

Since 2001, Central New York Reads One Book has been asking the community to read with us. You might ask, "Why one book?" And to be sure, we wouldn't want to stop anyone from reading 5 books, or 10 books, or 100 books! The meaning behind our name comes from what we do. Each year, the CNY Reads committee members select a book that they think is well written, engaging, and approachable, meaning it is written in language that is descriptive, yet simple and clear. In other words, you don't need to be a code breaker to decipher what the book is saying. We then spend January, February and March, our season, enticing CNY community members to read the book and come to one or more of several free programs that we offer that help readers expand their reading experience.

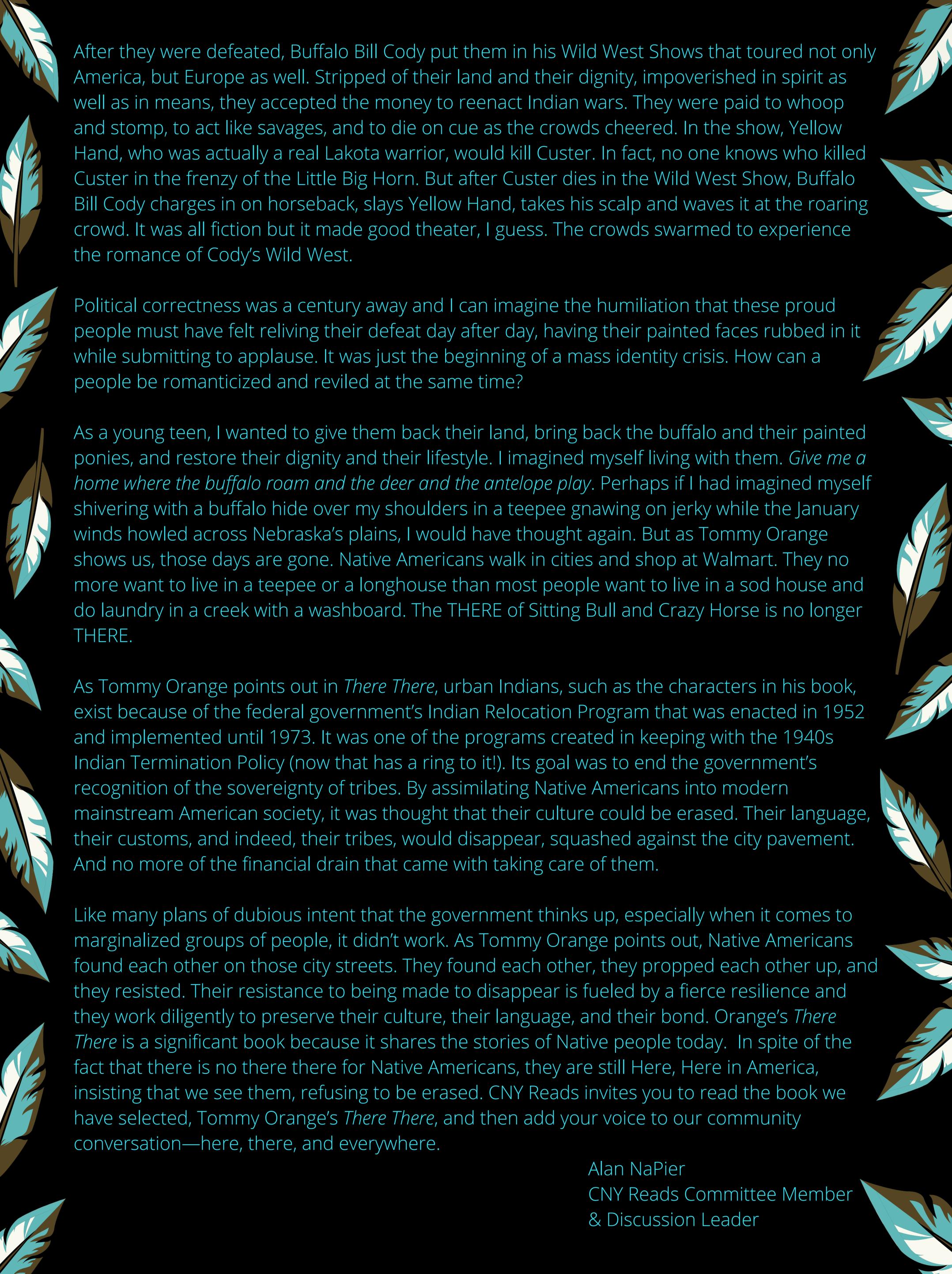
Most, but not all, of the programs are book discussions. And most, but not all, of the discussions, are held at local libraries across the area. We call it a community-wide dialogue, a conversation about what each of us took away from the book. By sharing our thoughts, we all might grow a little bit. We might understand more completely what the author was saying, and we might understand more completely one another.

