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PLACE AS A STORIED EVENT-IN-PROCESS IN BRAIDING SWEETGRASS AND THERE THERE

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ABSTRACT

The notion that place may be conceptualized as a storied event-in-process is the crucial premise of this literary exploration. The essay critically analyzes the storied memoir *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Potawatomi scholar and scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer, and the novel *There There* by Cheyenne and Arapaho author Tommy Orange, in order to understand the ways that place is socialized and localized through habit, representation, narrative, and action in the texts of these Native American activists. This comparative examination will demonstrate that interpreting place as a storied, processual event enables possibilities for new representations of identity and new imaginings of locality; the inquiry will also challenge the reader to actively and intentionally participate in the storied event of place within the decolonizing frameworks enunciated throughout the investigation.

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Place As a Storied Event-In-Process In *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *There There*

1.1. Introduction: Place and Story

Places are essential to our narratives as we experience and navigate the lifeworlds in which we exist. The central argument of this essay is that place may be conceptualized as a storied event-in-process. Jeff Malpas states, “The crucial point about the connection between place and experience is not that place is properly something only encountered ‘in’ experience, but rather that place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience” (*Place* 31). By way of introduction, and particularly with respect to literary and narrative texts, it is important to emphasize that understanding place as a storied event-in-process creates the possibility for new forms of representation, new ways of imagining our locality, and new ways of navigating our social and geographical milieus. Place as a storied event enmeshes and informs persons, non-persons, locations, and objects, and it may be interpreted as part of a reciprocally mediated, unfolding process that blurs spatial boundaries in connection with both the human and the non-human as it impels the open-ended process along. Interpreting place as a processual happening lends itself to the work of unfixing and disrupting bounded localities and identities, and it enables place to be represented as both a geographical arena and a social construction. Place as a storied event-in-process encompasses ongoing socio-cultural relations, productions, memories, and imaginings, and as Indian-American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai implies, place may be “socialized and localized through complex and deliberate practices of performance, representation, and action” (*Modernity* 180). Place as “storied” encourages us to narratively articulate the meaning of our lives as embodied humans living in a material world. Presenting place as an unfolding, storied event also enables an articulation of the potential confluence between immediate experience and narrative representation in the analysis of the two primary texts under consideration in this essay, Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* and Tommy Orange's *There There*.

1.2. Place and Decolonial Projects

"We are where we think," declare Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh in the opening pages of their analysis of decoloniality (*Decoloniality* 2). Locality and place are of primary importance for my proposed decolonial interpretation of texts by two Indigenous authors, especially in light of the much-vaunted "spatial turn" in recent literary and cultural studies. Yet, decolonial projects take on many manifestations, and decolonization work requires specificity and clear enunciation. Asserting that place is a storied event-in-process is not in and of itself "decolonial." So, how may this essay be presented and implemented as a decolonizing project?

Walter Mignolo is an Argentinian academic whose ground-breaking scholarship is influential in the formation and development of decolonial studies and practices. He offers an incisive summary of decoloniality that aptly frames this project: he says that decoloniality "seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought" (*Decoloniality* 17). Mignolo's sketch is complemented by Appadurai's claim that "decoloniality offers an alternative, one that is rooted in Indigenous thought about nature, community, and solidarity" ("Beyond"). This project is centered upon considering the differing ways that Kimmerer and Orange construct and represent decolonial ontologies and decolonial epistemologies in their texts. The reflection here upon place is admittedly just one among many possible interpretations, and this reflection is not intended to stand in exclusive contradistinction to rival or differing accounts of place. A major goal, however, is to participate in the process of decolonizing knowledge. As Mignolo asserts, "decolonizing knowledge is not rejecting Western epistemic contributions to the world. On the contrary, it implies appropriating its contributions in order to de-chain them from their imperial designs" (*Darker* 63). Kimmerer and Orange both in inventive and unique ways attempt to de-chain Western epistemic notions from settler frames and to reclaim, reconfigure, retake, and re-narrativize the notions for their own decolonizing projects. This essay seeks to privilege the narratives of both Indigenous authors, and it is an attempt to embrace Mignolo's assessment of the tasks of decolonial projects: "Decoloniality, therefore, means both the analytic task of unveiling the logic of coloniality and the prospective task of contributing to build a world in which many worlds will coexist" (*Darker* 54). *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *There There* contribute to the building of such a world, and hopefully this essay will as well.

1.3. Relationality and Transformative Activism

This analysis also seeks to highlight the ways that Kimmerer and Orange open up potentialities for *relationality* and *transformative activism* within a decolonizing paradigm. Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice speaks to the importance of relationality for Indigenous communities in his monograph on Indigenous literatures:

> Indeed, I'd go so far as to argue that relationship is the driving impetus behind the vast majority of texts by Indigenous writers—relationship to the land, to human community, to self, to the other-than-human world, to the ancestors and our descendants, to our histories and our futures, as well as to colonizers and their literal and ideological heirs—and that these literary works offer us insight and sometimes helpful pathways for maintaining, rebuilding, or even simply establishing these meaningful connections. (*Why* xix)

Relationality is a key for the creation and development of what Appadurai calls "meaningful life-worlds" (*Modernity* 184), and individual and communal relationships may be decolonizing as they engender alternate forms of knowing, relating, participating, and living in these life-worlds.

Furthermore, interpreting a place-event as a non-static, open-ended site for transformation enhances the potential for what Laura Furlan calls "transformative activism" (*Indigenous* 24). Kimmerer's storied memoir is an activist text that encourages meaningful collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples for the responsibly sustainable transformation of natural environments and habitats. Orange's novel is a decolonizing counterdiscourse, an activist text enacting social criticism that challenges representations of urban Natives as "exiles without culture, stuck in a liminal space between the traditional and the modern, problematically separated from an authentic ideal of Indian culture and identity" (Ramirez, *Native* 21). Both Kimmerer's cultural practices and Orange's narrative representations are texts of transformative activism that embody decolonial practices within networks of relationality.

2.1. Participating In the Event of Place in *Braiding Sweetgrass*

In the opening pages of her work *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Potawatomi scholar and scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer declares, "Our relationship with the land cannot heal until we hear its stories" (*Braiding* 9). She introduces a phrase at the beginning of her carefully crafted, self-described interweaving of "science, spirit, and story" (*Braiding* x), one that serves as an invitation to consider the relationship(s) between identity and locality: "becoming Indigenous to a place" (*Braiding* 9). Kimmerer employs a refreshing approach by intertwining stories from her people and her life, together with scientific information and environmental analyses, to present a beautiful narrative proposal for how one might responsibly participate in the storied event of place. She invites us to hear the stories of the land, to develop new shapes of experience, and to be attentive to the spaces of our lives. *Braiding Sweetgrass* enables us to understand place in new ways and to think of place as exceedingly more than a fixed/limited/geospatial sphere, location, or thing. Kimmerer disrupts the notion that place should be clearly defined or quantifiable or static. This segment of the essay contends that place may be understood as part of a continuing, unfolding process; that within this process it is instructive to interpret and represent place as a storied event; and that place-making involves responsibly participating in the storied event.

From my position as a non-Indigenous scholar it is important for me to operate (as best as possible) within the decolonizing paradigm detailed above, one that privileges Indigenous communities' knowledges and lifeways. I seek to identify and honor place-based occurrences of meaning-making. Mignolo offers a helpful proposal in this regard: "It is necessary for dissenting actors belonging (e.g., having citizenship, not necessarily the right blood or skin color) to a colonizing society (e.g., the US today) to join projects of decolonization (political and epistemic) that are, at once, *articulated by the colonized* and yet *not the project of a colonized elite*" ("Delinking" 458). *Braiding Sweetgrass* is instructive in that it points "toward a vision of human life that is not dependent upon or structured by the forced imposition of one ideal of society over those that differ" (Mignolo, "Delinking" 459). By considering the notions of animacy, process, immanent vitality, reciprocal appropriation, and reflexive agency, this analysis of Kimmerer's narratives seeks to enhance our understanding of place as a storied event so that we may to begin to look for ways to constructively and responsibly become a part of such events.

One objective in privileging Indigenous texts is not to "reduce the Indigenous to an ethnic category" (Mignolo, *Decoloniality* 59). Rather, a goal that is shared with Kimmerer is to promote meaningful collaboration between settler scholars and Indigenous scholars and communities. As

Chickasaw literary theorist Jodi Byrd encourages, “Settler, native and arrivant each acknowledge their own positions within empire and then reconceptualize space and history to make visible what imperialism and its resultant settler colonialism and diasporas have sought to obscure” (*Transit* xxx). The current exploration of place as a storied event-in-process arises from the localized, tribally-specific stories and analyses of Kimmerer, a Potawatomi author and scientist. Participating in the process of decolonial place-making often involves specific, local places and peoples; universal theory does not translate into local praxis without intentional and responsible adaptation. By privileging Indigenous knowledges and seeking to “activate indigeneity as a condition of possibility” (Byrd, *Transit* xxix), theoretical frameworks may begin to arise that make it possible to maintain and in fact celebrate difference and conflict in place (Pratt, *Native* 153).

