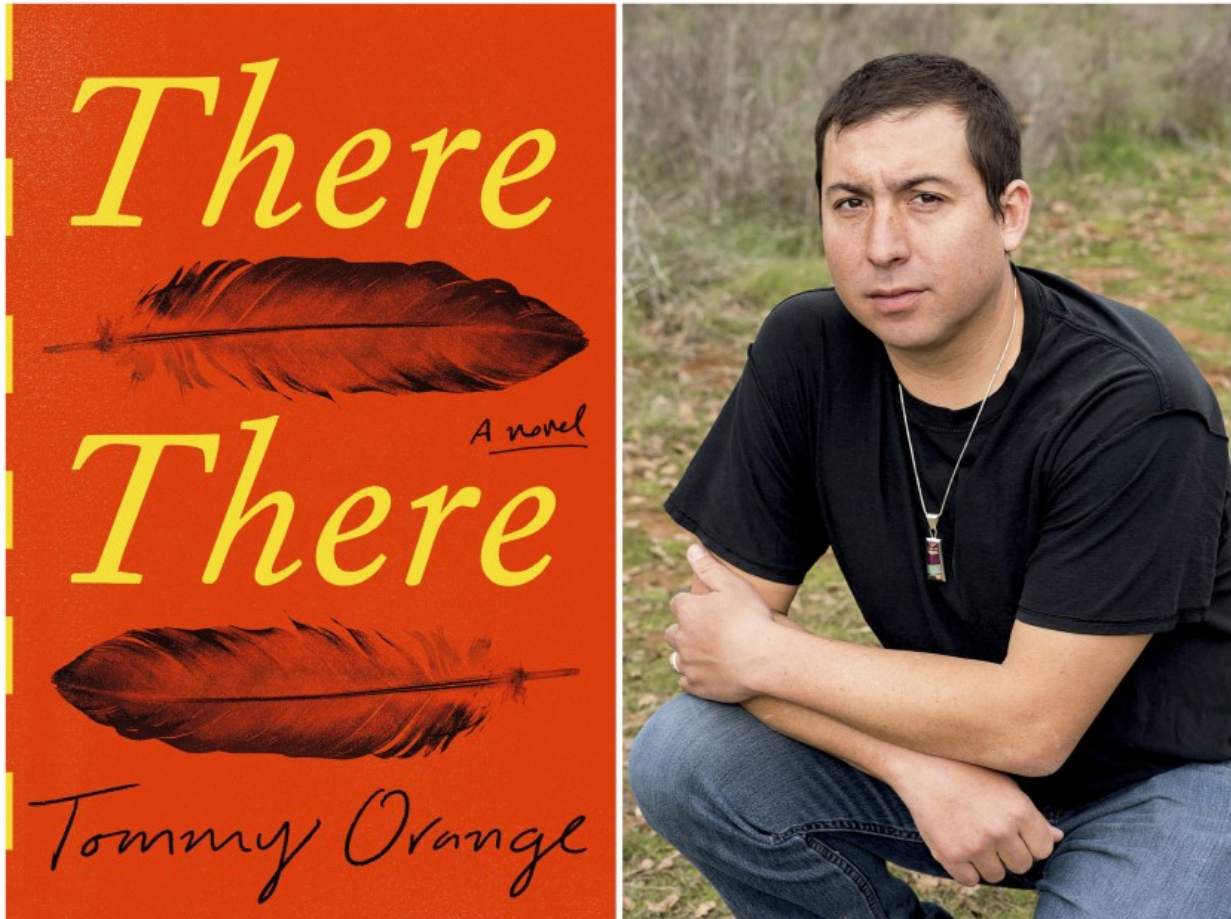


***There There*, by Tommy Orange**
Open Books – Open Minds Reading Guide



The OBOM committee and the Adams Library wish to acknowledge that Rhode Island College sits on the traditional homelands of the Narragansett and Wampanoag peoples. We acknowledge the painful history of genocide and forced removal from this territory, and we honor and respect the many diverse Indigenous peoples still connected to this land on which we gather. It is important to understand the long-standing history that has brought the college to reside on this land, and to seek to understand our roles within that history.

