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## The New Guard: An Interview with Tommy Orange

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NICOLE GOMEZ

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## THE NEW GUARD: AN INTERVIEW WITH TOMMY ORANGE

Tommy Orange, whose novel *There There* was a finalist for the 2019 Pulitzer Prize, visited the University of Montana in October as part of the President's Lecture Series. Orange not only agreed to meet with me for a sliver of the fully-booked twenty-four hour period for which he was in Missoula, but also offered to forgo his break between talks in order to continue our conversation. Orange surprised and delighted me right off the bat by revealing that he was already familiar with *CutBank* (I had begun with an introduction of the magazine) because he had submitted (and been declined) in the distant past. After dismissing my semi-serious request that he resubmit by scribbling something on a napkin, we got down to craft talk.

**Nicole Gomez:** Do you dabble in other genres beyond fiction?

**Tommy Orange:** Yeah. I just wrote a profile for *Esquire*, so nonfiction, and I guess I dabble in poetry but hate to admit it and would probably never show it to anyone. But I love fiction. That's where I love to be.

**NG:** So you never had any real doubts about what your genre calling was?

**TO:** No. I mean, I was pretty late to writing, but once I knew I loved fiction and wanted to write it, I never had doubts. I never thought about doing other genres.

**NG:** It's exciting to me to meet another writer who also came to writing late, or later.

**TO:** How long have you been at it?

**NG:** I've been dabbling in writing since I was little, but actually seriously dedicating myself to pursuing it in an MFA... I mean this is my second year here, so it took me a little while to commit to it.

**TO:** It's not a super solid thing to commit to, in terms of admitting it to your family and friends, to the point of paying money to go to school for it. That's when you have to start to tell people that you're doing it for real.

**NG:** What was your push to finally do an MFA?

**TO:** For a long time I was kind of anti-MFA. I was writing in private for about ten years before getting to the MFA, and then I found one that was Native-based and low-residency, so I wouldn't have to relocate, and it was

pretty affordable. It was very pragmatic, my decision to do it, and I was halfway through writing my novel. I was sort of worried that MFAs can turn you into a safer, more boring, cookie-cutter writer, but at that point, and because it was Native and because the faculty was amazing, I was completely convinced to do it. And the MFA is different now than it was. I think the MFA I was worried about is changing everywhere.

**NG:** You've talked about how a lot of MFAs are moving away from the "old white man guard," and how at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) they taught writing for people interested in culture.<sup>1</sup> As a female writer of color, I still feel sometimes inundated by the old guard. Could you speak a little more about how that's changing, and how it should change more?

**TO:** I think, with diversity in the publishing world, it's sort of being forced to change. I think there are a lot of people that are hesitantly changing that would rather keep it the old way, but for instance, if you write a story about a person who goes to the store and comes back and has marriage problems or whatever and you never say their gender or their race, it's assumed white man, and that's the epitome of white privilege, right? But it's actually been taught to not write this stuff in, and we have to find ways, like craft decisions, of how to bring it up without it being clumsy. But it's not talked about in craft ways, it's talked about in political ways or in ways that have to do with it being 2019, and I think it's really the responsibility of the author

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with the *Santa Fe Literary Review*, Volume 14, 2019.

to navigate gender and race in your writing and not just defaulting. Not every piece of writing needs to do it, but it certainly needs to shift.

**NG:** How did you find it taught differently at IAIA?

**TO:** It helped that there is a big Native presence there, though it's not 100% Native. I heard people coming from other MFAs where they were discouraged from bringing up culture, and so not only were we not discouraged, we were *encouraged*. What's more, we didn't have to overexplain ourselves when incorporating culture, because it was all kind of known and understood. We didn't have to pander. So you are freed to write in a more nuanced and subtle way if you assume your audience already understands the culture you're writing about. Then you don't end up overwriting things that don't have to be overwritten.

**NG:** I read that the idea for *There There* came years ago and that you struggled with the structure and with managing the whole cast of characters. I wanted to ask you about the evolution of it. How did you wrangle it? How did you craft so many different characters with so many different voices? Can you just speak a little bit about, you know, how to write a novel?

