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Paper #3: The Research Paper

ENGL 103-06

The Indigenous Experience of the Current Era

Alicia Elliot is a Canadian Tuscarora writer living in Brantford, Ontario. Elliot has written for *Maclean's*, *The Washington Post*, *Hazlitt*, CBC Books, *Vice*, *Chatelaine*, and her own monthly column on CBC Arts. Elliot's essay, "A Mind Spread Out on the Ground," won Gold at the 2017 National Magazine Awards, and her first novel, *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*, published in 2019, was a bestseller which won multiple awards for that year. In addition, Elliot was the winner of the Canada Council Grant for 2020-2021: Creating, Knowing and Sharing: The Arts and Cultures of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples.

For this paper, I will be analyzing Elliot's work. To do so, I will be focusing on "A Mind Spread Out on the Ground," and how Elliot represents her era from the perspective of an Indigenous woman in Canada. To further illuminate Elliot's place in her era, I will be comparing and contrasting her work to that of Tommy Orange, a Cheyenne and Arapaho author from Oakland, California. I will be comparing Elliot's essay to Orange's prologue to his novel *There There*, which was one of the finalists for the 2019 Pulitzer Prize. Elliot represents her era from the perspective of Indigenous peoples, contending with both the lasting oppression of European colonialism and the universal realities of the moment in which she is writing. Elliot and Orange both work to disintegrate the narratives that pathologize Indigenous peoples, and their commercial and critical success is an important step towards promoting cultural awareness and solidarity.

“A Mind Spread Out on the Ground” explores the intersectionality between colonialism, mental health, and language, as Alicia Elliot describes her own experience with mental health challenges, both her own and her family’s. The essay’s title, “A Mind Spread Out on the Ground,” is an English translation that “can best approximate” (Elliot 9) the Mohawk phrase for depression, “Wake’nikonhra’kwenhtará:’on.” Elliot connects her experiences to the impacts of Indigenous intergenerational trauma and the perpetuation of colonialism through labels and misunderstood perceptions, and she emphasizes the importance of language (and its use in describing and understanding reality) in her culture.

Elliot’s essay is written from a first-person point of view, and it begins with her describing a conversation with a therapist, who makes her “think briefly of residential schools” (Elliot 1). Elliot reflects on her experience of growing up and challenges surrounding mental health; her Onkwehon:we family was of extremely low socio-economic status, her mother was “diagnosed and rediagnosed many times” (Elliot 2), and “[Elliot] was 16 when [she] wrote [her] first suicide note” (Elliot 7). Elliot’s personal and intimate first-person tone reads like flashbacks; she takes the reader through moments in her life, and the emotional climax comes with the totality of her experiences leading her to “now understand why that therapist in that church reminded me of residential schools (Elliot 11). Elliot goes on, by using her own experiences, to explain the various ways that colonialism and mental health intersect. Elliot points out that the term for “depression” was initially “melancholia,” and people considered it to be “a form of demonic possession” (Elliot 3). Elliot connects this to the fact that “European colonists widely considered Indigenous peoples to be devil worshipers” (Elliot 5) and thus considered themselves justified in their treatment of Indigenous peoples under the premise that they were “enemies of Christ” (Elliot 6).

Elliot describes her own experience with attempted suicide. She points out how incredibly high Onkwehon:we suicide rates are, and how suicide rates were lower “when more than 50 percent of the people spoke their Indigenous language” (Elliot 8). Elliot contends that colonialists worked to eradicate language and culture, and that Indigenous culture “lives and breathes inside [Indigenous] languages” (Elliot 8). Elliot describes this to be the primary conflict for Indigenous peoples; she “struggles against colonialism the same way [she struggles] against depression,” and “[b]oth depression and colonialism have stolen [her] language” (Elliot 12). “A Mind Spread Out on the Ground” explored the existence of pervasive colonialism: the attempted eradication of language and culture and the subsequent forcing of Indigenous people “to take on [colonialist] values and wonder[ing] why [Indigenous peoples] couldn’t cope” (Elliot 11). Elliot’s personal and viscerally honest essay explores these harmful patterns through the accessible lens of her own experiences.