Book Blurb

Tommy Orange's shattering novel follows twelve characters from Native communities: all traveling to the Big Oakland Powwow, all connected to each other in ways they may not yet realize. There is Jacquie Red Feather, newly sober and working to make it back to the family she left behind. Dene Oxendene, who is pulling his life back together after his uncle's death, has

come to work at the powwow to honor his memory. Fourteen-year-old Orvil has come to perform traditional dance for the very first time. Together, this chorus of voices tells of the plight of the urban Native American—grappling with a complex and painful history, with an inheritance of beauty and spirituality, with communion and sacrifice and heroism. Hailed as an instant classic, *There There* is at once poignant and laugh-out-loud funny, utterly contemporary and always unforgettable. (from the publisher)

Tommy Orange was also raised in the Oakland area, and the author has said that he identifies with all 12 of his characters in one way or another. In this novel, Orange confronts themes important to contemporary Native Americans, such as generational trauma and life as a Native American in an urban setting. In addition, the novel explores many other concepts: storytelling and its importance to Native American culture; coincidence, fate, and the interconnectedness of all things; violence; substance abuse and addiction; personal identity versus cultural identity; the concept of home. (from [BookRiot](#))

Biographical Details

Tommy Orange is a recent graduate from the MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts. He is a 2014 MacDowell Fellow, and a 2016 Writing by Writers Fellow. He is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. He was born and raised in Oakland, California, and currently lives in Angels Camp, California.

Awards & Accolades for *There There*

2019 Finalist, Pulitzer Prize in Fiction

2019 Hemingway Fountain/PEN Award

2019 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for Fiction

2018 One of the *New York Times* 10 Best Books of the Year

2018 Center for Fiction First Novel Prize

2018 National Book Critics Circle Award's John Leonard Prize for First Book by a New Voice

There There reached number 1 on the *San Francisco Chronicle*'s best-seller list, and number 8 on *The New York Times* Best Seller list

Media

Alexander Alter, "Tommy Orange's 'There There' Is a New Kind of American Epic," *New York Times*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/31/books/tommy-orange-there-there-native-american.html>

Jim Ruland, "Tommy Orange adjusts to all the attention as a 'There There' sequel flows along," *LA Times*, November 21, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2019-11-21/tommy-orange-there-there-sequel>

Allusions in the Title

“There There” by Radiohead, from the album *Hail to the Thief* (2003)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AQSLozK7aA>

In pitch dark
I go walking in your landscape
Broken branches
Trip me as I speak
Just 'cause you feel it
Doesn't mean it's there
Just 'cause you feel it
Doesn't mean it's there
There's always a siren
Singing you to shipwreck
(Don't reach out, don't reach out
Don't reach out, don't reach out)
Steer away from these rocks
We'd be a walking disaster
(Don't reach out, don't reach out
Don't reach out, don't reach out)
Just 'cause you feel it
Doesn't mean it's there
(Someone on your shoulder
Someone on your shoulder)
Just 'cause you feel it
Doesn't mean it's there
(Someone on your shoulder
Someone on your shoulder)
There there
Why so green and lonely?
And lonely, and lonely?
Heaven sent you to me
To me, to me?
We are accidents waiting
Waiting to happen
We are accidents waiting
Waiting to happen

About the song, Thom Yorke (songwriter and lead singer for *Radiohead*) has said that the song was “supposed to be comforting – ‘It's alright, you're just imagining it.’” The subtitle “The Bony King of Nowhere” refers to an episode of the animated series *Bagpuss*, which Yorke watched with his young son.

Gertrude Stein, on Oakland in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937)

“... what was the use of my having come from Oakland it was not natural to have come from there yes write about it if I like or any- thing if I like but not there, there is no there there.” (298)

Themes & Recurring Imagery

Reflections (in mirrors, TVs, screens): see pages 15-16, 63, 68, 84, 118, 121-22, 159-60

Spiders (myths of Veho the spider trickster, spider legs)

Stories & Storytelling

Names

Cast of Characters

Prologue

In the dark times

Will there also be singing?

Yes, there will also be singing.

