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Embodied Prayer in Tommy Orange's *There There*: Reaching the All-The-Way-There Place

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Tommy Orange's polyvocal novel, *There There* (2018), in its consideration of urban Native identity in Oakland, deftly takes on questions about cultural history as it pulses in the cultural present. References to BART and local landmarks such as the Coliseum, and histories such as that of Alcatraz, mark it as geographically rooted. However, as I consider the role of drumming and dancing as embodied prayer in this narrative, I am interested in a different kind of place, what Orange's character, Thomas Frank, refers to as *the State*, "a place you could get to where everything felt exactly, precisely in place, where and when it belonged, you belonged, completely okay in it [...]" (218). The characters' struggles to reckon with their place, and their presence, culminates at the Big Oakland Powwow, and we find that for some, prayer emerges as a form of seeking and remembering, a resistant willfulness to remain, reclaim, and return.

Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield, a former child of Alcatraz who carries familial, ancestral, and personal traumas, reflects a ubiquitous contemporary experience. Orange writes of Opal:

"[...] There is troubled water that lives in her, that sometimes threatens to flood, to drown her—rise up to her eyes. [...]. But that's okay because she's become quite good at getting lost in the doing of things. More than one thing at a time preferably. [...]. The trick is to stay busy, distract then distract the distraction. [...]. It's about disappearing in the whirl of noise and doing" (162).

This turning away from internal confrontations, avoidance of pain's impending 'floodwaters' via the "whirl of noise and doing," describes the modern condition, in which there are at our fingertips endless self-distractions. However, by novel's end, as Opal faces a crisis she cannot turn away from, she realizes, "this is the time, if there ever was one, to believe, to pray [...]" (284). Yet, she must *allow* prayer to come forward, from "the place she used to think and imagine from when she was too young to think she shouldn't" (285). Thus, Orange deals with an essential question of our historical moment, the unlearning of forgetting—a reclaiming of spiritual knowledge.

Opal raised her adoptive grandson, Orvil Red Feather, and his brothers without cultural traditions. Upon first seeing powwow dancing on TV at 12 years old, Orvil immediately recognizes the importance of the dance and after secretly teaching himself through internet videos, sets out, at 14, to compete at his first powwow. As Orvil begins, Orange narrates the dance as embodied prayer. "To get to that feeling, to get to that prayer," Orange writes, one must

[...] dance as if time only mattered insofar as you could keep a beat to it, [...] in such a way that time itself discontinued, disappeared, ran out, or into the feeling of nothingness under your feet when you jumped, when you dipped your shoulders like you were trying to dodge the very air you were suspended in, your feathers a flutter of echoes centuries old, your whole being a kind of flight (232-3).

Here, dance is a way of knowing and being, with your body—a way of knowing time and the very air around you differently, with "your whole being." To enter into this "flight," this alternative experience of space and time, is not only to enter into relationship with ancestral presence "centuries old," but to do so within the context of one's living community. Having closed his eyes to shield himself from feelings of embarrassment and fraudulence, "He opens his eyes and sees everyone around him. They're all feathers and movement. They're all one dance" (233). This coming into relationship requires courage, discipline, and determination over self-doubt and fear, which makes Orvil an exemplary model for readers, because even amidst the chaos and violence of the book's climactic battle, "He wants to believe he knows how to dance a prayer and pray for a new world" (271).

The dance depends upon the drum, which Thomas Frank adopts as replacement for alcohol, another method to reach *the State*. Thomas' breath, heart, and fingers are in full discovery of sound and beat throughout his life, so as he awaits the song's first drum hit, he reflects, "Your prayer will be the hit and the song and the keeping of time" (225). For Thomas, drumming and singing are a way of belonging, transporting him to an "all-the-way-there" place, "that complete feeling, like you're right where you're supposed to be [...]—in the song and about what the song's about" (262). Like dancing, drumming becomes a prayer towards a fuller knowing and being, an arrival into a longed-for presence and relation. Perhaps, in our modern time, it is embodied prayer, prayed with our whole being, that can deliver us to a place free from fear's endless distraction.

Christina Garcia Lopez is an Associate Professor of Literature in the English Department at the University of San Francisco, where she also directs the minor in Chican@-Latin@ Studies. She holds a Ph.D. in American Studies, with a certificate in Mexican American Studies, from the University of Texas at Austin. Her recently published book is entitled Calling the Soul Back: Embodied Spirituality in Chicana Narrative.