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Indian

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Indian

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"An Urban Indian belongs to the city, and cities belong to the earth. Everything here is formed in relation to every other living and nonliving thing from the earth. All our relations. The process that brings anything to its current form--chemical, synthetic, technological, or otherwise--doesn't make the product not a living product of the living earth. Buildings, freeways, cars--are these not of the earth? Were they shipped in from Mars, the moon?Cities form the same way as galaxies..." *—There There, Tommy Orange*

Indian. American. Indian-American. American Indian. Native American. Indian Indian. Various forms of these labels have followed me ever since I left New Delhi during the summer of 1966 and as a five-year-old arrived in the heart of Washington D.C.

In kindergarten at Stephens Elementary School, I learned to replace my Tamil and Hindi language-centeredness with English. My classmates asked: “Where are you *from*?” and “What *are* you?” My replies of “India” and “Indian” fell on mistakenly comprehending ears. Immediately, they started dancing and hopping around me in a fast-moving tight circle with a bend in their bodies. A piercing, whooping call came out of their mouths as their hands beat rhythmically on their lips. I did not understand what they were doing, and I would answer with just a frightened smile. Once I learned what the “Indian” they knew meant and understood that it was not my kind of Indian, I would say, “I am the kind of Indian that comes from India, not the Americas.” Eventually, I recognized the offensiveness of their mimicry.

In my mid-20s, I heard the English translations of Hindu rituals and was simultaneously invited to Pueblo and Cayuga/Salish rituals by Native American friends, activists, and artists. I realized that both kinds of “Indians” believe in the sacredness of the rivers, the mountains, the clouds, the rains, and the earth itself. Both kinds of “Indian” think of these natural forms as our kinfolk. There is a shared sense that we are ultimately responsible for the survival of the natural world, in which humans are deeply embedded. I learned that both of our ceremonies are centered around the idea of gratitude towards the natural world and an understanding that nature has its own active consciousness. This consciousness is often embodied by deities such as the Hindu river Ganga and the Hindu goddess Bhū-Devī; or embedded in a concept such as the *bupingeh*, or the “heart of the earth” in the Tewa cosmology among the Pueblo people. This Nature has revelatory, throbbing agency in our individual and collective lives.

As a religious studies scholar, I think often of ritual life; of how rituals, ceremonies, and festivals shape our lives whether we are aware of them or not. My recent book, *Feeding A Thousand Souls: Women, Ritual and Ecology in India, An Exploration of the Kōlam* (Oxford University Press, 2019) is about one of these rituals. Nearly every morning of my mother’s adult life, she made a *kōlam* (an ephemeral women’s ritual design in rice flour) on the threshold of our home. She did this whether we were in a government flat in New Delhi or a suburban townhouse in Washington D.C. The *kōlam* is a gift of gratitude to the earth goddess, Bhū-Devī, and asks her forgiveness for our stomping heavily on her throughout the day.

Both fiction and non-fiction give us so many ways to experience each other’s pains, struggles, hopes, and experiences. Reading Tommy Orange’s brilliant love letter to the city of Oakland and the everyday life of local, contemporary “Urban Indians” is like watching bright green grass growing in the interstices of a heavy concrete sidewalk. Voices, memories, and landscapes swirl dramatically to reveal the daily, painful weight of

the horrific past and the impending future carving themselves onto the present. The collective ways of being are refracted through the twelve characters' searches for meaning, and culminate in a unique literary luminosity filled with grace.

Dr. Vijaya Nagarajan is Associate Professor and Chair of Theology/Religious Studies Department and Affiliate Faculty of Environmental Studies Program at the University of San Francisco. She teaches courses on Hinduism, Commons: Land, Water, and Air, Community Internships, Voice, Memory and Landscape, among others. She is the author of the recently published Feeding A Thousand Souls: Women, Ritual and Ecology in India, An exploration of the kolam in India (Oxford University Press, New York: 2019), a multi-disciplinary investigation of a popular women's ritual art form performed daily with rice flour by millions of women in Tamil Nadu.