About the dark times.

— Bertolt Brecht

We've been defined by everyone else and continue to be slandered despite easy-to-look-up-on-the-internet facts about the realities of our histories and current state as a people.... We have all the logos and mascots. The copy of a copy of an Indian in a textbook. All the way from the top of Canada, the top of Alaska, down to the bottom of South America, Indians were removed, then reduced to a feathered image. Our heads are on flags, jerseys, and coins. Our heads were on the penny first, of course, the Indian cent, and then on the buffalo nickel, both before we could even vote as a people—which, like the truth of what happened in history all over the world, and like all that spilled blood from slaughter, are now out of circulation. (7)

Some of us grew up with stories about massacres. Stories about what happened to our people not so long ago. How we came out of it.... They did more than kill us. They tore us up. Mutilated us.... It was a celebration. (8)

Getting us to cities was supposed to be the final, necessary step in our assimilation, absorption, erasure, the completion of a five-hundred-year-old genocidal campaign. But the city made us new, and we made it ours. We didn't get lost amid the sprawl of tall buildings, the stream of anonymous masses, the ceaseless din of traffic. We found one another, started up Indian Centers, brought out our families and powwows, our dances, our songs, our beadwork. (8-9)

We did not move to cities to die. The sidewalks and streets, the concrete, absorbed our heaviness. The glass, metal, rubber, and wires, the speed, the hurtling masses—the city took us in. We were not Urban Indians then. This was part of the Indian Relocation Act, which was part of the Indian Termination Policy, which was and is exactly what it sounds like. Make them look and act like us. Become us. And so disappear. But it wasn't just like that. Plenty of us came by choice, to start over, to make money, or for a new experience. (9)

Plenty of us are urban now. If not because we live in cities, then because we live on the internet. (9)

They used to call us sidewalk Indians. Call us citified, superficial, inauthentic, cultureless refugees, apples. An apple is red on the outside and white on the inside. But what we are is what our ancestors did. How they survived. We are the memories we don't remember, which live in us, which we feel, which make us sing and dance and pray the way we do, feelings from memories that flare and bloom unexpectedly in our lives like blood through a blanket from a wound made by a bullet fired by a man shooting us in the back for our hair, for our heads, for a bounty, or just to get rid of us. (10)

Urban Indians were the generation born in the city. We've been moving for a long time, but the land moves with you like memory. An Urban Indian belongs to the city, and cities belong to the earth. Everything here is formed in relation to every other living and nonliving thing from the earth. All our relations. (11)

Cities form in the same way as galaxies. (11)

[B]ut nothing is original, everything comes from something that came before, which was once nothing. Everything is new and doomed. (11)

Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere. (11)

Part I: Remain

How can I not know today your face tomorrow, the face that is there already or is being forged beneath the face you show me or beneath the mask you are wearing, and which you will only show me when I am least expecting it?

— Javier Marías

Tony Loneman

Most people don't have to think about what their faces mean the way I do. Your face in the mirror, reflected back at you, most people don't even know what it looks like anymore. (16)

Reflection question: What, how, and why do our faces mean things to others?

Dene Oxendene

Dene puts his headphones on, shuffles the music on his phone, skips several songs and stays on "There There," by Radiohead. The hook is "Just 'cause you feel it doesn't mean it's there." (29)

About his storytelling project, Dene says:

"Anyway, I asked some Indian people who've lived in Oakland for a while and some that just got here not too long ago a two-part question, actually it's not a question, I tried to get them to tell me a story. I asked them to tell me a story about how they ended up in Oakland, or if they

were born here, then I asked what it's been like living in Oakland. I told them the question is meant to be answered in story form, whatever that means to them is okay, then I left the room. I decided to do it confessional style so it's almost like they're telling the story to themselves, or to anyone and everyone behind the lens." (32)

"You know what Gertrude Stein said about Oakland?" Rob says.

Dene shakes his head no but actually knows, actually googled quotes about Oakland when researching for his project. He knows exactly what the guy is about to say.

