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Parallel Worlds in Oakland

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Tommy Orange put me into a spiral of confusion, then reflection. I can't quite put my finger on it. So if I may, I will just start here, in confusion, and see where we get. This is not a review - though I will agree with everyone else that *There There* is an incredible book.

Here's what really got to me: he traced a world, a psychic geography, of Oakland, a city that I have resided in for more than 40 years, a world that I did not even know, the Oakland of the urban Indian. I thought I knew Oakland, I get my tacos at Mi Grullense truck in the Goodwill parking lot right across from the Native American Health Clinic. But I did not really see Indian Oakland (I use the term Indian, though imperfect like all such signs, in respect of the American Indian Movement), did not see what was right there in front of me.

First, the simple point: there are many peoples, many layers of community in the vibrant and undulating streets of Oakland. And, through the complex journeys of migration, through struggle and love - the communities mix and match in an eclectic quilt. I'm thinking of the time I was walking out of a classroom at Oakland High when a Black freshman was shouldering his way in, muttering "chingada!" So Oakland.

But what struck me with this revelation of a world formerly invisible to me was not just the complexity, not just the new insights afforded me, but really the very contradictions of being white in America at all. I know - apologies ahead of time - it sounds like another "all about me" piece, but hear me out.

The problem is the way that white sojourners, even white activists, have the luxury of the white gaze, of being able to pick and choose, to say "I think I'll get involved in border issues," or "I'm interested in Black civil rights," or "I'm supporting Palestinians," or to be active in nothing at all. For us, for me, it is a luxury, the privilege of choice. But if you are Black in Oakland, if you are Salvadoran in Oakland, or any other identity that places you at the margins - that is what you have no choice but to do (you might very well also be expressing solidarity with other struggles but you are for sure dealing with your own).

But Oakland I know versus the Oakland Tommy Orange gives us through his characters is not only about my own erasure of community experience. It also reminds us that whiteness so dominates the landscape that Orange's characters also struggle to perceive themselves (their Indian-ness, their cultural selves) through this distorting "white fog" that exists around them. Like when the character Opal is talking with her mom.

"You have to know what's going on here," she said. "You're old enough to know now, and I'm sorry I haven't told you before. Opal, you have to know that we should never not tell our stories and that no one is too young to hear. We're all here because if a lie they been lying to us since they came. They're lying to us now!"

The way she said "They're lying to us now" seared me. Like it had two different meanings and I didn't know what either one was. I asked my mom what the lie was, but she just stared off toward the sun, her whole face became a squint. I didn't know what to do except to sit there and wait to see what she would say. A cold wind laid into our faces, made us close our eyes to it. With my eyes closed, I asked my mom what we were gonna do. she told me we could only do what we could do, and that the monster that was the machine that was the government had no intention of slowing itself down for long enough to truly look back to see what happened. To make it right. And so what we could do had everything to do with being able to understand where we came from, what happened to our people, and how to honor them by living right, by telling our stories. She told me the world was made of stories, nothing else, just stories, and stories about stories." (57)

In other words, whiteness has left all of us struggling to perceive the truth of things, and how to piece together a future that transcends colonialist oppression. And *There There* demands that we, as white people, really hear and see racialized others.

This is just the reality - something you can't escape. It got me thinking. My son and I love to ferret out amazing local restaurants, this Laotian spot, that Puerto Rican bodega. It is particularly rewarding if we get there before it is "Yelp discovered." The food is amazing and affordable; the locals predominate. But this, too, is exotic tourism - a privilege of choice, of floating above multiple realities.

In my privilege, I recognize myself as a [flâneur](#), a sojourning observer, but also a dilettante and taker. Since I am a teacher, too often this also means I am an arbiter of ratified cultural expression and therefore of access. This is something I have to challenge in myself constantly.

For white people, it is a constant search for authenticity, for things to appropriate or at least to consume. As an aside, I know there are white people who, because of their place and history, have a particular relation to, for instance, Black culture – I’m thinking of the recently deceased Dr. John of New Orleans. But I don’t buy the white Marxist dodge about, “I’m working class and that supersedes colonialist relationships.”

For white people, the search for authenticity is also a search for place. We have access and power in so many ways. We also have an alienation, a kind of loneliness which we are constantly racing to obliterate. Tommy Orange opened another lens to Oakland for me and also forced me to check myself.

Native people’s stories convey a painful reality. As Jacquie Red Feather says in *There There*, “Kids are jumping out the windows of burning buildings, falling to their deaths. And we think the problem is that they’re jumping. This is what we’ve done: We’ve tried to find ways to get them to stop jumping. Convince them that burning alive is better than leaving when the shit gets too hot for them to take.” (104)

Where to go from here, then, as a white educator? I’m not sure. I don’t expect to be able to obliterate the alienation, the loneliness. The answer must be in being able to live in the contradiction, to dwell in the liminal space. Without simply flitting from one thing to another, we must be able to use our privilege for solidarity, to end the dehumanizing separations that capitalism constructs.

For white teachers, this means being honest and not defensive; to not try to pathetically appropriate the dazzling cultures of our students but to recognize them, to be yourself but to always communicate, “I see you, I am on your side. Let us build better futures.” I don’t mean this as some vague color-blind sentimentality. On the contrary, we have to learn to acknowledge our own racism – which is built into our structural place in this world – and commit to battling against white supremacy in every way possible. My students, I have found, are generous and appreciate that this is a white person who can be at least partially trusted.

That's all I've got for now.

Rick Ayers is an associate professor of education is the coordinator of the San Francisco Teacher Residency and a part of the Urban Education and Social Justice cohort in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco. He focuses on curriculum and pedagogy, with particular focus on equity, social justice, and decolonial approaches to education. His writing, in blogs as well as publications, is on community engaged scholarship and community organizing. He is the author or co-author of five books including, Teaching the Taboo: Courage and Imagination in the Classroom; An Empty Seat in Class: Teaching and Learning after the Death of a Student; Great Books for High School Kids: A Teaching Guide to Studs Terkel's Working; and You can't fire the bad ones: And 18 other myths about teachers, teachers unions, and public education; as well as numerous chapters and journal articles.