When we speak of place as event, we are employing a perceptual metaphor, a useful figurative and descriptive trope that is not necessarily dependent upon any specific theoretical or metaphysical paradigm, but is instead useful in multiple paradigms or fields as a tool of narrative enunciation and representation. We continually experience the powerful, beautiful, atrocious, and tragic proliferation of places, and in so doing we begin to attune ourselves to the emergent stories that arise from our participation in these place-events; we drift into the process of “soul-deep fusion” with place (Kimmerer, *Braiding* 213); we lay the groundwork for meaningful collaboration between Indigenous and Western ways of knowing (Whyte); and we utilize place as a site for transformation that “enfranchises a whole new set of social knowledges” (Comer, *Landscapes* 15). Such a storied, relational discourse is an integral part of the “process of knowing and being where knowing is an activity and what is known is not a thing but an event” (Burkhart, *Indigenizing* 120). Our stories are embedded in place. Participating in the storied event of place requires acknowledging both our relationship with our places and our relationship with other humans and non-humans. In order to meaningfully collaborate and responsibly participate in decolonizing ways we must be committed to facilitating long-term processes that privilege Indigenous cultures, voices, and ways of knowing, and also to transforming power dynamics that are "not conducive to coordinated action that would avoid further injustice against indigenous peoples" (Whyte, "Too Late" 1). Within this interpretive framework, and following Kimmerer's lead, I contend that we may both discover ways to responsibly participate in place as a storied event-in-process, and also to participate in such a manner that our praxis may become part of a decolonizing project.

2.2. Place, Indigeneity and Story

The choice of "place" as the operative term for this analysis (as opposed to space, land, territory, home, region, or landscape,) is intended to enhance the possibilities for interaction, relationality, and transformative activism, far beyond mere geographical interpretations. What Scott Pratt calls the logic of place in his book *Native Pragmatism* opens doors for transformative possibilities; place as storied event involves more than interaction in a geographical location – it "extends to a redevelopment of a way of orienting one's understanding in the world" (*Native* 146, 161). Kimmerer's presentations of place resonate with Pratt's pluriversal understanding of the term: he insists that conceptions of place establish the expectation "that there will be multiple geographical centers, multiple origins and histories relative to those centers, multiple 'fit' relationships between the land and its inhabitants, and an ongoing need to determine relations between them" (*Native* 153). This non-hegemonic outlook makes it possible to "build a world in which many worlds will coexist" (Mignolo, *Darker* 54). In this sense, foregrounding "place" enables multiple stories, histories, outlooks, and processes to merge and converge in an ongoing network of relationality.

As an Indigenous woman and a biologist, Kimmerer offers a storied account of place. Her narrative weaves a non-linear web, and the places, people, and non-humans are not grafted onto absolute, detached, de-localized spaces or states of being; instead, she employs a narrative semantics that presents people and their experiences as intrinsically connected to place. She asks, “What happens when we truly become native to a place, when we finally make a home? Where are the *stories* that lead the way?” (*Braiding* 207, emphasis added). Rather than offering definitive answers to her questions, Kimmerer opts to tell stories that point to vibrant ways of being human in the places we know and love. She strives, as many Indigenous thinkers do, to center her presentation upon a deep connection to place, land, landscape, or locality. Cherokee philosopher Brian Burkhart says, “Words, understood in the context of locality, are fundamentally not symbols but physically voiced manifestations of locality” (*Indigenizing* xvi). There is an important reciprocity between humans and places when places are understood as events, or even more specifically as storied events-in-process. People engage with places, and in turn reciprocally manifest their experiences through language, story, ceremony, or artistic expression, all of which actively construct places as well. In this way, place can be understood as a continually unfolding, emergent event in the ongoing narratives of human life.

In the telling of her stories, Kimmerer refrains from making universal claims about place and land. Interpreting place as an integral part of human experience highlights the nature of discourse, language, stories, or rhetoric as thoroughly and inevitably local or regional. Telling stories about our places helps to develop decolonial tendencies that enable us, as Mignolo argues, to delink from “the myth of universal history. . . there are no histories other than local” (*Local* xvii). Regardless of the ways in which global or transnational discourse permeates experience, every presentation of locality arises from a situated, localized place. To reemphasize an earlier line of thought, phenomenologist Jeff Malpas makes this provocative claim: “Place is not founded *on* subjectivity but is that *on which* subjectivity is founded. Thus, one does not first have a subject that apprehends certain features of the world in terms of the idea of place; rather, the structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of a place” (*Place* 34). Malpas, a non-Indigenous scholar, aligns with Indigenous scholars in developing the basic understanding of human life as essentially a life of location, and of self-identity as a matter of identity found in place (*Place* 6). Again, he states, “The crucial point about the connection between place and experience is not, however, that place is properly something only encountered ‘in’ experience, but rather that place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience” (31). Within this paradigm, “human expression” as Cherokee scholar Rachel Jackson identifies it, is an animating power of local emplacement that facilitates the collective, processual unfolding of experiences and discourses. She notes, “Human expression is always already regional, and critically so, because this expression results from *and* lends to the social construction of places and identities” (“Locating” 309). Interpreting place as an event-in-process points toward the relational nature of such social construction. Multiple stories construed in various ways participate in the event of place-making. Human expression is reflective of this complicated, reciprocal process. Keith Basso offers a related observation: “The experience of sensing places, then, is both thoroughly reciprocal and incorrigibly dynamic. As places animate the ideas and feelings of persons who attend to them, these same ideas and feelings animate the places on which attention has been bestowed” (*Wisdom* 107). Many Indigenous communities understand place or land as inherently having, possessing, or displaying agency; this notion of the agentive animacy or immanent vitality of place is central to *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

2.3. Animacy, Process, and Immanent Vitality

I have argued that place may be conceptualized as a storied event-in-process. Before further unpacking the notion of place as event and presenting it as a venue for decolonial practice, it is important to consider Kimmerer's arguments regarding the animacy of place. It will also be helpful to discern why Kimmerer's notions of animacy, in conjunction with process thought and new materialism on basic levels, are compatible with and useful for any attempt to participate in the unfolding event of place.

The storied presentations in *Braiding Sweetgrass* advocate for the animacy of place. Kimmerer celebrates the Potawatomi language that is "a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things" (*Braiding* 55). Humans do not provide or give places animacy or agency; rather, we experience this animacy, this immanent vitality, in a relational way when we become participants in the event of place. In their edited collection on ontology, agency, and politics, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost assert that new materialisms understand matter itself "as lively or as exhibiting agency" (*New Materialisms* 7). They insist that their task involves "creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter's immanent vitality," and they emphasize "emergent, generative material being" (*New Materialisms* 8). Indigenous thinkers have long known that places possess and exhibit animacy prior to and independent of any human interaction. Humans have the option and potential to participate in the event of place, and such participation is possible because places are sites for potential transformation and relationality that open themselves up to and make possible our participation. Places - because of their animate or agentive unfolding – enable humans to become embodied participants in the ongoing processes of their developments. In this way, we may participate in a plentitude of remarkable "choreographies of becoming" (*New Materialisms* 10).

Through our intentional attunement to the animacy and immanent vitality of place, we may begin to become aware of "something that is not me, for which *we have no language*, the wordless being of others in which we are never alone" (*Braiding* 48, emphasis added). Though place in this essay is being presented as a storied event, the limitations of language are readily acknowledged. "We have no language" for so much that we perceive, intuit, or experience. Linguistic analyses and narrative representations can only take us so far, because we are of course limited in what we can express.

Kimmerer illustrates her own understanding of the animacy of place in correlation to human limitations when she describes her experiences studying the work of Anishinaabe ethno-botanist Keewaydinoquay. In a treatise on traditional fungi uses, Keewaydinoquay incorporated the word *puhpowee*, which she translated as "the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight" (*Braiding* 48). Kimmerer was struck by both the word and the concept. "The makers of this word," she felt, "understood a world of being, full of unseen energies that animate everything" (*Braiding* 49). And though she is convinced of the animacy of place, Kimmerer does not presume to understand this potent idea in its totality. There are boundaries to what we can know or say.

> (I)n scientific language our terminology is used to define the boundaries of our knowing. What lies beyond our grasp remains unnamed. . . But to become native to this place, if we are to survive here, and our neighbors too, our work is to learn to speak the grammar of animacy, so that we might truly be at home (Kimmerer, *Braiding* 49, 58).

Participating in the event of place encourages us to learn and practice this grammar of animacy as we all the while acknowledge the boundaries of our knowing.

