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## Exploring Place and Identity in a Modern World: USF Scholars Respond to *There There* by Tommy Orange

Saera R. Khan  
University of San Francisco, [srkhan@usfca.edu](mailto:srkhan@usfca.edu)

Christine J. Yeh  
University of San Francisco, [cjyeh@usfca.edu](mailto:cjyeh@usfca.edu)

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## **Exploring Place and Identity in a Modern World: USF scholars respond to *There There* by Tommy Orange**

In *There There* by Tommy Orange, one of the novel's characters picks up on a sense of nostalgia and loss in present day Oakland: "so much development had happened [in Oakland] that the there of her childhood, the there there, was gone, there was no there there any more...it's what happened to Native people." Themes of loss, displacement, and derailment reverberate through the voices of twelve characters from Native communities.

Orange's debut novel, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and many other accolades, explores identity, community, spirituality, cultural histories and memories, modern day anxieties, and place. Oakland of the past and present has much to celebrate and mourn, and the novel centers individuals and communities grappling with and retaining connections to people, geography and collective histories while authentically inhabiting within the modern world. Concerns about whether the center will or will not hold is not new in writing about the Bay Area, and finding a "center that can hold" amidst our modern anxieties, disconnections, and fractured histories and internal struggles, can seem almost impossible though.

And yet, Orange, who experienced many internal struggles himself but who firmly identifies as part of the Native community, has written ultimately a hopeful book where the "there there," the idea of center, has a different source. "There is an anchor, something he's been rooted to all this time...a wind from the bay...Tony hears a bird. Not outside. From where he is anchored, to the bottom of the bottom, the middle of the middle of him. The center's center...the birds are singing" (p. 290).

Using the novel as a source of inspiration, USF faculty across the university were invited to provide their research, artistic, and scholarly perspective through essays, reflections, or artistic pieces on themes about "place and identity in a modern world."

Through these essays and artistic pieces, we can deeply consider and reconsider the lived experiences of Native communities and reanalyze and contest portrayals of their historicity. Tommy Orange's characters embody the struggles, hopes, and identities of a community often not seen or understood in a modern urban context. These stories allow us to engage deeply with urban Indians as they are today without the primary and limited lens of their past. As Rachel Brahinsky writes, "And Oakland, like the other places described by Orange throughout the book, becomes a character that shapes its people."

Oakland as a site for the novel is eye opening and simultaneously humbling. From a cultural perspective, Oakland is known for its roots in the Black Civil Rights movement and home to the Black Panthers (previously known as the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense) and as having one of the oldest and most diverse Chinatowns in North America. Yet, many are unaware of the strong and longstanding Native presence in Oakland—not only as its earliest inhabitants but also currently. As Rick Ayers writes "[Orange] 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."

Orange exposes us to the multi-generational Indian community in Oakland that is often left out of stories about Oakland and more importantly, stories about Indians. Orange's portrayal of this group layered with their interactions and movements within and around Oakland, offer insights into how we not only understand ideas of place and identity but how we—as Bay Area scholars and residents—interact with Oakland.

As Michael Rozendal writes, "Walking through the Temescal neighborhood, perhaps it is not surprising that people are too preoccupied with the fried chicken sandwiches from Bakesale Betty's ...to look down, to wonder about the ground, to roll the word Temescal around their mouths. But this ground, this word resonates with *There There's* urban Indians deeply part of a city that seems to both erase and sustain native presence... 'Temescal' may be a migrant term from Nahuatl that Spanish colonizers brought north, but it points to Ohlone traditions that were here long before the word."

Orange's new stories may be part of a long healing process and but at the same time do not seek to offer simple answers or obviously heroic characters to fix years of injustices. In fact, the characters are flawed, stuck, confused, complex and mostly just trying to get by and survive each day. As Monisha Bajaj notes, "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" (p. 215); and not for the reader wanting a rosy ending to the stories of the characters so beautifully woven together in this book."

Oakland is not free from the rapid tech-driven gentrification of Bay Area neighborhoods surrounding San Francisco and Silicon Valley. Communities of Color in particular have been driven away by the rising cost of living and influx of wealthy new residents. This movement away from and towards Oakland influences and reflects the many shifts in cultural selves it embodies. Orange reminds us of the complexity of being caught between these worlds—modern and historic, white and native and how these liminal spaces emerge as authentic collective and individual identities.