines, or spiritual affinity to a particular plot of land that makes up the Native sense of belonging, but a special bond to Earth as not only a Native but a nonhuman home: “being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere” (ii). The author’s reference to our shared humanity (both human and nonhuman), besides more obvious collective ties such as ancestors and relatives, not only challenges settler-colonial practices, which aimed at obliterating Native connections to land and family, but also allows the author to demonstrate the persistence, viability, and diversity of the Native perspective. Silvia Martínez-Falquina also recognizes “a vindication of belonging, equality, our common humanity” (87; emphasis added) behind the motivations of texts by and about Natives. Urban does not mean “homeless,” as it allows Native characters to reconfigure their connection to land and, subsequently, to develop and establish new ways of belonging, which are crafted to be relevant, meaningful, and efficacious for contemporary Native Americans. One such way is to apply Laverne Roberts’s concept of the “hub,” as discussed by Renya K. Ramírez (22), designating a space that allows for the creation of a sense of belonging away from a geographic center. For urban Native communities, as Orange’s novel demonstrates, the city has become a source of new networks and relationships, even if initially it was perceived as the site of loss.

**Affirming Native Identity and Maintaining Authenticity**

Native identity is another problem that Orange’s narrative queries, as the context of urbanity provides a new set of factors that demonstrate the complexity and fluidity of urban life. By no means is this representation a cohesive concept, as it locates itself somewhere between confrontation and integration, especially because urban Native Americans are an itinerant population; “[m]any migrate between reservations and cities, within and among cities, and even among states” (Urban Indian Health Commission 7). Carol Miller signals “urban” as “experience,” rather than an Indigenous identity category, because it “is crucially relevant as a counter to the stereotypes that, over centuries of contact history, have driven white society’s triumphalist assumptions about the doom and vanishing of Native individuals and nations” (74). To be able to control the construction of identity proves an essential element of Native sovereignty.

The traditional Western view of Native identity is connected to nineteenth-century historical stereotypes and is contingent on the land where they and their ancestors lived, died, and were buried. The experiences of removal and relocation taught Native people that their identity is not dependent on a place, but rather on community, but a sense of community is often lacking in sprawling and diversified urban areas.
As a deliberate assimilative strategy, urbanization reproduces colonial tropes of Native disappearance and undermines the legacy of Native traditionalism, as its objective was to implement and uphold mainstream ideals: “Make them look and act like us. Become us. And so disappear” (9). Due to the mainstream insistence on obliterating difference and claiming connection, uprooted young people, like Orange’s characters, grow up without successful role models, missing the knowledge of their traditional ways to rely on for security.

A search for identity entails one’s identification, but in the case of Native history, it is deeply embedded within the systems of colonial power. It depends on whether the names of Native people are self-identified or given by colonists, as stereotypes and popular myths have often obscured how they see themselves. During early encounters, White explorers (Spanish, French, and English), settlers, legislators, and local officials translated tribal names, often incorrectly, or gave their own names, often corrupted, to Native groups they met, which were often not the names the Natives knew themselves by: “We didn’t have last names before they came. When they decided they needed to keep track of us, last names were given to us, just like the name Indian itself was given to us” (Orange 139; emphasis in original). The narrator’s observation echoes Vizenor’s explication of this term as “a generalization which does not exist in any native language, and which is a western simulation that substitutes tribal names and perpetuates cultural dominance” (Martínez-Falquina 82). Another layer of knowledge circulated during the assimilative process is signaled by Opal’s mother, who observes an imposition of the systemic norms of Western patriarchy onto Native communities: “We had our own way of naming before white people came over and spread all those dad names around in order to keep the power with the dads” (46). At present, various markers provide a system of classification for being recognized as Native, which mimic the tropes that have informed the settler-colonial concept of Native identity, such as history (American Indians), geography (Mexican Indians, Native Hawaiians), legal status (Status and Non-Status Native Americans, enrolled or disenrolled), location (Rez and Urban Native Americans), federally recognized, or ineligible. The narrator presents a long inventory of categories to show how Native labels elude easy classification: “We are Indians and Native Americans, American Indians and Native American Indians, North American Indians, Natives, NDN’s and Ind’ins, Status Indians and Non-Status Indians, First Nations […]” (136). This taxonomy expresses the need for clarity about the parameters of Native “difference,” which benefits only mainstream society in maintaining its authority. This insistence on grasping and defining Native identity challenges the protagonists’ sense of legitimacy and traps them in a vortex of conflicting concepts so much that they are unable to move beyond the identity problem. The situation which per se is a manifestation of the procedures of settler-colonial policy that still precludes Native peoples
from political participation. Names and categories are never transparent; they produce and reflect social order, as to be recognized means to be incorporated into the dominant system.