Process philosophy understands life and being and reality as changing, dynamic, varying, and fluctuating. Any apparently stable, fixed, or recurring parts or aspects of life emerge from a complex interweaving of continuous processes. A.N. Whitehead, a central figure in the development of process thought in the 20th century, argued that the primary problem with Western philosophy is that “it tends to ignore the fluency, and to analyze the world in terms of static categories” (*Process* 209). Process thought moves away from notions of static individuals and places that exist substantially in a fixed way in strictly linear temporality. Life or reality is always becoming, arising or emerging from processes and modes or types of occurrences. Burkhart adds, “In the context of the already always becoming of reality in locality . . . all the different experiences of the world as it is presenting itself are simply regarded as a part of that *process* of the continual manifestation of reality or the always already being in motion of the becoming of things” (*Indigenizing* 245, emphasis added). Process thought is not circumscribed by the prevailing historical theories of Western substance metaphysics, and it is not as concerned with what a person, place, or entity “is” but rather with what it “does.” “Even space,” Burkhart says, “most often understood as a static and simple void, is a qualitative process” (*Indigenizing* 244). Additionally, as Coole and Frost assert, “it is evident from new materialist writing that forces, energies, and intensities (rather than substances) and complex, even random processes (rather than simple, predictable states) have become the new currency” (*New Materialisms* 12). Places are fluid events, always in process.

Kimmerer’s notions of animacy and aspects of process and new materialist thought are especially insightful in conjunction with various Indigenous ways of knowing, and with this decolonizing analysis, because they are not of necessity committed to traditional Western concepts of static objects, substances, or states. The presentations of animacy in *Braiding Sweetgrass* offer a framework for intercultural, decolonizing research and writing, and they make room for Indigenous cultural and metaphysical representations and imaginings. Human knowledge is seen as generated in community upon reflection in the midst of an unfolding, emerging series of interrelated processes. “Locality is a process, not an abstract limit” (Burkhart, *Indigenizing* 88). More specifically, understanding place as an animate, lively, immanently vital event-in-process enables us to move away from notions of place as strictly fixed, bounded, located, circumscribed, identifiable, recordable, map-able, manageable, or unchanging. We can instead begin to think of place as part of interrelated, ongoing processes, and make an intentional decision to situate place in our narratives as a storied event, specifically an event in which we can participate.

2.4. Participating in Place: A Decolonizing Practice

Participating in the process of decolonial place-making, when place is interpreted as an event-in-process, has the potential to become a decolonizing habit or practice. The word practice is emphasized because place is here conceptualized as a storied event with/in which we may participate, and also because many decolonial methodologies value and promote practice and praxis over theory. *Braiding Sweetgrass* provides strong examples of decolonizing praxes-in-action; Kimmerer’s narratives encourage like-minded scholars and activists, both Indigenous and settler, to embrace decolonial theories of place and to embody decolonial practices in our communities.

Our participation in the storied event of place is part of a collective action that arises from the communities with which we are affiliated. Jackson incorporates notions of community engagement that correlate with practice-in-action: “Critical theory that engages space and place even now merges with decolonial theory amid increasing calls for community-engaged leadership and community-engaged projects” (“Resisting” 509). Mvskoke scholar Laura Harjo argues that “Decolonizing as an *action* can redefine the definition of the community and what constitutes land by underscoring the ways in which land is known and understood” (*Spiral* 100, emphasis added). A central focus of this segment is to consider how place and locality may not only be known and understood within a decolonial matrix, but also how one might relate to and (within the decolonial framework put forth here) participate with/in place. Jackson notes, “The decolonial project challenges us all to reflect upon how we place ourselves and our work on the landscapes that shape our lives – landscapes that have been expropriated from Indigenous peoples” (“Resisting” 498). Decolonial place-making opens up possibilities for meaningful collaboration in theory and practice between Indigenous and settler scholars.

Kimmerer’s entire monograph utilizes stories of plants, trees, and Indigenous wisdom to draw us into her own unique decolonizing project. She operates within what some decolonial theorists call “transmodernity,” which is a reconfiguring of place and embodiment into non-imperial, anti-settler, decolonial paradigms of subjectivity, locality, and temporality (Burkhart 47-8). She notes, “To walk the science path I had stepped off the path of indigenous knowledge”; however, her presentation at a gathering of Native elders considering traditional knowledge of plants “was the beginning of my reclaiming that *other way of knowing* that I had helplessly let science supplant” (*Braiding* 44). Her return to that other way of knowing is part of a decolonial epistemic shift that “brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding” (Mignolo, “Delinking” 453). Participating in the storied event of place is a futurity-minded practice (Harjo, *Spiral* 100) that merges with the participationist, system-of-responsibilities approach advocated and embodied by Kimmerer throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Understanding place as a participatory venue of sorts can be used as a part of our decolonizing project if, throughout the process of representing and participating in place, we work to avoid and reconstruct unjust hierarchies and uneven cultural or political dynamics. This tactic also arises from and leads to embodied rather than merely theoretical knowledge; this in itself has a decolonizing effect because, as Harjo observes, “Discovering the presence, power, and importance of embodied knowledge is an act of futurity as well as resistance, because it marks Indigenous knowledge as important and meaningful in the current moment and in the future” (*Spiral* 82). The practice of place-participation begins with embodied community knowledge, and theory and praxis arise from that embodied knowledge.

Decoloniality, it should be noted, must not be presented or interpreted as a new universal, or a new canon. Decoloniality is an option and a welcome alternative to coloniality and its mythical universality. We must remain wary of the tendency or potential to commodify decoloniality “as the property of a group of individuals (i.e. the modernity/[de]coloniality project) and as a new *canon* of sorts, both of which erase and shroud decoloniality’s terrain of political project, praxis, and struggle” (Mignolo, *Decoloniality* 82). Contrary to the colonial interpretation, place should not be perceived solely as property, a mere commodity; striving to participate in the event of place is a decolonial practice insofar as we work to situate place in a decolonial paradigm that is centered upon Indigenous notions of praxis, relationality, and meaningful collaboration.

2.5. Narrative Paradigms and Sites of Transformation and Relationality

Interpreting place as a storied event-in-process presages a narrative matrix that is critical in relation to our participation in the process. Jackson says, “To engage Indigenous communities and modes of leadership, we must attend to the storied landscapes that represent the histories, perspectives, and practices of the places in which we live and lead" ("Resisting" 504). We must learn the stories of a place in order to meaningfully become a part of it. Kimmerer, we recall, uses story to represent her own unique relationship to place. She says, "Language is the dwelling place of ideas that do not exist anywhere else. It is a prism through which to see the world" (*Braiding* 258). Places are integral to the stories we tell and to the discourses in which we are engaged; they emerge in process from what Burkhart calls a web of epistemic locality, a continuously unfolding network through which being, meaning, and knowing are rooted and manifested in place. "Stories," Jackson asserts, "bring people together to create located meaning" ("Resisting" 499). Places are events that we participate in, and to which we intricately relate through reflection and story. Burkhart rightly intimates that local, situated occasions are not *of* place; rather, our stories, experiences, reflections, and expressions are moments in the *unfolding* of place (*Indigenizing* 197).

Kimmerer and her daughters moved to an old farm in upstate New York when her daughters were young, and the biologist participated in the unfolding of place as part of her own story. On her property, there was a pond that was filled with algae after years of "eutrophication" – a process of nutrient enrichment that happens over time (*Braiding* 83). "It was hard to believe that anyone would dip even a toe in that pond today. My daughters certainly would not. It was so choked with green that you could not tell where weeds left off and water began" (*Braiding* 83). As a scientist, Kimmerer knew that she needed to remove nutrients from the pond, and not just skim foam from the surface of the water or dump in chemicals and hope for the best. She determined to be a good mother and to fix the pond. She committed to participate in place. "At school," she says, "I taught ecology, but on a Sunday afternoon when the kids were off at a friend’s, I got to *do* ecology” (*Braiding* 88). The process of improving the pond was tedious. She raked algae from the water in great quantities, then piled the algae on the shoreline. As the piles quickly accumulated, it became apparent that they would have to be moved so that the nutrients wouldn’t return in decay back into the pond, thus obviating her painstaking work. Mud became her close friend, as did the tadpoles she necessarily had to remove from each rake-full of algae. “On Saturday mornings, Sunday afternoons, year after year, I would go to the solitude of the pond and get to work . . . I cannot count the hours that I’ve spent there. Almost without notice the hours stretched out to years” (*Braiding* 94-5). There were difficult decisions to be made. Things were often “murky” when the spiritual and the pragmatic bumped heads on a practical level (*Braiding* 90). But over time, she began to notice a difference. The pond was clearing up. The work is not complete, but Kimmerer’s intentional activity has made a noticeable difference at her home place. “Our lives became entwined in ways both material and spiritual. It’s been a balanced exchange: I worked on the pond and the pond worked on me, and together we made a good home” (*Braiding* 95). Her story was interwoven with the pond’s story, and the pond became a part of her life.

