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"If We Learn for Ourselves, We Don't Have to Be Taught": Native Childhood and Pedagogies of Becoming in Tommy Orange's *There There*

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The Native children and youth in Tommy Orange's *There There* are assembling their identities in a gentrifying Oakland, in an Oakland that exists on Ohlone land ([Parrish](#)). They do this work of *becoming* within the continuing project of settler colonial violence, dispossession, and erasure. Caroline Levander describes "the idea of the child as a rich site of cultural meaning and social inscription" and asserts that the child is a "series of representative possibilities" (16). In their struggle to articulate and claim their identities, Oranges' child and youth subjects disrupt narrative, historical, and geographical assumptions about Urban Indians. As Orange explains in his prologue: "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" (7). Orange's prologue foregrounds the pedagogical poetics of childhood that inform the intertwined narratives of the novel's "Cast of Characters."

Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* writes that in the "struggle for liberation a pedagogy of the oppressed" will be "made and remade" (48). This concept of making and remaking is essential to Orange's depiction of Native children and youth. These children "know the sound of the freeway better than we do rivers, the howl of distant trains better than wolf howls (11). The narrator of the prologue declares: "'Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere" (11). The novel uses Native childhood to reveal the difficulty and fragile joy of producing self and place when the land is "everywhere or nowhere."

Becoming

Native girl child. This is the perspective we occupy when *There There's* Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield, and her half-sister Jacquie Red Feather, are taken by their mother to participate in the Native American occupation of Alcatraz island. Dean Rader writes: "The Indian occupation of Alcatraz from 1969 to 1971 is one of the most important instances of American resistance since the American Revolution...It stands as the longest occupation of any federal facility in the history of the United States, and it is one of the few examples of resistance that actually engendered change" (10). Orange produces literary memory of Alcatraz by utilizing the material objects and imaginary pronouncements of Native girlhood. While on the island, Opal carries her

teddy bear, Two Shoes (TS). In their imaginary conversations, TS instructs Opal: "You know, we're not so different... Columbus called you Indians, for us it was Teddy Roosevelt's fault" (51). TS describes a hunting expedition where Teddy Roosevelt refused to kill a "real scraggly old hungry bear," narrating that the media constructed Roosevelt as "merciful, a real nature lover." TS explains: "Then they made the little stuffed bear and named it Teddy's Bear. Teddy's Bear became teddy bear. What they didn't say was that he slit that old bear's throat. It's the kind of mercy they don't want you to know about... You gotta know about the history of your people. ..Us bears, you Indians, we been through a lot" (51). TS's imagined narration moves us from the slaughter of bears to the production of a children's toy, underscoring Native childhood's import to the construction of counter histories.

The significance of knowing history is echoed by Opal's mother pages later, when she insists that Opal understand the profundity of their resistance on Alcatraz Island: "You're old enough to know now, and I'm sorry I haven't told you before. Opal, you have to know that we should never not tell our stories and that none is too young to hear" (57). Robin Bernstein describes how, beginning in the 19th century, "a cultural system" worked to tether "innocence to whiteness through the body of the child" (6). To be "innocent" "was to achieve obliviousness" which was not "merely the absence of knowledge" but an active "state of repelling knowledge" (6). Juxtapose this production of "racial innocence" through white childhood to the knowledge embedded within the toy play of young Opal and proclaimed through her mother's insistence that Native children and youth must know.

There There's complexities lies in its exploration of the difficulties of producing knowledge when the quotidian conditions of survival refuses one the space or time to *tell and know*. When her adopted grandson, Orvil Red Feather, seeks to learn what it means to be Indian, Opal, now in her fifties, describes the "Cheyenne way" of learning on your own and then being taught. Orvil, the grandson that yearns to dance, that will secretly join the ill-fated Big Oakland Powwow, complains: "If we learn for ourselves, we don't need to be taught. It's cuz you're always working." Later, dressed in the regalia he steals from Opal's closet, Orvil gazes in the mirror. He sees "hides and ties, ribbons and feathers, boned breastplate, and hunched shoulders, he stands, weak, in the knees, a fake, a copy, a boy playing dress-up. And yet there's something there, behind that stupid, glazed-over stare...which is why he keeps looking, keeps standing in front of the mirror (121-122). Orvil's dance will refuse "a world made for Native people not to live but to die in, shrink, disappear" (165). Orvil's body will produce enigmatic signs of becoming that force Opal to look back and refuse silence. Orvil will become something new in this space, in his Oakland.

Samira Abdur-Rahman is Assistant Professor of English at the University of San Francisco. Previously, she served as a postdoctoral research fellow at the Frederick Douglass Institute at the University of Rochester. Her current book project, Stealing the Future: Black Childhood and the Ecological Imagination, asserts that a literature of black childhood points to a tradition of writing place, race, and childhood to explore the ecological crises produced at the intersections of racism and capitalism.

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