**TO:** I don't know if I *can* speak on that. It was a six-year thing. I've heard it said that first-time novelists try to put all of their ideas into their first book, like cram everything inside, everything you've ever thought or felt—

**NG:** I'm guilty. Did you do that?

**TO:** In a way I think I was doing that. I tried to cram a lot of things I'd been thinking about and feeling over many, many years, and then pare it back later. My revision process is maximalist and then minimalist. For the first year of writing it, I was working full time and waking up super early in the morning and writing late at night after my son went to bed. I was a new father. I would just put in the time and write different characters, and whichever ones felt like they had longevity and felt true to the community I was writing about, then I would keep writing into them. So the first year I was just writing new stuff, writing into new characters that felt like they could go a long time or just writing brand new ones if I had to take a break from any character. So a lot of the core characters came out in the first year of writing.

**NG:** Were you writing mostly on intuition, or were you outlining?

**TO:** It was really just putting in the time and going for it. Whatever my fingers would do at that time. And then, once I had the core cast together, I started thinking about how they would all connect. I had this device built in—they were all connected because they would all end up at the powwow, and that was a convenient device to be able to write into. Like, what are they all doing? When I think about what is the content of their lives, which part of their lives am I focusing on, and it was always related to the trajecto-

ry of getting them to the powwow. It got really messy in the middle, trying to figure out organically how so many characters could relate. One of my techniques, even though it sounds like it's not writing, is long-distance running. A lot of ideas, sort of a deeper solution to these threads that needed to connect, would just pop into my head on a run. So once I realized that was a thing—I already liked to run—it turned into a devotion that was related to writing. Some people get it in the shower or when they wake up the next day. There's sort of a non-thinking thinking that happens. You can kind of put a problem in your head and then do the thing, and then—it won't always work—but it worked enough that it became part of my writing practice.

**NG:** *There There* is very voicey and also incredibly lyrical. How do you balance voice and lyricism? I know that you love music and have a background in sound. When that comes out in your writing, how much of it is intuitive, or is this something you tinker with in revision?

**TO:** I think it's both. I'm a pretty instinctual writer. Things come out a certain way. But for sure, 10% comes out pure, and then the rest has to be shaped up in revision. Reading out loud is a really big part of my revision process. I also listen to apps that read my work, which is really nice for running. That's also how I'm still writing while I'm running, because I'm listening to a robot read my work and I'm picking up on things that I wouldn't normally have noticed. I listen to the sound of sentences really closely, and

the musicality of them, in order to know if they need an extra beat or not. The way words sound together is really sonically important to me.

**NG:** That's what [author and UM professor] Kevin Canty talks a lot about. He's a musician, and he often tells us to pay attention to the musicality of language and the contrast of syllables.

**TO:** I didn't realize I was doing it until I started talking about it since the book's been out, but it's definitely what I do. But in terms of lyricism and voiceyness—sometimes people talk down about voiceyness, like it's a gimmick, but I love voicey stuff, and I feel like I'm so convinced when I read something that's full of voice. I feel like criticizing it is like telling an actor they're overacting when they're just doing good acting. To have a strong voice is to be distinct, is to be a real character in fiction. I don't know what people are talking about sometimes when they talk down about voice.

**NG:** I agree completely. I find in my evolution as a writer I'm moving more and more towards trying to capture the sound of the way people talk. I find that people respond to it in a way that's encouraging to me.

**TO:** Totally. It's more readable, more engaging. But if there's any craft trick that I do, and that I definitely did in *There There*, it's playing around with POV. So getting the essence of the voice first, and that may come out in first or third close, initially, and then I'll tinker with it POV-wise. So if I'm



feeling uninspired or destructive, I'll sort of turn myself into an intern and make myself do the tedious work of transposing from one POV to the other. It reveals something about the character, even if I ultimately keep it in third close, if I move it to first and it pushes something about the voice that reveals. So it's a part of my revision process to transpose, to play with POV. And the trick that I used in *There There*, as I moved from character to character, was to almost always switch POV as a way to signal to the reader that we're shifting to another character, and to make it feel like we're moving, so I never risked blending any voices.