Much of Western philosophy and culture as a colonial enterprise has led to displacement and alienation from the very places in which people live their lives. People are far too often displaced, dislocated, detached. Particularly in the academy, meaning is often sought after solely in books or abstract theories, often to no avail. “Meaning does not happen in disembodied, delocalized texts” (Burkhart, *Indigenizing* xxiii). A major theme of *Braiding Sweetgrass* is the reorientation and reconnection of humans with the physical landscape. Kimmerer asks, “How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like?” (*Braiding* 6). An important step is to re-think our notions of place, and to conceive of it in such a way that acknowledges our complicity in its creation and unfolding. Such rethinking focuses our attention on both “the social construction of place” (Jackson, “Locating” 306) and our inescapable participation in the unfolding of place. Environmental philosopher David Wood says, “We discover ourselves as in the world but not entirely of the world, with the capacity to stand back from it even as we cannot for a moment be separated from it, even as we are utterly dependent on it with every breath we take” (*Reoccupy* 57). The critical component for Kimmerer and many others is the nature of our participation. How are we involved in or engaged with place as event? Jackson notes that in engaging with place, we are “participating in complex networks of associations between peoples, histories, geographies, and economies” (“Locating 308). The engagement is part of an “open-ended discourse” that does not view place as fixed, authentic, stable, or boundaried (Comer, *Landscapes* 57). For Kimmerer, part of decolonial place-making involves “living as if your children’s future mattered, to take care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritual, depended on it” (*Braiding* 9). Her traditional, Indigenous outlook - contained within both the stories she shares from her people and the stories from her own life - places great responsibility upon the participants, and such participation is part of an all-encompassing narrative that does not separate people from storied places. In other words, the notion of place as storied event-in-process resists any representation that reduces it to a collection of autonomous components (Malpas, *Place* 36). We are emplaced and enmeshed in a collective, interrelated, processual narrative.

Braiding Sweetgrass is not a scientific dissertation or a philosophical treatise. It is a memoir and a collection of stories, tales that are locally and culturally specific. Place as an experience-able event as part of a decolonial project must not be purely theoretical, and should not be constituted by an unmoored, abstract, Euro-western locality or de-localized cultural reality

(Burkhart, *Indigenizing* xvii-xviii). Place as a storied event should be understood in connection with specific, local, community stories. We need to be intimately connected with our storied landscape, and with the stories of our places in order to meaningfully participate in place-making. “Did you ever wonder,” Thomas King asks, “how it is we imagine the world in the way we do, how it is we imagine ourselves, if not through our stories?” (*Truth* 95). It is indeed difficult to imagine a world devoid of stories.

Furthermore, this narrative paradigm – place as storied event-in-process – incorporates these events as “sites for transformation” or “event horizons” (Wood, *Reoccupy* 106). Wood presents places as agentive, animate, immanently vital events that open themselves up to our participation or intervention. In adopting this stance, he argues: “We switch from seeing the thing as in the world to seeing the thing as projecting, opening, or proliferating its own world, its own order of things, or as constitutively implicated in the world in which it might just seem to be an item” (*Reoccupy* 106). Places are continually projecting and opening, as the notion of animacy emphasizes. They are more than constitutively implicated; they are actively engaged. Jackson makes the important claim that “landscape and place are agentive” (“Locating” 308). This agency is interspersed throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Native American cultures especially speak through the power of locality (Burkhart, *Indigenizing* xiv), and places in many tribal epistemologies may be interpreted as living, animate presences possessing very real agency. Process thought, I have argued, also makes room for place as an experience-able event, and understanding agency as significantly place-based and localized helps move our participation from the theoretical to the experiential realm. Agency is decisive in experience. As Vine Deloria, Jr. stated, “It was not what people believed to be true that was important but what they experienced as true” (*God* 66). In this interpretation, landscape can be understood as a verb as much as it is typically taken to be a noun. Landscape is not an “empty field of vision” (Comer, *Landscapes* 13) but the mediator of connections. Landscape or place “happens” rather than “exists” and because this is so, we can participate in the happening. Additionally, for Kimmerer, part of her experiences of the animacy of place means knowing that the earth “loves” her. Love undoubtedly connotes agency. “Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond” (Kimmerer, *Braiding* 7). Feeling that “the earth loves you” is an acknowledgment of the reciprocal nature of place-making, and it helps to emphasize Kimmerer’s understanding of the agentive nature of place.

One family’s connection with black ash trees in *Braiding Sweetgrass* epitomizes both the loving, reciprocal relationship between people and places, and also the potential of decolonial environmental thinking and activism. John Pigeon is from the Pigeon family of Potawatomi basket makers (*Braiding* 141). “John is both a master basket maker and a carrier of tradition” (*Braiding* 142). For centuries, his people have been crafting baskets of all kinds for numerous purposes from the wood of the black ash. Merely finding a black ash tree is not enough. It has to be the “right one – a tree ready to be a basket” (*Braiding* 143). Kimmerer notes, “Traditional harvesters recognize the individuality of each tree as a person, a nonhuman forest person. Trees are not taken, but requested” (*Braiding* 144). The harvester searches out just the right tree, then decides to harvest the tree, not with tools or force but with conversation. Craftsmen like John speak with the tree and ask for permission. Sometimes it is “the ineffable knowing that turns him away” (*Braiding* 144); other times, permission is felt and given. After the black ash is harvested, the basket maker carefully creates his works of art, and all the while “the tree’s life is coming off in his hands, layer by layer" (*Braiding* 145). These proponents of traditional knowledge are acutely attuned to place. As basket makers began to notice a decline in the number of black ash trees, they brought their unique traditional ways of knowing into collaboration with forest biology and discovered that the tree loss was due to underharvesting and not overharvesting (*Braiding* 149). In addition, they realized that the emerald ash borer beetle was wreaking havoc on the trees in the Great Lakes region and New England. John and his family, along with forestry scientists, have united in a concerted effort to preserve the sacred trees. Indigenous activists are taking the lead in "an effort to bring traditional ecological knowledge as well as scientific tools to bear in the protection of black ash" (*Braiding* 151). In an act of place-based participation, these diverse groups are collaborating for shared, collectively agreed-upon goals. They are "storing seed to keep faith with the future, to replant the forest after the wave of invasion has passed" (*Braiding* 151).

Meaningful collaboration is significant because it enables all people to participate in the process of decolonial place-making, and thereby to engage in transformative activism. The process "can arise wherever people are materially and spiritually integrated with their landscape" (Kimmerer, "Weaving" 433). We can endeavor to integrate ourselves into the event of place as it unfolds, and we can collaborate with others, according to Potawatomi philosopher and environmental activist Kyle Whyte, "by inviting people to consider alternatives that may not have been on their conceptual radar before" (Whyte, "Role of TEK" 9). The potential for what Whyte calls "co-existence" begins to emerge; co-existence challenges and invites non-Indigenous people to learn more about cross-cultural and cross-situational divides, and it presents very different possibilities for collaboration than what non-Indigenous people may be used to (Whyte, "Role of TEK" 9). Collaboration of this kind requires consent, trust, accountability, and reciprocity; these are "qualities of relationships that are critical for justice-oriented coordination across societal institutions . . . they are necessary for taking urgent action that is just, but they cannot be established urgently" (Whyte, "Too Late" 2). The stories of *Braiding Sweetgrass* promote these types of decolonial collaborations.

2.6. Reciprocal Appropriation and Reflexive Agency

In consideration of Kimmerer's inquiry as to how one might participate in the process of decolonial place-making, it has been repeatedly insisted that place can be conceptualized as a storied event-in-process that emerges in experience from interrelated, reciprocal discourses or narratives and is then manifested in human expression. The next segment of this analysis will consider some additional ways we might become active, intentional participants in the unfolding event. In other words, how else may we be invested in place? The analysis will consider performative and relational practices that are connected to the important concepts of reciprocal appropriation and reflexive agency.

Kiowa author and artist N. Scott Momaday once said, "The Native American ethic with respect to the physical world is a matter of reciprocal appropriation: appropriation in which man (*sic*) invests himself in the landscape, and at the same time incorporates the landscape into his own most fundamental experience" ("Native" 80). As Kimmerer relays at the end of her book, Franz Dolp was thoroughly invested. Dolp, a non-Indigenous poet and economics professor, purchased forty acres of forest land in the Oregon Coast range. He named the place Shotpouch Creek and set about to establish the homestead of his dreams (*Braiding* 282-3). Dolp also had a connection with the western red cedar tree. "Displaced from his own vision of how the world should be, he vowed that he would heal this place and return it to what it was meant to be" (*Braiding* 285). He wrote, "I wanted to do right here, even if I had little idea of what 'right' meant. To love a place is not enough. We must find ways to heal it" (*Braiding* 286). Dolp couldn't depend upon natural recolonization for cedars to get started at Shotpouch, so he had to plant them. And plant them he did. Over 10,000 trees in all. "To plant trees is an act of faith" (*Braiding* 338), and Dolp had great faith in the cedars and in the land. His connection to place was one of beautiful reciprocity, because he believed that in order to bring about restoration that one must develop an intimate relationship with the land and all its living things (*Braiding* 285). Kimmerer observes, "Restoring land without restoring relationship is an empty exercise. It is relationship that will endure and relationship that will sustain the restored land" (*Braiding* 338). Dolp invested years of hard work with/in Shotpouch Creek, and his faithful acts resulted in great change. Dolp enthusiastically participated in the event of place. He was killed in a collision with a paper mill truck in 2004 on his way back to Shotpouch Creek, yet his acts of reciprocal appropriation live on. His words still inspire: "In restoring the land, I restore myself" (*Braiding* 290). To hear the stories and attune our hearts and minds to both the mundane and the magisterial, we must intentionally do our utmost to incorporate place into our own experiences.

