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Memories, Stories, and the Search for our Place

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... 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 ... The world was made of stories, nothing else, just stories, and stories about stories.

–There There by Tommy Orange

Tommy Orange's book *There, There* is a masterful reflection on place, violence, displacement and indigenous erasure told through the lives of 12 characters set in Oakland, California. Through the inter-generational stories, Orange renders visible the fictionalized accounts of community members who have made Oakland home over several decades. Themes of home and displacement captivated me most while reading this book as a second-generation South Asian American child of immigrants raised in the Bay Area and as a scholar of migration and education.

What becomes "home" when we are forced to flee from our ancestral lands?

I met Zau in 2015 when he was finishing high school in Oakland at a school for newly arrived immigrants and refugees. After fleeing Burma as an unauthorized migrant to Malaysia, he applied for asylum and was resettled with his family in the U.S. Is place the blurry photo of his family's home that Zau has on his phone? Is home an image from over ten years ago; a home that no longer belongs to his family after they were forced off their land in Chin state by the Burmese military? No land to till meant no livelihood, and Zau was pulled out of school after the fifth grade, conscripted into forced labor in a gold mine at the age of 11. Reflecting on his experience, Zau shared:

I had to go find gold in the mines when I was 11 years old. We had to dig holes 20 feet down, and then go inside to see if there was gold. It was so quiet when I would go inside there. Because the government had taken our farms over and built things on our land, we had to leave and look for work. The mine owners hire children because we have more energy and we are small so we can go inside the holes and go way down into the mines. Plus, if something falls as we dig, we can move quickly to escape.

It was really scary, but I didn't really have a choice but to do it. (as cited in Bajaj, Canlas & Argenal, 2017, p. 133)

Zau's blurry photos and strained memories of forced removal from his neighborhood still make him long for home and want to return someday.

What, then, is the nature of home in exile?

The late Palestinian theorist Edward Said described exile as the "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (Said, 2002). Through the experiences of indigenous genocide, the inter-generational transmission of trauma, and the present-day structural racism facing indigenous and other communities of color in the U.S., stories must be honored. This wisdom is shared with Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield by her mother in *There There* as revealed in the quote at the start of the essay.

But can we find place in our stories, especially in those of displaced people? In stories of hardship, of resistance, of "survivance" (Vizenor, 2008)?

My grandparents became refugees and survivors of the violent partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 that claimed more than two million lives. Their stories were reluctantly shared, stories of violence and terror (on both sides of a border that was hastily drawn by British cartographers unfamiliar with the region, deemed "experts" by colonial hubris and who were the catalysts for the massacre of millions). Stories of my great-grandfather's dead body found hacked to death in the river one morning convincing my relatives to finally heed the warnings to leave. Perhaps we can also find place in the stories of longing for home after leaving? I remember my grandfather sending letters upon letters in his native tongue of Urdu for decades to officials in his childhood hometown to learn about how the place was faring—the place he was born and in which his father died. Nearly 60 years after he was forced to flee, he finally received his first response, which gave him deep connection and joy before he passed away.

Tommy's Orange's book doesn't offer easy redemption—not for Americans wanting to absolve themselves of the bloody history of genocide and settler colonialism in the United States for over 500 years; not for the agents of gentrification, "how out of place they are, all the while looking like they own the place" (Orange, 2018, p. 215); and not for the reader wanting a rosy ending to the

stories of the characters so beautifully woven together in this book. But there are insights for the way forward offered throughout the book, through memory, stories, towards a path, ultimately, of healing. As the author offers, "All these stories that we haven't been telling all this time, what we haven't been listening to, are just part of what we need to heal" (Orange, 2018., p. 137).

Monisha Bajaj is Professor of International and Multicultural Education at the University of San Francisco. Dr. Bajaj is the editor and author of six books, including, most recently, [Human Rights Education: Theory, Research, Praxis](#) (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), as well as numerous articles. She has also developed curriculum—particularly related to peace education, human rights, anti-bullying efforts and sustainability—for non-profit organizations and inter-governmental organizations, such as UNICEF and UNESCO.

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