**NG:** You never did. And that's what I found so compelling and curious, and as a writer, interesting, how you accomplished that and how distinct those voices were. For example, with the three kids, how you captured the voices of children. And then, the chapter that particularly gripped me was "Thomas Frank," which was the only one where you used second person. Why did you choose to do that one in second person?

**TO:** That one came out really fast, and this is part of why he's not as connected as other characters. It came out in like ten days, the real core of it, and it came out in third person close, and then I transposed it to second thinking that it would be interesting, because Thomas Frank is my first and second name. And it was like, how interesting would it be to make the reader me? And the details in the chapter are largely my family story.

**NG:** And his musicality—is that also the way you register sound?

**TO:** Yeah. I'm not a drummer necessarily. But, yeah.

*A knock comes at the door and it's time for Orange to attend a soup lunch hosted by the Payne Family Native American Center and then a Q&A for first-year students.*

**NG:** They're calling you. (*Laughs.*) I think I got a percentage of my questions in.

**TO:** I know there's a little window afterwards, before the Q&A. I don't necessarily need a break, if you want more time. I'm happy to keep talking.

*We pause to attend the lunch and then reconvene to continue the interview.*

**NG:** As a teacher, what do you try to impart to your students about the project and process of writing a novel?

**TO:** I've never been asked that. I just taught my first workshop that was not at IAIA. I walk around with a lot of imposter syndrome. It looks one way from the outside and feels a totally different way from the inside. I still feel like the exact same person, with the exact same demons and doubts. And so that carries over into teaching, you know. Why am I an authority on that,

right? Just because I had a successful novel? This is something that I grapple with, but I also include it in my teaching, in deconstructing authority and trying not to allow me to be an authority, while at the same time I have things that I learned while writing it that can be helpful. So I don't think that I have specific advice. It depends on what kind of novel you're working on. It also depends what kind of writer you are, because some people work really linearly and need to write the whole thing out in a bad draft and then go back and go through again. One thing I tell people to do is at the beginning of the book you need to put extra care and attention to the entry. The doorway to your book needs to be really fancy and nice and inviting, because that's where you win or lose readers. You need to immediately convince readers that your voice is something they want to stay with. This is their time. They're choosing to spend time out of their own lives with something you put your work into. So that's the most important: the entry to your book, and also the entry to individual chapters. Put extra care into those. And as a revisor or editor of your own work, if you put extra work into the beginning of it, you'll invite yourself into the revision process. Like, well, at least I got this part right. Now I just need to get the rest into as good of shape as the beginning. But that's just a minor part. I don't have any general advice for writing novels, because everyone is so different.

**NG:** That's why it was so interesting to ask you about outlining versus writing by intuition. I do the latter, and I think that's how I'll continue to proceed with my novel, but because we're in the thick of it in novel workshop,

that's sort of what we're asking: how do we do this? How *best* to do it?

**TO:** I've never been an outliner, but I do tend to think of a concept and then I write into that, and then it becomes very mysterious how I'm going to get to it. I'm working on a short story now that might become a novella about an author living in a rural town and these sort of hillbilly guys, pro-Trump—this is influenced by where I've been living, and also where Mark Twain launched his literary career—but there's a lot of pro-Trump people there. They get wind of this author living there and also of his success—it's not totally autobiographical—and they take him for ransom, but they're not very good at what they're doing. Anyway, I thought of that as a concept and I started writing into it, and it totally changed. So from concept to actual execution I think things can really get crazy. I had them at first as people I didn't really like, and they've turned into people I do like because it's not interesting to just write dumb people who you don't agree with politically. Like, that doesn't look good on a page and doesn't do anything.

**NG:** I read that while you were writing *There There*, you ended up discarding chapters digging backwards into your characters' family histories. But it seems like when you're telling a story about people, there's always going to be a backstory that just keeps going backwards and backwards and backwards. How do you know, as the writer, when you've gone far back enough?