"There is no there there," he says in a kind of whisper, with this goofy openmouthed smile Dene wants to punch. Dene wants to tell him he'd looked up the quote in its original context, in her *Everybody's Autobiography*, and found that she was talking about how the place where she'd grown up in Oakland had changed so much, that so much development had happened there, that the there of her childhood, the there there, was gone, there was no there there anymore. Dene wants to tell him it's what happened to Native people.... (38-39)

Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield

"Why do we got names like we do?" I said.

"They come from old Indian names. 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)

"You gotta know about the history of your people. How you got to be here, that's all based on what people done to get you here. Us bears, you Indians, we been through a lot. 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. There were bears and Indians all over the place. Sister, they slit all our throats." (51)

Edwin Black

"Native American Indian," this weird politically correct catchall you only hear from white people who've never known a real Native person. ... I use Native, that's what other Native people on Facebook use. (69)

I wrote my thesis on the inevitable influence of blood quantum policies on modern Native identity, and the literature written by mixed-blood Native authors that influenced identity in Native cultures. All without knowing my tribe. Always defending myself. Like I'm not Native enough. I'm as Native as Obama is black. It's different though. For Natives. I know. 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. (71-72)

Part II: Reclaim

A feather is trimmed, it is trimmed by the light and the bug and the post, it is trimmed by little leaning and by all sorts of mounted reserves and loud volumes. It is surely cohesive.

— Gertrude Stein

Jacque Red Feather

She'd recently read an article that called the number of suicides in Native communities staggering. For how many years had there been federally funded programs trying to prevent suicide with billboards and hotlines? It was no wonder it was getting worse. You can't sell life is okay when it's not. (98)

In her head she heard her mom say, "The spider's web is a home and a trap." And even though she never really knew what her mom meant by it, she'd been making it make sense over the years, giving it more meaning than her mom probably ever intended. (101)

Orvil Red Feather

"Listen, baby, it makes me happy you want to know, but learning about your heritage is a privilege. A privilege we don't have. And anyway, anything you hear from me about your heritage does not make you more or less Indian. Don't ever let anyone tell you what being Indian means. Too many of us died to get just a little bit of us here, right now, right in this kitchen. You, me. Every part of our people that made it is precious. You're Indian because you're Indian because you're Indian." (119)

He's waiting for something true to appear before him—about him. It's important that he dress like an Indian, dance like an Indian, even if it is an act, even if he feels like a fraud the whole time, because the only way to be Indian in this world is to look and act like an Indian. To be or not to be Indian depends on it. (122)

Interlude

We made powwows because we needed a place to be together. Something intertribal, something old, something to make us money, something we could work toward, for our jewelry, our songs, our dances, our drum. We keep powwowing because there aren't many places where we get to all be together, where we get to see and hear each other.

We all came to the Big Oakland Powwow for different reasons. The messy, dangling strands of our lives got pulled into a braid—tied to the back of everything we'd been doing all along to get us here. We've been coming for miles. And we've been coming for years, generations, lifetimes, layered in prayer and handwoven regalia, beaded and sewn together, feathered, braided, blessed, and cursed. (135)

Our bumpers and rear windows are covered with Indian stickers like *We're Still Here* and *My Other Vehicle Is a War Pony* and *Sure You Can Trust the Government, Just Ask an Indian!*; *Custer Had it Coming*; *We Do Not Inherit the Earth from Our Ancestors, We Borrow It from Our Children*; *Fighting Terrorism Since 1492*; and *My Child Didn't Make the Honor List, but She Sure Can Sing an Honor Song*. (135-36)

We are Indians and Native Americans, American Indians and Native American Indians, North American Indians, Natives, NDNs and Ind'ins, Status Indians and Non-Status Indians, First Nations Indians and Indians so Indian we either think about the fact of it every single day or we never think about it at all. We are Urban Indians and Indigenous Indians, Rez Indians and Indians from Mexico and Central and South America. We are Alaskan Native Indians, Native Hawaiians, and European expatriate Indians, Indians from eight different tribes with quarter-

blood quantum requirements and so not federally recognized Indian kinds of Indians. We are enrolled members of tribes and disenrolled members, inelligible members and tribal council members. We are full-blood, half-breed, quadroon, eighths, sixteenths, thirty-seconds. Undoable math. Insignificant remainders. (136)