The gamut of puzzling options testifies to the futility of labeling Native people and reflects the complexity of a contemporary reality. Orange’s narrative does not detach identity from social location, but instead makes urbanity an important element of its characterization. The socio-cultural urban transformation marks a shift from the communal tribal identity to a generic “American Indian” identity, which is largely shaped by mainstream stereotyped beliefs. While Orange’s characters try to formulate self-concepts, they struggle between the need to belong to a community in a traditional Native society and the urban mainstream emphasis on individuality. Calvin Johnson’s parents both come from Native ancestry, but they never talked about it, so he feels like a fraud: “I feel bad sometimes even saying I’m Native […] I just don’t think it’s right for me to claim being Native if I don’t know anything about it” (148-49). Lack of knowledge about his father affects Edwin Black, who feels “removed […] not only because [his mother] is white, and [he is] therefore half white, but because of how she never did a single thing to try to connect [him] with [his Native] dad” (69). Blue, who is raised in a White foster family, feels White “while being treated like any other brown person wherever [she] went” (198). Dene Oxendene “is not recognizably Native. He is ambiguously nonwhite […] [and had] been assumed Mexican plenty, been asked if he was Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Salvadoran once” (28-29). Whereas Tony Loman struggles not to allow FAS to define him: “it’s the way history lands on a face” (16), signaling an important public health issue troubling Native communities.

Whether it is the “right” ancestry without knowledge thereof, mixed-blood heritage with cracks and fissures, physical appearance, or mental affinity, the overwhelming feeling that Orange’s protagonists share is confusion about their Native identity. In Edwin’s words: “I don’t know how to be. Every possible way I think that it might look for me to say I’m Native seems wrong” (72). Thus, Native identity reveals itself as a negotiated and highly contested set of realities, among which the depth and solidity of the connection to Native community, or lack thereof, plays an important role.

Bonita Lawrence claims that “[i]n urban contexts, where other bonds of identity (language, band, territory, or clan) may no longer apply, family becomes all the more important for grounding the person as Aboriginal” (xv). And yet the same families that should help maintain Native identity are, in fact, the sites where this knowledge is discouraged or silenced altogether, due to fear of racist discrimination or desire for easier assimilation and acceptance into White society. While “drawing upon transpersonal sources for strength and resilience that Gerald Vizenor would surely recognize as survivance” (Miller 80), some Native people still choose to be silent about their roots in the interests of survival.
Social ills plaguing Native families, such as alcoholism, drugs, and domestic abuse, add to the feelings of shame and the desire to distance oneself or withdraw entirely from family life, all amidst the struggle with invisibility while being eclipsed by other ethnic communities fighting for survival and advancement in American society. Orange’s storyline, however, features an ethnically homogeneous cast of characters and omits inter-ethnic confrontations, thus escaping the relegation of Native presence to some form of liberal multiculturalism that eventually devalues the Native position. Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle H. Raheja highlight the dangers of a politics of liberal multiculturalism, claiming that Native scholars should “assert their absolute difference in order to gain recognition from the multicultural but still colonial academy” (313). The insistence on pluralism within multiculturalism positions its goals not as a challenge to the mainstream but rather as an insight into one of many ethnic communities that struggle for recognition and acceptance in American society. In other words, there might be a danger of promoting “the narratives and the claims of the descendants of slaves and settlers of color at the expense of Indigenous people” (Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández 81).