Reciprocal appropriation is a vital part of understanding place as an unfolding event, particularly within a decolonizing paradigm. There is the potential for reciprocity as the event of place happens because places are always in flux (Little Bear x). Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear speaks of the Native American paradigm as comprised of and centered upon notions of constant flux and motion (process), and he also mentions a "spider web network of relations" (x). Place in this regard may be understood as being made manifest through human expression that represents this generative process; place lures us to experience its material manifestations which are non-static, and in turn decolonial knowledges and our self-understandings develop through our investment in and connection to place. The notion of reciprocal appropriation speaks to both our intentional participation and the immanent vitality of place. It also shifts the mode of participation from one of passivity to one of action. Participating in the process is not something that "just happens." To actively take part in the process is to embody a mode of life that is "a way of living awake in the world" (Kimmerer, *Braiding* 36). Anishinaabe theorist Lawrence Gross says, "Rather than thinking in terms of inherent being, the Anishinaabeg tend to think in terms of action" (*Anishinaabe* 174). From an environmental standpoint, our action and participation stand in direct contradistinction to the "culpable negligence" (Wood, *Reoccupy* 96) that characterizes those who are indifferent or harmful to the world. We begin to recognize that our connection to place is more than mere reciprocity; it can move us toward reflexive agency and a level of deep relationality.

Reciprocal appropriation is underscored by the notion of relationality. Burkhart says "The self is a part of reality only insofar as it is relational" (*Indigenizing* 107), and Kimmerer agrees: "My natural inclination was to see relationships, to seek the threads that connect the world, to join instead of divide. But science is rigorous in separating the observer from the observed, and the observed from the observer" (*Braiding* 42). Settler colonial modes of thought and action are typically committed to an extractionist, exploitative approach when it comes to people and places. This extractionist approach often leads to "species loneliness" – a state of isolation and disconnection that is characterized by "a deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship" (Kimmerer, *Braiding* 208-9). On the other hand, traditional knowledge as embodied in many Indigenous communities employs a participationist approach that privileges reciprocal appropriation and relationality. It promotes inter-dependence and is based upon a "covenant of reciprocity" (Kimmerer, *Braiding* 383) and makes room for meaningful collaborations of all sorts.

As a compliment to the animacy of place, our own reflexive agency has the potential to serve as a vital performative, decolonial practice. Decolonial thinkers rightly insist that theory is meaningless if it is not put into operative discourse and praxis within a community. Participating in place obviously requires action. It demands that we are engaging intentionally, and our agency is reflexive in the sense that it is continually adapting and changing in response to the ever-fluctuating processes of life. Reflexive agency is an integral part of meaning-making. Jackson highlights an important statement from Indiana Miami / Eastern Shawnee scholar Malea Powell that is significant in relation to engaging with place: "By 'space,' I mean a place that has been *practiced into being through the acts of storied making*, where the past is brought into conscious conversation with the present and where – through the practices of making – a future can be imagined" ("Resisting" 499, emphasis added). Operating within a decolonizing framework that interprets place as a storied event-in-process may certainly cause us to "change the content as well as the character of our agency" (Wood, *Reoccupy* 21) to align with modes of life that are focused upon reciprocity and relationship. Reflexive agency can therefore help to develop "habits of place" (Jackson, "Locating" 315) that enable us to function within Kimmerer's environmentally-focused, decolonizing paradigm.

2.7. Emplacement and The Power of Story

Two of the most evocative expressions in *Braiding Sweetgrass* attest to the power of language and story. Kimmerer says, "I am also a poet and the world speaks to me in metaphor" (*Braiding* 29); and, "The very facts of the world *are* a poem" (*Braiding* 345). Narrative facilitates the process of emplacement in ways that both reflect and bring about the unfolding of experiences. Language is a gift and a responsibility (Kimmerer, *Braiding* 347), and Kimmerer uses language via story to unveil decolonizing, Indigenous ways of being and seeing in the world. She says, “To be native to a place we must learn to speak its language” (*Braiding* 48) – learning to speak the language of a place, to tell its stories, are central tenets of *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

Kimmerer aptly demonstrates that participating in place as a storied event is an attainable goal. It can also be a decolonizing practice, one that demands discipline and carries with it great responsibility. While engaging in such a processual practice is oriented toward the future, it “does not determine a future. It overflows the present as possibility” (Keller, *Political* 18). Understanding places as storied events-in-process invites us to consider them as complex, unfolding happenings to which we can sincerely belong in rich and meaningful ways. This presentation of *Braiding Sweetgrass* may hopefully serve as a challenge, especially to non-Indigenous scholars, to put “regional culture to work for the construction of the future” (Jackson, “Locating” 317) and to make room for a sense of wonder that is possible when we meditate upon our connections with the world. In the face of unfathomable planetary crises, Kimmerer makes it clear that we have the responsibility to engage with/in the places of our lives in a manner that is meaningfully collaborative and intentionally decolonizing. We must follow Kimmerer and set out to both learn the stories of place and to responsibly participate in the event of place. All the while, we may incorporate Kimmerer’s optimism and hope into our own lives, choosing “joy over despair” (*Braiding* 327) as our stories unfold.

3.1. Narrative Representations of Place and Identity in *There There*.

This essay asserts that place may be understood as a continuous, unfolding process, and that within this open-ended process it is instructive to interpret and represent place as a storied event. The analysis of *Braiding Sweetgrass* attempted to follow Chickasaw literary theorist Jodi Byrd’s invitation to undertake a reconceptualization of place and space (*Transit* xxx); the same may be said of this interpretation of *There There*. It has been noted that we continually experience the powerful, beautiful, atrocious, and tragic proliferation of places, and in so doing we begin to attune ourselves to the emergent stories that arise from our relationality to these place-events. While our stories are most certainly embedded in place, it is equally important to emphasize the reflexive notion that *place is embedded in our stories*. Stories both give rise to and shape the creation and interpretation of place. Additionally, stories are empowering in that they create the possibility for agency and relationality. Acknowledging and attempting to understand this storied nature is important to the present decolonizing reconceptualization of place.

In his study on stories, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice says, “Our lives are incarnations of the stories we tell, the stories told about us, and the stories we inherit. They are both the process and the consequence of the transformation into the fullness of our humanity” (*Why* 34). Storied incarnations make it possible for us to find ways of “meaningful being in whatever worlds we inhabit” (*Why* 34). Justice’s text aligns with other Indigenous works in offering a strong presentation of the ways that our lives as storied incarnations enable us to participate in and represent the event of place. As we tell and inherit and hear stories, we inevitably participate in place by inhabiting the lifeworlds that develop in connection to these generative, ongoing, interconnected narratives. Place as an event happens as we engage with stories. Stories are the vessels that enable us to experience “meaningful being” in the worlds or places within which we live.

More often than not, place has traditionally been associated with physical localities that can be graphically mapped. The present reconceptualization suggests that place is exceedingly more than a fixed/limited/geospatial sphere, location, or thing, and that places may be potential sites for relationality and transformation. Stories enable us to inhabit “worlds” and experience transformation and relationality at “sites” and create and interpret “geographies.” Yet, notions of worlds and sites and geographies may be understood in multiple, equally valid and important ways. What happens to the storied nature of place-events if place is not interpreted only as a physical, geographical location? What if – in relation to the decolonizing aims of this presentation - a great percentage of Indigenous people in the United States have no grounded way to relate to Laguna Pueblo scholar and artist Paula Gunn Allen’s striking claim: “*We are the land*. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea that permeates American Indian life” (*Sacred* 119, emphasis added)? How may place be both storied and an event if place means an urban or digital space? How relevant is place today when we consider the “unmoored sensibility of contemporary identity” as identified by Herring Pond Wampanoag scholar Melanie Benson Taylor (“Orange” 593)? In this section of the essay, I hope to demonstrate that Cheyenne and Arapaho author Tommy Orange’s *There There* has tremendous potential to greatly enhance our appreciation of the storied character of atypical place-events, when we consider both the “multigeneric lifeworlds” (Warner, “Publics” 63) the work presents and the novel’s overt eschewing of traditional spatial or place-based sensibilities. As I will illustrate, *There There* both represents and reflects narratively upon the decolonizing work of enriching and sustaining Native identity that is connected to place – place in the immediate as a physical, geospatial cultural milieu; and place as a reality (both experienced and imagined) from which Native peoples have been displaced and disconnected. Through an inventive blending of fictional narrative presentations and non-fictional meta-narrative commentaries, the novel creates representations of place and Native identity that enrich our notion of “storied places,” particularly when these places are urban.