The wound that was made when white people came and took all that they took has never healed. An unattended wound gets infected. Becomes a new kind of wound like the history of what actually happened became a new kind of history. All these stories that we haven't been telling all this time, that we haven't been listening to, are just part of what we need to heal. Not that we're broken. And don't make the mistake of calling us resilient. To have not been destroyed, to not have given up, to have survived, is no badge of honor. Would you cann an attempted murder victim resilient? (137)

This is the thing: If you have the option to not think about or even consider history, whether you learned it right or not, or whether it even deserves consideration, that's how you know you're on board the ship that serves hors d'oeuvres and fluffs your pillows, while others are out at sea, swimming or drowning, or clinging to little inflatable rafts that they have to take turns keeping inflated, people short of breath, who've never even heard of the words *hors d'oeuvres* or *fluff*. (137-38)

If you were fortunate enough to be born into a family whose ancestors directly benefited from genocide and/or slavery, maybe you think the more you don't know, the more innocent you can stay, which is a good incentive to not find out, to not look too deep, to walk carefully around the sleeping tiger. Look no further than your last name. Follow it back and you might find your line paved with gold, or beset with traps. (139)

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. (139)

Dene Oxendene

[Dene] "That's what I'm trying to get out of this whole thing. All put together, our stories. Because 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."

[Calvin] "I just don't think it's right for me to claim being Native if I don't know anything about it."

"So you think being Native is about knowing something?"

"No, but it's about a culture, and a history." (149)

Part III: Return

People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.

— James Baldwin

Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield

She lives by a superstition she would never admit to. It's a secret she holds so tight to her chest she never notices it. (160)

Opal and Jacquie's mom never let them kill a spider if they found one in the house, or anywhere for that matter. Her mom said spiders carry miles of web in their bodies, miles of story, miles of potential home and trap. She said that's what we are. Home and trap. (163)

Octavio Gomez

[Sixto] "She [my grandma] told me I had something in me I wasn't gonna be able to get out this time around. She told me I could handle it like a man. Die with it. But that I could also share it with family. I could give it away over time. Even to strangers. It was some old dark leftover thing that stayed with our family. Some people get diseases passed down in their genes. Some people get red hair, green eyes. We got this old thing that hurts real fucking bad, makes you mean. That's what you got. That's what your grandpa had in him. Be a man, she told me. Keep it to yourself." (181)

"We got bad blood in us," Sixto said. "Some of these wounds get passed down. Same with what we owe. We should be brown. All that white you see that you got on your skin? We gotta pay for what we done to our people." (182)

[Fina] "Long time ago they didn't have a name for the sun." She pointed up to the sun, which was in front of us. "They couldn't decide if it was a man or a woman or what. All the animals met about it, and a badger came out of a hole in the ground and called out the name, but as soon as he did, he ran. The other animals came after him. That badger went underground and stayed there. He was afraid they would punish him for naming it." ... "Some of us got this feeling stuck inside, all the time, like we've done something wrong. Like we ourselves are something wrong. Like who we are deep inside, that thing we want to name but can't, it's like we're afraid we'll be punished for it. So we hide. We drink alcohol because it helps us feel like we can be ourselves and not be afraid. But we punish ourselves with it. The thing we most don't want has a way of landing right on top of us. That badger medicine's the only thing that stands a chance at helping. You gotta learn how to stay down there. Way deep down inside yourself, unafraid." (185)

Part IV: Powwow

A man must dream a long time in order to act with grandeur, and dreaming is nursed in darkness.
— Jean Genet

Blue

"There's a secret war on women going on in the world. Secret even to us. Secret even though we know it," Geraldine says. (202)

Thomas Frank

[About his limp] Is it really some Native-specific countercultural thing you're going for? Some vaguely anti-American movement? Or do you only walk the way your dad walked because genes and pain and styles of walking and talking get passed down without anyone even trying? (214)

The chip you carry has to do with being born and raised in Oakland. A concrete chip, a slab, really, heavy on one side, the half side, the side not white. As for your mom's side, as for your whiteness, there's too much and not enough there to know what to do with. You're from a people who took and took and took and took. And from a people taken. You were both and neither. When you took baths, you'd stare at your brown arms against your white legs in the water and wonder what they were doing together on the same body, in the same bathtub. (216)

Quotations from the end of the novel are intentionally omitted to avoid plot spoilers.