There There provides a solution to this ambiguity by introducing the concept of Native identity as a matter of individual choice: “Indianing” is “something [you] could decide for [yourself] when [you are] old enough […] [like] drinking or driving or smoking or voting” (118). This choice must be conscious and voluntary; when the decision to discover and explore one’s Natineness has been made, the sum and consequences of the choices made during the process will constitute identity. In fact, Orange’s “indianing” is evocative of David A. Hollinger’s concept of “postethnic” identity, in which a national or biological origin as the only criterion for identity is substituted by a reversible idea of “affiliation” (11-12). Dene Oxendene, a half-Native documentarian, makes such a choice when he begins to restore the missing bonds of community through filmed interviews with urban Native Americans from Oakland. The reconstruction of these stories is an arduous task, as they are never linear or chronological, and involves painstakingly piecing together fragmented accounts, full of omissions and gaps. These nonsequential histories and chronologies are evocative of Native storytelling in which the audience hears only what is meant for the occasion, not the whole story, whereas the choice of the electronic media documentary gestures both towards its relation to traditionally oral cultures and its educational role for younger generations. Dene’s task emphasizes the importance of storytelling for Native survival: “the world was made of stories, nothing else, just stories, and stories about stories […] we should never not tell our stories, and no one is too young to hear […]” (58), repeats Opal’s mother. Because of their turbulent and fragmented past, Native characters hold history in memories they themselves often do not remember: “We are the memories we don’t remember” (10). Instead, history is remembered
for them in the form of cultural memory, yet often in a skewed way, because historical memory is frequently employed in the service of a ruling ideology. Therefore, the power of counter-narratives is more important for shaping the understanding of history when it is brought in their own words: “being able to understand where we came from, what happened to our people, and how to honor them by living right, by telling our stories” (58). Storytelling sustains historical memory and establishes continuity by preserving collective knowledge when social and communal aspects of traditional Native life are disrupted. “In the White Earth Constitution, Vizenor insists that stories are at the basis of the imagination of nationhood” (Brooks 58), and thus the individual stories that make up the fabric of Orange’s novel imagine a nation as a network of not only families but also other kinds of kinship affiliations that are not predicated on biology but that share an urban association.

Another character, Orvil, also chooses “Indianing,” albeit via a different route, by reclaiming a particular element of Native tradition, the dance. His great-aunt Opal has always refused to talk about “being Indian” (119), choosing to suppress their heritage for the sake of survival in an urban environment. When Orvil accidentally finds the regalia hidden deep in the closet, “faded in color” (121), he is curious to try it on. The regalia, which is too small and itchy, makes him feel like an imposter. Because urban experience has eroded tribal tradition, “[t]here was so much he’d missed, hadn’t been given. Hadn’t been told” (121). Orvil resorts to the internet for lack of guidance: “powwow footage, documentaries on YouTube […] Googling stuff like ‘What does it mean to be a real Indian[?]’” (121). While trying to fit in as a traditional dancer, he looks for a connection to the shared past in order to affirm himself as part of the group: “He’s waiting for something true to appear before him—about him” (122). Hence, performance, as an example of a particular cultural expression, becomes a substitute for absent heritage and a link to the place of belonging. The boy’s dual act, both in front of the mirror and at the powwow, reflects private and communal aspects of culture. In the privacy of his home, Orvil performs for himself to discover who he is, and at the powwow, he performs for his kinfolks to experience the communal bonding. Through a dialogue between the personal and the communal, Orvil explores his identity: “Because dance is an embodied practice, the body is central to cultural meaning, not only because it serves as the medium of enactment, but because the body is the locus and embodiment of those very practices. […] The body effectively serves as a ‘memory pad’ by which the most serious and essential knowledges we have are rooted” (Hancock 440). Dance is a communicative process through which the dancer restores, articulates, and maintains spiritual and visceral energy deriving from the repetition of certain gestures across the generations. Orvil’s willful participation in tribal dances is an act of survivance, which brings hope that this tradition will not die out but will live on among the younger generation, just like the
transmission of oral stories, which testifies to the existence of a living community. Moreover, dance as a voluntary manifestation of Indianness affords visibility: “moving, dancing bodies are viscerally present in the form of individuals and social beings with cultural histories and lived experience” (Axtmann 112). Even though Orvil’s performance is not addressed to the White audience, there is a strain of dominant culture present in non-Native spectators at the powwow, just like the presence of non-Native readers of Orange’s novel. Their acts of observing or reading about Native traditions are important because they function as essential prerequisites for the process of decolonization.

In choosing to be part of the Native myth, Orvil also chooses to conform to it. The fact that he performs Indianness through the lens of American cultural consciousness, with feathers and beaded and fringed buckskins, does not preclude its authenticity: “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” (122). Native identity being constructed within the authoritative discourse of Western norms assures that the protagonist will be taken seriously, claims the narrator, reiterating Louis Owens’s words: “in order to be recognized, to claim authenticity in the world—the Indian must conform to an identity imposed from the outside” (12-13; emphasis in original). Only in this way can he achieve a small measure of social affirmation in a society that tends to degrade Native people. David L. Moore criticizes the static view of Native cultures, which is anchored in the past: “True Americans or Europeans need not wear powdered wigs, yet true Indians must wear feathers” (45). So does Orange, who insists on calling his protagonists “present-tense people” (141), underlining a gap between the stereotype and the present-day reality of Native people. The decision to act “Indian” is a private and individual choice, which signals the protagonist’s sovereignty through the practice of self-rule and decision making, whereas the ensuing reclamation of cultural memory allows his access to the communal past and helps build the protagonist’s sense of self.