Our 2020 book, the 19th book that CNY Reads has selected, is *There There* by Native American author Tommy Orange. The book was published in 2018 and is the author's first novel. It won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the National Book Award, and the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize. A trifecta! Call it a fluke, call it beginner's luck, but I think we have before us a gifted writer.

There There is a story, but between its covers are the stories of 12 people—12 urban Native Americans who have struggled with identity and hardship in different ways but find themselves on a common path leading to the Big Oakland Powwow where they will drum, sing, dance in historic costumes, and maybe heal a little bit. The powwow is a place to reconnect with your roots. It is a place to sort out who you are, a place to get support and share your pain—a pain that comes from bad treatment and outright abuse that span generations. It is at the powwow that this powerful novel comes to its shocking conclusion.

The title *There There* comes from a quote in Gertrude Stein's autobiography published in 1937. She grew up on a farm in Oakland, California. Upon returning after spending years in France, she went to her childhood home. When she went there, she found the farmhouse had been razed and in the farm fields stood new houses. She went there, but there was no there there. The there in her mind no longer existed.

I grew up in Nebraska and moved to New York as an adult. The words Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga were not familiar to me. Nebraska was the home of the plains Indians—home of the Sioux, or as they call themselves, the Lakota. The names Oglala, Hunkpapa, Brule, and Miniconjou were the terms I was familiar with. These were the Native Americans of the Wild West, the ones we saw in John Wayne movies. These were the tribes of Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, Spotted Tail, and Crazy Horse. Like many boys in Nebraska, I was fascinated by their feathered bonnets and painted faces, and by pictures of them on spotted ponies, bow strings pulled taut, as they charged into buffalo herds. My romanticized picture of them was shared by the world.



After they were defeated, Buffalo Bill Cody put them in his Wild West Shows that toured not only America, but Europe as well. Stripped of their land and their dignity, impoverished in spirit as well as in means, they accepted the money to reenact Indian wars. They were paid to whoop and stomp, to act like savages, and to die on cue as the crowds cheered. In the show, Yellow Hand, who was actually a real Lakota warrior, would kill Custer. In fact, no one knows who killed Custer in the frenzy of the Little Big Horn. But after Custer dies in the Wild West Show, Buffalo Bill Cody charges in on horseback, slays Yellow Hand, takes his scalp and waves it at the roaring crowd. It was all fiction but it made good theater, I guess. The crowds swarmed to experience the romance of Cody's Wild West.

Political correctness was a century away and I can imagine the humiliation that these proud people must have felt reliving their defeat day after day, having their painted faces rubbed in it while submitting to applause. It was just the beginning of a mass identity crisis. How can a people be romanticized and reviled at the same time?

As a young teen, I wanted to give them back their land, bring back the buffalo and their painted ponies, and restore their dignity and their lifestyle. I imagined myself living with them. *Give me a home where the buffalo roam and the deer and the antelope play.* Perhaps if I had imagined myself shivering with a buffalo hide over my shoulders in a teepee gnawing on jerky while the January winds howled across Nebraska's plains, I would have thought again. But as Tommy Orange shows us, those days are gone. Native Americans walk in cities and shop at Walmart. They no more want to live in a teepee or a longhouse than most people want to live in a sod house and do laundry in a creek with a washboard. The THERE of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse is no longer THERE.

As Tommy Orange points out in *There There*, urban Indians, such as the characters in his book, exist because of the federal government's Indian Relocation Program that was enacted in 1952 and implemented until 1973. It was one of the programs created in keeping with the 1940s Indian Termination Policy (now that has a ring to it!). Its goal was to end the government's recognition of the sovereignty of tribes. By assimilating Native Americans into modern mainstream American society, it was thought that their culture could be erased. Their language, their customs, and indeed, their tribes, would disappear, squashed against the city pavement. And no more of the financial drain that came with taking care of them.

Like many plans of dubious intent that the government thinks up, especially when it comes to marginalized groups of people, it didn't work. As Tommy Orange points out, Native Americans found each other on those city streets. They found each other, they propped each other up, and they resisted. Their resistance to being made to disappear is fueled by a fierce resilience and they work diligently to preserve their culture, their language, and their bond. Orange's *There There* is a significant book because it shares the stories of Native people today. In spite of the fact that there is no there there for Native Americans, they are still Here, Here in America, insisting that we see them, refusing to be erased. CNY Reads invites you to read the book we have selected, Tommy Orange's *There There*, and then add your voice to our community conversation—here, there, and everywhere.

Alan NaPier
CNY Reads Committee Member
& Discussion Leader