Laura Furlan's book *Indigenous Cities* aptly demonstrates the significance of urban experience for contemporary Indigenous narratives and identity. *Indigenous Cities* was published in 2017 prior to the release of *There There*. However, Furlan's text is seminal in its presentation of the ways that urban Native American texts redefine Indigenous relationships to place; rescript and re-narrativize the stories of urban Native Americans; and depict the re-takings of place by Native American diasporic communities in urban landscapes. Furlan's analyses anticipate the impact of novels like *There There*. She states, "Urban Indian narratives are not solely about despair and dislocation; they imagine a cultural past identified with ancestral lands and/or a reservation and a present that require the making and remaking of Native bonds and communities" (*Indigenous* 3). Orange's novel is emblematic of the ways that, according to Furlan, "the urban landscape gets rescripted and re-storied" (*Indigenous* 178). Furlan's insistence that the characters in contemporary Native urban novels possess narrative agency is clearly seen in the empowered lives of the people in Orange's narrative presentations. Additionally, Furlan highlights the ways that Indigenous fictional characters participate in urban society: "they make new homes away from their home communities; they collaborate with other Indigenous peoples in these new spaces; they travel to reservation spaces; and they preserve and adapt traditional cultural practices" (*Indigenous* 27). All of these practices or participatory acts may be clearly seen in *There There*. Most significantly, Furlan emphasizes that narrative representations such as those found in Orange's book reveal the significance of the multiplicity and plurality of urban Native stories, since there is more than one way to be or become a Native American in an urban place (*Indigenous* 220); this acknowledgement aligns with my understanding of decoloniality and the many ways one may participate in differing, varied decolonial projects. Given that Orange's intended audience is urban Natives, I hope to incorporate and build upon Furlan's groundbreaking work, in order to present the novel as a decolonizing, anti-assimilationist text that rectifies negative representations of urban Natives and redefines urban Natives' relationship to place through reclamations and re-takings.

There There creates an interwoven tapestry of contemporary Indigenous lives in and around Oakland, California. The novel is comprised of thirteen narrative perspectives (or fourteen if Loother and Lony's perspectives are not combined), and two nonfiction essays in the form of a Prologue and an Interlude (Allen, "Propulsive" 555). As Chadwick Allen notes,

> Seven of the forty-two named chapters are narrated in the first person, one is narrated in the second person, and thirty-four are narrated in the third person. First- or second-person narration occurs only in the initial appearance of a particular perspective; when that perspective recurs, it is always as third-person narration. ("Propulsive" 555)

The book is a conglomeration of interrelated stories that unfold in a uniquely Indigenous dialectic of place, placelessness, locality, spatiality, digital networking, and displacement that "defines the real contradictions and resolutions produced by individuals and groups on the ground" (Ross and Sexton 585). These Native characters have not vanished, they are not artifacts, they have not disappeared, they are not ashamed, and they are striving and struggling and flourishing in their own places. They are legitimately and authentically Native in all the ways we may interpret their disparate identities. Alcatraz and Oklahoma and Oakland and New Mexico and other places appear in the stories, and yet as Stephen Ross and Choctaw and Pawnee scholar Steven B. Sexton note, *There There* "effaces the place-based spatial logics that have long aligned authenticity with location in traditional – inevitably rural – settings" ("Digital" 581).

Ross and Sexton's article "Digital Tribalography" does a wonderful job of demonstrating how Orange's novel redefines the notion of "urban" in relation to digital interconnectivity and

Indigenous tribalography. Their analysis illustrates how *There There* can be read as a strong critique of settler affiliations of Indigenous identity with rural or reservation settings and attendant negative associations of Native Americans as vanishing, maladapted, uncivilized, or archaic. Digital technologies are presented as affording the potential to supersede locality in the development of Native identity and community. I hope to build on Ross and Sexton's work, and further develop their insights by demonstrating that *There There* narratively represents the potential of moving from dispossession and displacement to the Indigenous repossession and re-placement of urban sites by Native peoples. Their article serves as a springboard for my interpretation of the novel's representations as anti-assimiliationist self-determinations. Ross and Sexton's identification of "indigeneity as a fact of the present, with a real future" (584) is informative as I incorporate Furlan's assertion that Native American urban texts "rescript Native peoples into the American national imaginary – not solely located in the distant past or in remote places – on their own terms" (*Indigenous* 7). Beyond Ross and Sexton's analysis of the novel as depicting the appropriation of settler technology for Indigenous purposes, I propose that the commandeering of technology and the brief reclaiming or re-taking of the monolithic coliseum for the Big Oakland Pow Wow are decolonial, urban acts of Native self-determination.

3.2. Socially-Constructed Consequential Geographies

In spite of the effacement of traditional place-based spatial logics, it is quite possible for us to read *There There* to join Robin Kimmerer and hear the stories of the land in these urban, digital, contemporary Indigenous narratives (*Braiding* 9). The novel invites us to reorient our notions of land and place, and it does so through innovatively generative acts of storytelling. As Furlan notes, "The city is both a generative space and one where Indians are marginalized, and these urban geographies pose a significant challenge to the ways in which Native peoples have been narrated" (*Indigenous* 36). The novel's decolonial acts of storytelling through a Native lens enable us to conceive of "land" in new ways in response to these alternate narratives.

One of the most notable phrases from *There There* appears in the remarkable Prologue. At the end of an account of urbanity, wherein we are told that for Urban Indians "the land moves with you like memory" (*There* 10), these sweeping claims are made: "Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere" (*There* 11). *The land is everywhere or nowhere*. For Kimmerer and many Indigenous peoples, the land is specifically somewhere, in her case upstate New York or central Oklahoma. For other Indigenous peoples, like the characters in *There There*, the land may be distantly somewhere but it is more everywhere and nowhere, more an "unreturnable covered memory" than a daily, geographical, spatial reality (*There* 39), more an urban or digital space than a rural or physical locality. In this sense, the novel opens up the possibility of interpreting place as a "consequential geography," according to cultural geographer Edward Soja's definition, a "spatial expression that is more than just a background reflection or set of physical attributes to be descriptively mapped" (*Seeking* loc. 167). The spatial expressions of *There There* do not unequivocally nullify any "place-based spatial logics" (Ross, "Digital" 581). And as we reconceptualize place, we are not forced into a binary exclusivity, in that we must always and definitively identify place as (1) either a geo-physical site or as (2) a spatial expression (digital, urban, ceremonial, or otherwise) not directly tied to locality; instead, interpreting places as socially-constructed consequential geographies makes it possible for us to emphasize both conceptions, and to do so – if necessary – at the same time. The Big Oakland Powwow is exemplary: an event at the physical location of the Oakland Coliseum; a locality that is further manifested digitally as a spatial expression by and for the characters; and a storied event that unfolds in a processual manner as the narratives of the novel progress.

In differing and unique ways, *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *There There* offer alternative yet related presentations of places and spaces that enhance the potentialities of both participating in and narratively representing these storied-events-in-process. If Kimmerer's text encourages us to participate in the storied event of place – understood primarily as land, landscape, or physical location – in meaningfully collaborative, participationist, environmentally responsible and sustainable, spiritually grounded ways, how may we incorporate Orange's novel into a decolonizing place-based praxis? One way is to acknowledge that Orange's characters are intimately familiar with city spaces on their own terms, and their understandings are representative of alternate Indigenous epistemological worldviews. With each act of storytelling, places are being reclaimed and retaken – particularly in relation to the Big Oakland Powwow – and the epistemic presentations of these urban places are acts of both remembrance and reclamation. Furlan states, "The specificity of the city spaces – its neighborhoods and streets – speaks to both intimate place knowledge and the ways in which race and class are enacted and mediated by this geography. Maps are visual reminders of the physical loss of lands, of the naming of those places, and of the narratives of those places" (*Indigenous* 91). The representations of intimate place knowledge may be interpreted and acted upon as decolonizing performances of reclamation in *There There*.

Also, as we embrace the provocatively poetic assertion that "the land is everywhere or nowhere," how may we understand the urban narratives of *There There* as spatialized threads? And how may notions of digital space and digital interconnectivity enhance our reconceptualizations of place? I suggest that *There There* creates possibilities for relationality, transformative activism, and social change by narratively digitizing and urbanizing place; spatializing identity in ways that develop Indigeneity through technology and urbanity; and creating the potential for social change via relationality and the creation of community-through-story as the narrative presentations and the non-fictional meta-narratives incorporate multi-modal spatial expressions. These literary moves fit within the proposed decolonial project here, and they are anti-assimiliationist strokes in that they create access to imaginings of urban Natives that are mediated through a Native and not a settler lens.