**TO:** I carried this to great-grandparents in *There There*, back to New Mexico

and this very strange, unnecessary story. So I think, going back to reader attention and reader time and pacing, asking yourself what is necessary and what is the story I want to tell, versus, do I have the responsibility to write a backstory? Like, how much work is the backstory doing? If it's not doing something essential for the story that you want to tell, then it probably can be discarded.

**NG:** Do you think sometimes that you have to write it and then cut it?

**TO:** Yeah. Yeah. This goes back to my maximalism-minimalism approach. Sometimes it's the only way to find certain things out. With research, you can spend four hours on it—I've read whole books and gotten one thing out of it, but that one thing is so essential that it's worth it. I read a whole book on Amerigo Vespucci. Very boring, dry book. But it's because I wrote a short story about a young boy who wrote a letter to Amerigo Vespucci after learning about him in class, and he's telling Amerigo about what America is now, and he's also telling the reader who Amerigo was and how apt his name was for our country, because he was a pimp and a jeweler and a fraud, and all these things that lack character and are pretty shady, and it just matches who we are, especially right now.

**NG:** Especially right now.

**TO:** But I read a whole book and took almost nothing from it, and the stuff

I ended up including in the story I could have gotten from his Wikipedia entry. It didn't matter. And it's the same thing for backstory, that's why I bring it up. Backstory is a form of research, just internal research: Who is my character? What did he come from? What are the very subtle ways that that fills in the way you write the character in the present time?

**NG:** In the interview that you gave to the *Santa Fe Literary Review*, you talked about “taking care of the reader” and balancing the cerebral with pacing and through scene-building. You talked about how your earlier work was more experimental and less accessible and that maybe in the future you would return to that. I wonder if you can talk a little bit more about that, both about that balance and about what you would write if you returned to that?

**TO:** I think something that initially made me want to write was experimental stream-of-consciousness stuff. Still voicey, but stuff that explores philosophy, like what Kafka and Borges sometimes do. But when I had the realization about this communion that happens between reader and writer, that experience—that you're writing into a reader's life, that that's how they're spending their time—when I realized how much I needed to meet them halfway, that's when I—I kept hearing all this advice about writing in the scene, and it was annoying to hear, until I had this essential realization at some point in my MFA, not necessarily related to someone saying it, but just a moment of like, oh my God, I'm compromising my own vision by

not including the reader in my consideration in revision, because they won't even read it if it doesn't have these things that we know that readers love, which are scenes, which is pacing, readability.

**NG:** One thing I really connected with in your novel was the issue of mixed heritage. I'm mixed Hispanic and Native, but I was raised mostly on the Hispanic side. My great-grandmother was born on the Ysleta Pueblo reservation in New Mexico, but beyond that I don't know much about my Native heritage. Something in your novel that really resonated with me was the question of belonging, and blood and culture and identity and how complicated that is when it's mixed.

**TO:** I think there's a big wave coming of Latinx people in general identifying with their Native heritage, which is in many cases more than some Native people here that strongly identify. Those are strong indigenous connections that have been kept under wraps on purpose with things like the census and terms like "Non-Hispanic White"—all these confusing things to keep the numbers down. But it's changing, I can feel it.

*This interview was conducted by Nicole Gomez on October 30, 2019. It has been edited and condensed for publication.*

TOMMY ORANGE is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling novel *There There*, a multi-generational, relentlessly paced story about a side of America few of us have ever seen: the lives of urban Native Americans. *There There* was one of *The New York Times Book Review's* 10 Best Books of the Year, and won the Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize and the Pen/Hemingway Award. *There There* was also longlisted for the National Book Award and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Orange graduated from the MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts, and was a 2014 MacDowell Fellow and a 2016 Writing by Writers Fellow. He is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. He was born and raised in Oakland, California.

NICOLE GOMEZ is a second-year MFA candidate in Fiction at the University of Montana. She is the Editor-in-Chief of *CutBank Literary Magazine* and a teacher with Free Verse. She has a B.A. in International Relations from Stanford University and was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico and raised in El Paso, Texas.