

## Word Study from *There There*

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At Seneca, professors are encouraged to include a [Land Acknowledgement](#), which is “a formal statement that recognizes First Peoples and their unique relationship to their traditional territories” at the beginning of class, and I always like to follow the rules, if I can. So, I read the formal statement at the beginning of class. But after a couple of times, I thought, ‘How can I make this more relatable?’.

Then I read [There There](#) by Tommy Orange, and I knew it would be of interest to my students because the book was about a young person feeling disconnected from his heritage (in fact, knowing little about his ancestors) who wanted to learn how to dance a traditional dance at a pow wow. But his writing – oh my! This character is thinking about the dance steps and the beat of the drum, and somehow Tommy Orange has written this scene in such a way that we, the readers, are also learning the steps as he puts the words on the page.

I asked six students to read this section from *There There* as a way to expand upon the Land Acknowledgment.

“There are hundreds of dancers in front of him. Behind him. To his left and right. He’s surrounded by the variegation of color and pattern specific to Indianness, gradients from one color to the next, geometrically sequenced sequined shapes on shiny and leathered fabrics, the quill, bead, ribbon, plume, feathers from magpies, hawks, crows, eagles.... There are crowns and gourds and bells and drumsticks, metal cones, sticked and arrowed flickers, shag anklets, and hairpipe

bandoliers, barrettes and bracelets, and bustles that fan out in perfect circles. He watches people point out each other's regalia. He is an old station wagon at a car show. He is a fraud... He tries to shake off the feeling of feeling like a fraud. He can't allow himself to feel like a fraud because then he'll probably act like one. To get to that feeling, to get to that prayer, you have to trick yourself out of thinking all together. Out of acting. Out of everything.... To dance as if time only mattered in so far as you could keep a beat to it, in order to dance in such a way that time itself discontinued, disappeared, ran out, or into the feeling of nothingness under your feet when you jumped, when you dipped your shoulders like you were trying to dodge the very air you were suspended in, your feathers a flutter of echoes centuries old, your whole being a kind of flight....To perform and win you have to dance true. But this is just Grand Entry. No judges. Orvil hops a little and dips his arms. He puts his arms out and tried to keep light on his feet. When he starts to feel embarrassed, he closes his eyes. He tells himself not to think. He thinks the thought *don't think* over and over....He opens his eyes and sees everyone around him. They're all feathers and movement. They're all one dance."

(Excerpt from *There There* by Tommy Orange)

Did you read those lines out loud? I hope you did. I hope you imagined the dance, how the words described the dance, even if you didn't know some of the words, and you could see, and hear, and feel, the dance.

Of course, this is a creative writing class, so we're interested in words. Words

matter. Perhaps this phrase sounds like a cliché but please think about this –we often hear about “Truth and Reconciliation.”

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The Truth & Reconciliation Commission.

Yes, I’m in favour of this commission, and then, I read a different version – one word was changed, and everything changed, because words matter.

Truth **before** Reconciliation.

Truth ***before*** Reconciliation.

I took several minutes to think about this word change. Tried to make it relatable to my own world. I thought about arguments that I’d had with someone, or they with me, and that we wanted to resolve. Yes, I’d want the truth before I could forgive or forget or move on. Otherwise, the friendship couldn’t continue. I thought about how little I knew about the “truth” of how the Indigenous people lived and then didn’t, how children were ‘educated’ in schools where ‘educated’ meant the loss of their Indigenous language, their families, their freedom. I thought about how little I knew. How much I’d learned by reading Tommy Orange’s story. How I admired his ability to turn words into a dance, and to write his truth: “He is an old station wagon at a car show. He is a fraud.”

I continue to think of how to share the Truth & Reconciliation Commission and the Land Acknowledgement. And I’ll continue to have students read aloud in class. I hope you are finding interesting ways to include a [land acknowledgement](#) in your classes. I hope you are learning, ““To dance as if time only mattered in so far as you

could keep a beat to it, in order to dance in such a way that time itself discontinued...”