Topics for Research

Native American cultures, traditions, and rituals

Nativism

Native Americans in Rhode Island

Genocide of Native Americans

Native American names and naming practices

Native American reservations

Native Occupation of Alcatraz

Urban Life

Refugees

Borders

Colonialism

Exile, Loss, and Dislocation

Self and Other

Race, ethnic, national, & class identities

Intersectionality

Human Rights

Drug and substance abuse

Addiction and Recovery

Disability

Storytelling

Creative Writing and Culture

American History

Gender

Self-Determination

Rebuilding

Guides

Adams Library Lib Guide

<https://library.ric.edu/therethere>

After reading the full novel, you might be interested in these reflections on the ending (and the book as a whole) here: <https://alexjoyner.com/2018/10/14/dreams-nursed-in-darkness-tommy-oranges-there-there/>

Penguin

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/563403/there-there-by-tommy-orange/9780525436140/readers-guide/>

Lesson Plans and Resources from the Free Library

<https://libwww.freelibrary.org/programs/onebook/obop20/docs/there-there-curriculum.pdf>

Book Riot (Questions below are taken from this source, with some revisions)

<https://bookriot.com/there-there-book-club-questions/>

1. *There There* starts with a prologue: a nonfiction essay about the Native American experience. Similarly, there's a nonfiction interlude on pages 134–141. Why do you think the author opened with this prologue and included the interlude? And how did it inform your reading of the novel?
2. Of the 12 central characters the novel follows, were there some storylines that you enjoyed or cared about more than the others? If so, what about those characters made their story stand out?
3. Why do you think Tommy Orange chose to tell this story from so many different perspectives? And why were some told from a first person perspective while others were third person? Was it ever challenging to follow so many storylines before they began to converge?
4. In an interview with *Read it Forward*, author Tommy Orange had this to say about the concept of home: “I love the word home because it feels good to say it when you feel it, and it can mean so many different things and places and people. Home is moveable, replaceable, and malleable. Home can mean so many different things to so many different people, but once you know what home is for you, it can't be replaced by anything.” Does his opinion of home here align with the exploration of the meaning of home within the book? What do you think Orange is trying to say about “home” in *There There*?
5. How do gender roles factor into this novel? And why are there so many matriarch characters (Maggie, Maxine, and Opal, for instance)?
6. Although this has become a cliché phrase, it really does hold true for *There There*: the setting is a character. What role does the city of Oakland play in this story and in these characters' lives?
7. There is a scene in the novel that references the song “There There” by Radiohead (29), and of course the novel is named *There There* as well. What connections, if any, can be made to the

themes of the novel and the Radiohead song Tommy Orange references? What about the reference to Gertrude Stein's comment about Oakland that "there is no there there" (38)?

8. Spiders are referenced throughout the novel and seem to be an important motif. What do spiders represent for these characters, and why does Tommy Orange keep returning to the images of spiders? From tattoos of spiderwebs to finding spider legs inside of you, what does it all mean?

9. Throughout this story, all of the characters wrestle in one way or another with what it means to be Native American. What conclusions do they come to by the end of the novel? Do these characters reach similar conclusions, or do they all seem to have very different conceptions of their identities as Native Americans in the end?

10. In what ways is violence an important theme in this story, and what is Tommy Orange trying to say about violence? How did you feel about the violence at the end of the story when characters converge at the pow wow? What was the purpose of having everyone's story culminate in this way?

Loved *There There*, and want to read more? While Tommy Orange does not have another book out yet, he did recommend the following books by indigenous authors in an article for *The New York Times*: *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present* by David Treuer, *Empire of Wild* by Cherie Dimaline, and *Eyes Bottle Dark with a Mouthful of Flowers* by Jake Skeets.

If you're looking for more suggestions for new books by indigenous authors, [check out this list](#).