Tommy Orange’s prologue to *There There* similarly depicts the Indigenous experience in the United States, as opposed to Elliot’s experience as a Canadian First Nations woman. The primary difference between *There There*’s prologue and “A Mind Spread Out on the Ground” is the style, tone, and voice that Orange employs. As opposed to Elliot’s personal, first person accounts of her own experiences, Orange’s prose is constructed mostly from an omniscient, third person point of view. The only variation to this approach is that the first paragraph of *There There* is written from a second person point of view. This choice places the reader, and the reader’s knowledge of the “Indian Head test pattern” (Orange 3) in a position of complicity, as Orange’s transition to omniscient third person provides context to an uninformed viewer of what is “just a test” (Orange 3) on a TV. The remainder of *There There*’s prologue is written from the point of view of “Indians” in general, with Orange never elaborating on his own personal

experience. The primary contrast between *There There*'s prologue and "A Mind Spread Out on the Ground" is that Orange writes from a collective point of view, presenting the story of the American Indian broadly, and referring repeatedly to a unified "we."

However, the contrasting narrative points of view of both author's prose are equally effective at representing Indigenous experiences in North America. Orange's assertion that Indigenous peoples have "been defined by everyone else and continue to be slandered" (Orange 7), speaks to the experience of Indigenous peoples across the continent in much the same way that Elliot's essay does. In addition, while the narrative points of view of Elliot and Orange's prose varies greatly, their respective narrative arcs are similar. Orange describes various pieces of the history and folklore of American Indians, culminating in an intimate depiction of "Urban Indians" in Oakland. Orange does this in a similar way to Elliot's connection of the history of colonial interactions with Indigenous peoples to her own experiences with mental health challenges. Orange connects the violent and oppressive history surrounding the treatment of American Indians to the realities of "Urban Indians feel[ing] at home walking in the shadows of a downtown building" (Orange 11). While *There There*'s prologue does not interact with specific characters in the same way that Elliot's essay does, Orange's use of "we" synthesizes a single voice and character out of the collective experience of American Indigenous peoples.

A stark contrast between American and Canadian culture arises out of reading *There There*'s prologue and "A Mind Spread Out on the Ground." Orange's description of the treatment of American Indians is primarily focused on the history of acts of mass-violence towards them, whereas Elliot's depicts Canada's recent treatment of Indigenous peoples as an inauspicious and veiled perpetuation of colonialist perceptions and ensuing treatment of Indigenous peoples. American and Canadian approaches to reconciling each country's treatment

of Indigenous peoples is different, and a take-away from Elliot and Orange's writing on Indigenous experiences suggest that the reality for Indigenous peoples in their era are more similar than different, in terms of underlying issues of pervasive racism and marginalization.

Elliot's work is critically acclaimed, with her already having received multiple awards one year after publishing her first novel. However, one Amazon review of Elliot's first published novel, *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground* (where Elliot's essay is the first in a collection of her work), points out how Elliot's work is "[n]ot a flattering picture of Canadians" (Tanler par. 1) and goes on to accuse Elliot of "parroting her left-wing university indoctrination" (Tanler par. 1). The reviewer suggests that Elliot "set[ting] her sights on "men, capitalism and Western civilization in general" . . . is emotion speaking, not rational thought" (par. 1). Ironically, criticism of Elliot "setting her sights" on the social institutions that perpetuate colonial oppression validates the existence of the pervasive perceptions of the experience of Indigenous peoples which Elliot is working to disintegrate.

Alicia Elliot represents this moment. As with Tommy Orange, the success of Elliot's writing serves more than her own livelihood and the enjoyment of her readers. As a Canadian Tuscarora woman, Elliot offers a perspective on intersectionality which is not regularly given a voice in modern society, either in Canada or the United States. As CBC Books points out, "Elliott makes connections both large and small between the past and present, the personal and political" (par. 2), and "[she] offers indispensable insight and understanding to the ongoing legacy of colonialism" (par. 1). While Elliot's perspective is that of an Indigenous woman, the extent of the intersectional connections she makes to various aspects of her identity (including her socio-economic status, her gender, her mental health, and her representation) is conducive to a wide range of people both resonating with her writing and empathizing with aspects of her

story they might not have in common. Elliot works to break down the narratives that pathologize Indigenous peoples by sharing personal experiences that transcend perceptions and understandings of Indigenous life.

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