

Ms. Consuelo Rojas

Tommy Orange's novel sets a high bar for truth telling. He dramatically delivers a history of systematic eradication and genocide in America. Here, the absurdity of human-on-human inflicted suffering cracks the façade of White superiority. Nobody would want to claim descendancy from those who carried out the despicable acts in the prologue. Not even the dominant culture benefits from such inhumanity. In this novel the narratives about people of color, Native Americans, reflect dislocation and institutionalized discrimination.

One approach to ensure a deeper understanding of these stories is to reveal one's own stories, share and compare them, then together create a universal human story.

In my Mexican-American community the history resembles that of the Native- and African-Americans.' The characters' stories hit close to home. Discussions of racism around the African-American community including Black Lives Matter, the 1619 Project and Critical Race Theory inspire activism. Mexican-American migrant workers picking grapes and lettuce under abysmal conditions to satisfy an entire country's demands is not unlike that of African-American slaves picking cotton and creating a thriving economy. Issues such as migration, immigration, language, and physical traits resulted in prejudice and injustice.

As a 60-something mestizo Mexican-American woman I am still aware of being a person of color in the checkout line. Why am I still wondering where I fit in in society? Why do I still question my identity?

At home, similar to Ruth's and Calvin's stories, we didn't talk about our heritage or the primal hurts of my ancestors. We didn't know our relatives, only that we were part "Indian" and part Spanish. Later, my mother said, in so many words, children don't need to know about family sadness - poverty, prison, family abuse. Knowing perpetuates suffering. Ultimately, the message was of shame.

In school, assimilation into the dominant culture ruled; in society, Chicano Power was happening - pulls in different directions. Assimilation meant teachers changing the pronunciation of my name, having to take white bread to lunch instead of

tortillas, giving up our first language. But, sometimes, inklings of personal power did happen when I quietly dared to embrace my obvious differences. It felt like taking back all that was taken. There was a satisfaction in imagining how I could defy conformity. It was risky. It might invite more discriminatory bullying if I did act out on these secretly harbored thoughts. I might appear ungrateful, disloyal. Overall, in school, success was about honor role, but more importantly it was about making it safely through the hallways. It was survival.

At 18, I encountered an important policy, Affirmative Action, meant to right wrongs. Not unlike Ruby Bridges, the first African-American student to integrate an all-White school in Louisiana in 1960, I was in the early generation of Affirmative Action in the 70's. Ruby was too young to understand she may have been a sacrificial lamb. I was not prepared for accelerated assimilation.

I suddenly left home, a small town in New Mexico, shipped to a prestigious campus in a big city. To be a brown person from a low-income under-educated family in a sea of White affluent preppies compounded conflicted feelings of identity. The best education could not make up for glaring differences when asked, "What are you, anyway"? The struggle wasn't academic but already feeling inferior, there was little room for inevitable failures and mistakes. The leap from a humble background to a bastion of White privilege was overwhelming. I was also exposed to so much in such a short time. There was now a much bigger world to try to fit into.

Understanding anybody's story can come from empathy and compassion. For instance, how does a disabled or disfigured individual deal with feelings of otherness? We share human insecurities around appearance as identity.

After reading the novel, I feel graced to have been encouraged to face some painful stories. They instructed who I have become. I more deeply understand myself therefore can transcend some past stories and be aware of more hopeful ones. Sharing stories can heal. Collectively, we can find common ground and believe that a just and good society will rise out of the ashes of a brutal history.

There is hope, as there is in this novel.