Because Orvil’s knowledge comes from secondary sources, there is a question of its accuracy and legitimacy: “he stands, weak in the knees, a fake, a copy, a boy playing dress-up” (122). Using the trope of the simulcrum, the boy’s representation communicates the problem of authenticity in a contemporary world, where “nothing is original, everything comes from something that came before” (11). Paul Lyons signals the mutable character and the permeability of cultural boundaries: “since genuine cultures evolve and are never self-identical to what they were at a previous moment, they are either not actually ‘authentic,’ or else everything is always ‘authentic’ in the sense that ‘authenticity’ refers to whatever people actually do” (26). On a smaller scale, urban youth “have to work harder to get involved in their traditions because they have to achieve Native iden-
tity through study and performance, whereas those born on a reservation are ascribed Native identity” (Pollak 98). There is also the authority of tribal communities, who decide what is and what is not authentic: “what counts as ‘tradition’ and ‘Indian’ for Cherokees, for instance, looks very different than what counts for Lakotas, for Hopis, for Oneidas” (Powell 92). Donning feathers, beads, leather, and other nineteenth-century Plains Native American accouterments, Orvil’s act appears as a transcultural phenomenon—a performative challenge against colonization and assimilation, which is evocative of the years of genocidal settler-colonial policies but also suggestive of the viability and futurity of Indian identity, what Grace L. Dillon calls “biskaabiiyang,” or “recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world” (10). The boy tries to make sense of the old stories in a world that has been altered by White civilization, finding himself in a liminal position in relation to traditional and contemporary Native American existence. Through a dialogue between Western and Native, *indian* and postindian imaginaries, Orvil’s enactment creates and destabilizes meaning at the same time. He has trouble claiming an identity because, while reinventing himself, he has to challenge typical stereotypes of American Indians that obstruct his experience and keep him from knowing himself. In doing so, he represents Vizenor’s concept of “postindians” and “their affirmation of a native presence through the simulation of survivance instead of dominance structures” (Martínez-Falquina 82).

Native identity located in a cityscape is negotiated in the present, while at the same time it is deeply rooted in the historical past. Orange’s characters participate in contemporaneity and are shown as capable of adaptation while maintaining their cultural identity. This fluidity is echoed in Dillon’s concept of Native slipstream, which encompasses multiple universes and realities in the form of “pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream” (3). Hence, urban culture is signaled as a contemporary site of postcolonial negotiations:

Native cultures and identities can be carried forward through new and borrowed forms. At the same time, continuing unites dispersed communities by acknowledging mobility, diaspora, and exile as trajectories of endurance rather than loss and by recognizing the legitimacy of the knowledge, experience, and art produced along and through these lines. (Herman 34).

**Indigenous Futurity—Final Remarks**

In her introduction to *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, Dillon articulates the need for Indigenous people to make themselves visible in the future (2–3). However, how Indigenous peoples will be presented in the future depends on the way they appear in the social imaginary now. In other words, how Orange’s protagonists experience and enact cultural transmission speaks to the futurity of Indigenous

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7 By italicizing and lowercasing the word *indian*, Gerald Vizenor seeks to show that it is just an empty concept without reference, which denotes the ‘simulation, a derivative noun that means an absence’ (15), and which was created and perpetuated by the White dominant society in order to show the stereotypical representations of Native peoples.
nationhood(s). The emphasis on Indigenous presence serves as a link between tradition and the time to come in otherwise contested territory such as urban Oakland,\(^8\) “forming a nexus between epistemologies and ontologies of land and Indigenous futurity” (Bang et al. 39). By creating a future imaginary critical of the past and attentive to the present, Orange disrupts settler futurity and restructures the ways we think about Indigenous futures. Despite a lack of significant associations between Native Americans and urban areas in popular consciousness, cities have been an important site of Native presence since World War II. By giving urban Native communities recognition, Tommy Orange’s novel restores Indigenous relationships to urban California as Native land and creates a narrative of presence, which secures Indigenous continuity. Put more broadly, by bridging the gap between culture and politics, the author makes the urban Native experience part of a national consciousness and pronounces it crucial to the Native American future.

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\(^8\) For a more extensive discussion of urban Indian spaces, see Laura M. Furlan’s Indigenous Cities: Urban Indian Fiction and the Histories of Relocation (2017).
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298