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Singing the Dark Times in *There There*

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What does it mean to live in a world in which you were never supposed to remain? What does it mean to remain in a time in which you are imagined to be gone? These are impossible questions. And yet they are lived everyday by the urban Native American communities represented in Tommy Orange's novel *There There*.

The story recalls the tension between the collective and the individual that urban thinkers have written about for a century, from W.E.B. Du Bois to Jane Jacobs to Laura Pulido.¹ Our cities are places in which the richness of human diversity finds its way together; that diversity, and the complexity of human and social difference, creates an exciting energy and creativity. At the same time, our cities are places of exclusion and extraction, places from which some people are expelled, and where others find themselves grasping desperately for life, seeking a time and place that can be home, in a time and place that rejects their very existence.

What does it mean to live in a world in which you were never supposed to remain?

Toni Morrison wrote that the work of decolonized writing could look like the work of map-making. She said that a cartographic approach to understanding the world could be done in a new way, without the colonial imperative that has for so long crushed the spirit of places as it mapped them. As she put it, "I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World - without the mandate for conquest."²

¹ For example: W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Philadelphia: Published for the University of Pennsylvania, 1899); Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961); Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

² Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 3.

Exploration without conquest. Morrison writes that this involves, or maybe creates, a deepened connection to physical/material places, and that an understanding of “place” itself is deeply tied to identity, both personal and collective. Forced diaspora changes everything, pulling apart human connection to the earth and to the structures of our places, urban or otherwise. This is the condition of so many communities in the colonial and post-colonial world. It’s important to understand not just when and where displacement happens, when and how diasporic communities are created, but also how people remake themselves, what it takes to fuse again those frayed connections.

What does it mean to remain in a time in which you are imagined to be gone?

“We are still here.” So declare the bumper stickers at the Great Oakland Pow Wow, the event around which Orange’s novel is set. In many ways, this is the message of the text, but with no grand gestures of resilience or recovery – instead, this is a book about getting through and getting by and connecting and disconnecting.

Though he writes that he doesn’t want to tell us about resilience, Orange makes it clear that despite the forced dislocations pressed upon Native Americans, Oakland becomes a center, a core, a home. And Oakland, like the other places described by Orange throughout the book, becomes a character that shapes its people. You can feel this in the details large and small throughout the book: riding on a too-small bicycle down International Boulevard with potholes and car traffic; kids stealing coins from a fountain in the tony hills; riding a BART train to Fruitvale Station, a location heavy with meaning for so many communities. And amid the tragedies are reinventions: “[T]he city made us new,” he writes, “and we made it ours.”³

The novel touches on important topics with journalistic force – from the disappearances and deaths of Native women, domestic violence throughout the community, the challenges of poverty both on and off the “urban rez,” and the ways that cultural forms like the pow wow are bent and shaped by contemporary capitalism, even as they hold on to their roots. And the guns. It’s impossible to reflect on *There There* without acknowledging the drumbeat of the guns, from the first colonial moments to the tragic present.

Within that tragedy, Orange writes about the ways that stories get stuck – in our throats, in our minds. Sometimes they get lost. Re-telling them, reconstructing them,

³ *There There*, p. 8.

naming them: these are the practices of community-building in the face of the impossible. Those stories take many forms, through creativity and art, and song, as German poet and playwright Bertold Brecht wrote in the squalor of Nazi Germany's rise. Orange cites him in an epigraph that suggests that such creativity is perhaps the most human of impulses:

In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing,
About the dark times.⁴

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⁴ Brecht, as cited in *There There*, p.1.