

Emerging from Collective Derailment

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"At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."

- Albert Camus, [The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays](#)

Across each character's stories, Tommy Orange's writing introduces the reader to the experience of derailment. A relatively [new clinical term](#), a person experiencing derailment has lost the personal narrative of how the past self connects to present and future selves and ultimately self-direction. Although *There There* details the personal derailments experienced in each of the characters' lives, it is also the story of a larger collective derailment and its impact.

Existential philosophers have written extensively on the need for humans to construct coherence within themselves and between themselves and the outside world. These acts of meaning making are essential to experiencing the world as a place with order, continuity, and comprehensibility. When confronted with massive disruptions to these meanings, derailments can last indefinitely. Detaching ourselves and the external world creates an overcoming "feeling of absurd" as Camus describes, who then argues that the inevitable end point to this feeling is suicide. In each character, we witness their struggle being in a disappointing world where certain events ultimately cannot be reconciled. For Camus, one solution to overcome meaninglessness is to actively face the horror of death and then consciously choose to live with meaning ([Pözlzer, 2018](#)). The book exemplifies this resurrection when Tony, Opal, Blue, and Victoria face possible death to save others.

Another way to emerge from derailment is to re-engage in the act of [meaning making](#). To make meaning however, does not mean erasing or reframing horrific events so that they are stripped of their impact or pain. Rather, making meaning is the attempt to reconcile what has happened and assimilating and accommodating this information for the self. Part of this process can be facilitated by telling others about our life histories and struggles. How this unfolds ultimately depends on how the reconciliation attempts are received by others. Disclosing our secrets and struggles are only psychologically beneficial to the extent that they are received compassionately by the recipient(s) and yet some of the most difficult experiences are

ones that are resisted the most by others ([see Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010](#)). Stephen King succinctly summarizes the pain of this for rejection:

“The most important things are the hardest to say. They are the things you get ashamed of, because words diminish them—words shrink things that seemed limitless when they were in your head to no more than living size when they're brought out. But it's more than that, isn't it? The most important things lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried, like landmarks to a treasure your enemies would love to steal away. And you may make revelations that cost you dearly only to have people look at you in a funny way, not understanding what you've said at all, or why you thought it was so important that you almost cried while you were saying it. That's the worst, I think. When the secret stays locked within not for want of a teller but for want of an understanding ear.”
—[Stephen King, Different Seasons](#)

When an entire group of people has experienced incredible suffering at the hands of others, how can the group emerge from this derailment when their very experiences are delegitimized by others? Part of the legacy of oppression is the inherited story of collective derailment. How does one process experiences that are too painful to accept and whose fullest acknowledgment are actively resisted by others?

Orange addresses the collective traumas experienced by Native Americans head on in his book multiple times, but he also relays his present day fears about disclosing their continuing sufferings: “when we go to tell our stories, people think we want it to have gone different. People want to say things like, ‘sore losers’ and ‘move on already...’” As humans we seek coherence and continuity in our personal lives and our collective histories. The clinical experience of derailment powerfully refutes the notion that any one of us can just “move on.” Psychologists have meticulously diagnosed and treated individual sufferings but we are woefully behind in contextualizing these findings for a collective. Can these truths be transmitted with any completeness without passing on derailment? Can these truths be wholly acknowledged by oppressor groups’ descendants without a lesser derailment of their own? Maybe. Maybe not.

Fiction and other forms of artistic expression communicate the human condition writ large in ways that real life stories sometimes cannot because the format evades defensive layers we the audience carefully erect to avoid uncomfortable truths. Perhaps artistic expression is also the salve for collective derailment. Whether it be

graffiti, dancing, drumming or writing, artistic expression fulfills our need to make meaning and reclaim our experiences through our own lens.

Saera Khan is Professor of Psychology at the University of San Francisco College of Arts and Sciences. Her writing focuses on how people rely on stereotypes and biases to form judgments about others and people's sense of belonging when they are from marginalized groups. Her essay, "Confronting Complex Multiracial Realities" appeared in Psychology Today online.