"Plenty of us are urban now," we read in the Prologue, "If not because we live in cities, then because we live on the internet" (*There* 8). Although the primary geographical setting of the novel is Oakland, many of the narrative presentations in *There There* are oriented to place through technological modes or ways of being. Technology is the primary cultural form that mediates the majority of the connections to place for the fictional characters, and even in the meta-commentary of the Prologue digital technologies feature prominently. The novel is centered upon carefully articulated presentations of decidedly urban places that are understood to be no less "earthy" or "traditional" than a rural landscape or reservation. Both the general place-events of Oakland and the specific place-event of the Big Oakland Powwow are urban spaces that are mediated to and by the characters in large part through technological storytelling. The Prologue in fact sets the stage for the attendant representational digitizing and urbanizing of place in *There There*:

> 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. . . Urban Indians feel at home walking in the shadow of a downtown building. We came to know the downtown Oakland skyline better than we did any sacred mountain

> range, the redwoods in the Oakland hills better than any other deep wild forest. We know the sound of the freeway better than we do rivers, the howl of distant trains better than wolf howls, we know the smell of gas and freshly wet concrete and burned rubber better than we do the smell of cedar or sage or even fry bread – which isn't traditional, like reservations aren't traditional, but nothing is original, everything comes from something that came before, which was once nothing. (*There* 10-11)

The urban geographies of the characters in the novel take on material form mainly in and through technological creativity or communication. Physical place-descriptions are enmeshed with digital spatial expressions (stories and communications), and each of these acts affect events and experiences. All of these storied events are connected to but not entirely circumscribed by the physical locales of Oakland and the Big Oakland Powwow. As Ross and Sexton note:

> In this redefinition of the term *urban* as a function of digital interconnectivity rather than simply a city setting, *There There* offers a powerful pushback on the logics of place conventionally linked to Native belonging, and yet it does not dispense entirely with the specificity and significance of place. ("Digital" 581)

The pushback is essentially an awareness of place as more than geography or geo-physical location. The urban narratives become spatialized events as places – whether mediated through technology or other cultural forms – are engaged by the characters in a multitude of ways. These engagements happen in both physical places and digital spaces. And each place or space invites participation in their processual, storied unfolding. *There There*, in its own manner and in different ways from *Braiding Sweetgrass,* presents place as a storied-event-in-process.

3.3. Anti-Assimilationist Acts of Urban Self-Determination

Earlier I suggested that *There There* spatializes identity by developing and promoting Indigeneity through technology; we witness this spatial development most clearly in the narrative(s) of Dene Oxendene. Dene strives to create and promote Indigenous community and identity by documenting the stories of Native peoples in Oakland. His project is one of anti-assimilationist self-determination. He invites Native Americans to participate in place and to consolidate an Indigenous community by telling their stories. Focusing upon the spatial dimensions of our lives enhances our awareness and broadens our conceptual and pragmatic horizons. Our understandings of place need not be limited to maps and official, canonized histories. We may follow Furlan and "shift this conversation to think instead about new spatial encounters" (*Indigenous* 24). Spatial thinking turns our attention to social consciousness and social processes, to the ways in which place influences social relations, and to the potential for spatial creativity and connectivity. Edward Soja insists that "each mode of thinking about space, each 'field' of human spatiality – the physical, the mental, the social – be seen as simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphorical" (*Thirdspace* 64-5). Elsewhere, Soja says, "Our geographies, like our histories, take on material form as social relations become spatial but are also creatively represented in images, ideas, and imaginings" (*Seeking* loc. 364). Dene's documentary arises from complex social relations, and it is an example of a creative, artistic representation of locality and identity. Socially-constructed geographies or places are consequential in many ways. In addition to its decolonial representations or re-representations, *There There* certainly creates the potential for social change. The novel and its reception would be a noteworthy topic for sociological analyses in terms of the book's impact, influence, and practical effect upon both Indigenous and non-

Indigenous readers and communities. Social relations are most often storied relations in one way or another, and these relations are inextricably connected to both community and identity.

Dene's "official" Native identity is foregrounded in the beginning of his story. As he stands in front of a panel of judges at an interview for a digital storytelling grant, Dene says, "Hello. My name is Dene Oxendene. I'm an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma" (*There* 39). Dene, we are told, "is not recognizably Native. . . He is ambiguously nonwhite" (*There* 28). Much like it does with place, however, *There There* complicates notions of Native American identity. As Cohen observers, "*There There* offers a version of American Indian identity that comes without a master key of authenticity or culture-policing codes – it's hard, in what will feel to many readers like a new way, to parse what 'Indian' means in *There There*" ("Hacking" 563). Dene spatializes identity by working on a film project, wherein he will invite Native Americans to share their stories about what it is like or what it means or how it feels to be Native in Oakland. The stories will not be "placed" in a physical location in northern California; rather, they will be located online, in cyberspace. Dene's mission to create an Indigenous community "transcends the local community whose stories Dene will collect not by amalgamating the myriad stories of Oakland's Natives into a heterogeneous but unifying tribalography but by placing the project online so it is available to anyone with access to the Internet" (Ross and Sexton, "Digital" 586). While Oakland is central and necessary to the documentary project, it is not entirely sufficient. The physical location "provides the conditions of possibility, but only so that they can be transcended in the name of a more expansive notion of tribal identity" ("Digital" 585). Dene's spatializing of Indigenous identity through digital technologies opens up possibilities for the creation and consolidation of community in both physical places and digital spaces.

He is awarded the grant that will allow him to undertake the documentary film project. Dene tells Orvil Red Feather,

> I'm here to collect stories in order to have them available online for people from our community and communities like ours to hear and see. When you hear stories from people like you, you feel less alone. When you feel less alone, and like you have a community of people behind you, alongside you, I believe you can live a better life. (*There* 122)

Dene's project is focused upon collecting stories that can bring together the Indigenous community of Oakland and be experienced by Indigenous peoples outside of that particular place. He says to Calvin Johnson, "Talk about the place or places you've lived in Oakland, and then if you can think of a story to tell, like something that's happened to you in Oakland that might, like, give a picture of what it's been like for you specifically, growing up in Oakland, as a Native person, what it's been like" (*There* 147). As he talks with Orvil, Calvin, and others, Dene is spatializing identity and attempting to establish a community network through digital storytelling. The volunteers are participating in the place-event of Oakland as they share their stories. Oakland as a participatory "spatialized" venue becomes embedded in the Indigenous narratives, and their histories go beyond physical geographies as they are culturally mediated in and through digital media. Dene's project is emblematic of Orange's novel on the whole, which is "an event, an occasion for gathering, both an act and an engendering of community" ("Hacking" Cohen 563). *There There* is an artistic manifestation of Indigenous identity and of a community that comes into being through story.

3.4. The Big Oakland Powwow: A Blending of Imagination and Immediacy

The narrative unfolding of Orange's novel is animated most significantly by the storied event of the Big Oakland Powwow. The Powwow is developed through the multiple perspectives of the participants, and Orange creates anticipation for the big event from the opening pages of *There There*. Each of the characters have different expectations for the gathering and, significantly, different motivations for their participation. The imaginative representation of this storied event, along with the non-narrative interruptions from the Interlude, make it possible to read the Powwow as a decolonial act of Indigenous reclamation that opens the door for Indigenous solidarity. In this sense, it aligns with Kimmerer's hopeful outlook. However, Orange's characters are participants in the multi-directionality of cultural unfoldings, and not all of their motivations for engaging with/in the Powwow are unselfish and good. The specter of settler colonial violence literally and metaphorically erupts at the Big Oakland Powwow, altering an overtly optimistic interpretation of Indigenous relationality, and this haunting manifestation is anticipated throughout the novel by the articulations of Indigenous identity in Orange's characters. The ending of the novel leaves readers, both Native and non-Native alike, contemplating what sort of book they have just finished. Though the Powwow offers the possibility for hybridity and relationship, the narrative never resolves into hybridity – there is always the sense of a suspended possibility that is disrupted by violence. The Interlude insists that the "tragedy of it all will be unspeakable," (*There* 141), but the book is not entirely tragic. Rather, in its decolonizing representations of Native Americans as "present-tense people," it leaves one with a feeling "not unlike hope" (*There* 77).

Stuart Hall speaks of the "positioning" of cultural identity as he contemplates the notion that identity is a fluid production, one that is never finished, one that is always in process, and "always constituted within, not outside, representation." He says, "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points. . . which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*" ("Diaspora" 226). The characters in the novel are "positioned" differently in terms of their expectations for the Powwow and their motivations for participating in the event. Some are coming in a good way, seeking connection and relationality. Others have malicious intentions; their motivations are selfish and emblematic of settler colonial violence which always has devastating effects. Orange presents the Powwow as a place of Native interchanges and exchanges, and as a symbolic reclamation of place that enables these Native characters to remake a city space as an Indigenous location. The narratives intentionally develop anti-assimilationist themes alongside Indigenous acts of appropriation as the characters forcefully assert their own expressions of Native American identity at the Powwow, while they reclaim or retake the Oakland Coliseum for an inter-tribal gathering. The notion of an urban place as an Indigenous "hub" is helpful in conceptualizing the Powwow as a decolonial retaking of place and a venue for Indigenous acts of self-determination. Winnebago and Ojibwe scholar Renya K. Ramirez introduced the notion of an urban, Indigenous "hub" as both a geographical concept that represents actual places and as a virtual space supported by storytelling, memories, and imagination (*Hubs* 2, 20). The Powwow is a hub at the center of an intertribal diaspora that supports Native culture, community, identity, and belonging away from tribal lands (*Hubs* 1). It makes it possible for characters like Orvil, Dene, Blue, and Edwin to assert their own identities. The Powwow as a Native hub also allows for differing levels of engagement with the event. It helps the characters maintain Indigenous social networks and it enables participation in cultural and ceremonial practices. Identity, like place, is fluid and always changing, and the participatory venue of the Powwow arises from and is mediated by a plurality of conflicting, often irreconcilable narratives. The urban Native identities that develop in relation to the Powwow are constantly changing, often conflicting articulations. They end up being productions emplaced in an intertribal setting that erupts in violence.

The ironic and even satirical enunciation of colonial violence in the Interlude and at the Powwow is one of Orange's most brilliant decolonizing strokes. *There There* highlights the striking fractures between Powwow participants within the narratives, and between Native and non-Native readers in the meta-commentaries, enabling us to interpret the storied event of the Big Oakland Powwow as a blending of imagination and immediacy. In the Interlude, Orange creates friction between the construction of decolonial narrative worlds and colonial orderings of identity and place. The novel, in this regard, offers a challenge to Ross and Sexton's notion of "collaborative tribalography." Though Orange has stated in multiple interviews that his primary, intended audience for the novel is urban Native Americans, the Interlude (and the Prologue) anticipate non-Native readers. Orange uses the storied event of the Powwow to position his characters in relation to settler colonialism, particularly in connection to patterns and cycles of violence. He also frames the Powwow, via the decolonizing Interlude, to place his anticipated readers categorically into Native and non-Native sortings. Through a striking usage of changing verb tenses and pronoun shifts, the Interlude appropriates the fictional Big Oakland Powwow for the purposes of disrupting the historical-temporal notions of readers as well as magnifying the situated-ness of readers in relation to settler colonialism and its attendant violence. The meta-commentary tells its own decolonial story.

3.5. There is No There *There* Because it is *Here*.

The opening section of the Interlude is entitled "Powwows," and the first line reads, "For powwows, *we* come from all over the country" (*There* 134, all italics in quotes from the Interlude are mine). Spatial theorist Robert Tally argues, “There need not be any one-to-one correspondence between the referential space outside the text and the representations within it” (*Topophrenia* 99). Orange exploits this notion and he uses the Interlude to help make sense, it seems, of his own world. The Interlude continues, “*We* made powwows because we needed a *place* to be together, something intertribal” (*There* 134). At this point, the reader recognizes that the commentary is identifying Native Americans as the “we” in the narrative, and that powwows are places where identities are self-determined, where this kind of intertribal gathering offers the means for survivance as an “active sense of presence” and a renunciation of “dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (Vizenor, *Manifest* vii). The narration points to this active sense of presence: “We keep powwowing because there aren’t very many places where *we* get to all be together, where *we* get to see and hear each other” (*There* 134). The novel is representing the possibility for Indigenous relationality at storied-events such as powwows. And then, quite unexpectedly, the Interlude drops a conceptual bomb:

> *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 from miles. And *we’ve been coming for years, generations, lifetimes*. . .”. (*There* 134)

The meta-commentary extracts readers from fiction and positions them in the middle of a reality that is being mediated by a Native lens. The account is more than fictional; it takes a historical turn that is oriented toward the present. Now the Interlude is telling a story that “*we* haven’t been telling all this time, that we haven’t been listening to” (*There* 137). It is a story that in every way stands in distinct, decolonizing contradiction to the official his-*story* of settler colonialism. The Interlude then abruptly entraps non-Native readers in the story; *we* is now juxtaposed with *you*:

> 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. . . 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 not to find out. (*There* 137)

Settlers are now unavoidably being un-settled. The *you* of the narrative refers to non-Native readers who have directly participated in the colonial project. The *you* of settler coloniality is being confronted. By accident of birth and the implicit (and often explicit) avoidance of historical acknowledgment, the Interlude is saying that these non-Native readers contribute to the degradation of non-settler others, and to the continued marginalizing of subaltern individuals.

Orange's decolonizing literary project is herein enacting social criticism. The Interlude and Prologue both identify areas where people are dispossessed, marginalized, oppressed, and cast out; they emphasize these situations through artistic expression and narrative representation; and they invite Native and non-Native readers alike to become involved in the complex processes of reconstructing these instances of oppression. Orange's work challenges us to interpret the violence and disharmony that explode at the Big Oakland Powwow as a manifestation of timeless and placeless settler coloniality that shades contemporary Indigenous experience. The novel is a self-determining performance of decolonizing, transformative activism. It embodies a counter-narrative, and challenges non-Native readers to re-orient their notions of Native identity and agency. It acknowledges that after the disruptions of settler colonialism, "the history of what actually happened became a new kind of history" (*There* 137).

There There participates in a counter-history, and it offers alternate narratives of Native Americans as "modern and relevant, alive" (*There* 141). The narrative presentations attempt to redefine locality by re-scripting Indigenous history, by moving Native Americans' relationships to place and their identities from the past to the present, from archaic and isolated imaginings to a sense or feeling of vibrant immediacy. Even the title of the book participates in this decolonizing re-narrativization. There is no there *there* because it is *here*. We, the novel declares, are here.

3.6. "This Other Story": An Alternative Discourse

There There undoubtedly presents place as a storied event. The novel is also representative of Mignolo's decolonizing attempt to "build a world in which many worlds will coexist" (*Darker* 54). It has been argued that the fictional narratives themselves are striking demonstrations of decolonial resistance and world-making. Additionally, it is difficult to imagine more powerful presentations of decolonizing artistic expression and re-presentation than the Prologue and Interlude – nonfiction essays that according to Beth Piatote (Ni:mi:pu: [Nez Perce] / Colville Confederated Tribes), "provide metacommentary on the plot" and are "evidence that 'the real' is ever injecting itself into the fictive" ("No Spoiler" 579). Much like Kimmerer's work, the novel enables multiple marginalized stories, histories, outlooks, and processes to merge and converge in an ongoing network of Indigenous relationality. In this sense, *There There* is a defiant act of decolonial place-making and identity construction. Indigenous identities, epistemologies, and stories are foregrounded and privileged, and the novel creates "new sites for struggle and for the construction of interconnected and non-exclusionary communities of resistance" (*Thirdspace* 96). The communities in the novel resist colonial hegemony primarily through storytelling. In fact, the individual stories of the characters and the overarching story of the novel serve as a powerful counterdiscourse to the promulgated misrepresentations of Native Americans in U.S. settler colonial society. As Dene Oxendene says,

> That's what I'm trying to get out of this whole thing. All put together, all 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*. (*There* 149, emphasis added)

This other story is an alternate narrative, an Indigenous epistemological representation. This other story is a decolonial story.

4.1. Conclusion: The Motion Set Off by Words

Mvskoke poet Joy Harjo beautifully captures the dynamics of human expression in her poem "Motion": "And I write it to you / at this moment / never being able to get / the essence / the true breath / in words, because we exist / not in words, but in the motion / set off by them" (*Horses* 51). We exist, in large part, in the motion set off by our words, by the languages and stories we employ to exist with and in place. We are "participants, each immersed with the whole of our being in the currents of a world-in-formation" (Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy* 129). To fully imagine or represent place and story may forever be beyond our reach, but language carries us along.

Robin Wall Kimmerer and Tommy Orange have given us word gifts that ineluctably draw us into their motion. In their offerings of "that other way of knowing" (*Braiding* 44) and "this other story" (*There* 149), these Native American authors have created decolonizing works of art which complicate Ralph Ellison's claim that "Geography is fate" (*Going* 144). They have released stories into the world that immerse us in their trajectories, that help us conceptualize place and story in pragmatic and co-constructive ways. The imaginings of *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *There There* challenge us to responsibly participate in our disparate localities. All the rich narratives we encounter in these splendid works invite us to wholeheartedly remember, respect, and share the stories that belong with/in the places of our lives.

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