

# Telling Stories, Reclaiming Histories

## AWARD-WINNING NATIVE AMERICAN AUTHOR TOMMY ORANGE ROCKS LHS



By Jane Whitehead

On the evening of Monday, October 28, the Lexington High School auditorium was packed for a public presentation on "The Native Story in History and Literature," the final event of author Tommy Orange's day-long visit to LHS.

The visit was the high point of an ambitious program orchestrated by LHS English teacher Samantha St. Lawrence, to introduce students to writers usually missing from traditional reading lists.

Orange, 37, was born and raised in Oakland, Calif. and is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. His first novel, *There There*, (Knopf, 2018) was part of this year's summer reading for LHS 9th, 10th and 11th grade students.

### *Beyond the Res: Making Urban Native Americans Visible*

Hailed by novelist Margaret Atwood as "An astonishing literary debut," *There There* is a New York Times bestseller that won the Pen/Hemingway Award and the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, and was a finalist for the 2019 Pulitzer Prize. Now translated into more than twenty languages, the novel interweaves the stories of twelve urban Native American characters whose paths collide at a big powwow at the Oakland Coliseum.

"As native writers," Orange told the New York Times, "there's a certain feeling that you have to set the record straight before you even begin. It's been told wrong, and not told, so often." For him, part of setting the record straight was to pay attention to the lives of contemporary urban Native Americans, like Orange himself and people in the native community with whom he worked for a decade in Oakland. "We know the sound of the freeway better than we do rivers, we know the howl of distant trains better than wolf howls," he wrote in the novel's Prologue.

### *Community Collaboration*

Introducing the evening session, Craig Hall, Director of Lexington Community Education (LCE) congratulated St. Lawrence and her colleagues for "championing voices that have been stifled for far too long." In 2018, he reminded the audience, St. Lawrence piloted a similar program on a smaller scale, inviting Ghanaian-born author Yaa Gyasi to LHS to speak about *Homegoing*, her debut novel exploring the African roots of the slave trade.

"This day is an example of what we can do as a community when we work together," said Hall, referring to the collaboration among LCE, Lexington Public Schools and the Lexington Education Foundation, that had made Orange's visit possible.



Left to right: Craig Hall (Lexington Community Ed), LHS teacher Samantha St. Lawrence, Raquel Leder and Kim McCormick from the Lexington Education Foundation with Tommy Orange. COURTESY PHOTO

As they took their seats on stage for a 45-minute one-on-one interview, St. Lawrence congratulated Orange on surviving the "mental marathon" of hours of intense interactions with over 1400 excited and well-prepared students. His day had started with two mass Q&A sessions with freshmen and sophomores, followed by visits to writing classes.

### *Tommy's Writing Tips*

In English teacher Charlotte Parish's Senior Creative Writing Class, Orange, relaxed in jeans, black T-shirt and baseball cap, thoughtfully fielded students' questions and shared methods that help him to keep writing.

He runs five or six miles a day, noting ideas on his phone, and using an app that reads his work back to him in a variety of robotic voices as he runs. "Writing is a muscle, and you have to keep it in shape," he said. So if you're stuck, put on a timer for twenty minutes and do a writing exercise. "It doesn't matter what you write," he said, "proficiency comes from doing it."

Tenth-grader Brett Fortier attended several sessions with Orange and helped out with the evening event. "It just amazed me how down to earth he was, and how much of a regular dude he was, when he talked about how he wrote and made a Spotify playlist for writing," he said.

For tenth-grader Pip Fletcher, the highlight of Orange's visit was hearing his stories of a life between two cultures, that of his Cheyenne father and that of his white mother, and

learning which of the novel's characters most closely tracked Orange's own life. "There There changed my perspective on the way Native Americans have been treated in America and hearing Tommy Orange talk about his experiences further changed that perspective," she said.

### *"The Internet is Full of Spikes"*

"What do you think novels can do in 2019?" St. Lawrence asked Orange, in front of the evening crowd that included parents, students, teachers, book group members and librarians. "I think fiction plays a really important role right now," he said. What novels do best, he said, is "represent what this life is like here and now, and what's important to think about and talk about right now." He has no truck with the "old writer adage" about avoiding pop culture references that will date the work. "I don't care who's reading me when I'm dead," he said.

Asked about the impact of the book's huge success on his life, Orange said, "It hasn't changed very much about the way I feel inside. Criticism sticks really hard, and praise just comes and goes." He stays grounded by spending time with his wife and eight-year-old son, running, and continuing his practice of writing, while being self-protective about what he looks at online.

"The internet is full of spikes," he said, referring to the vitriolic online reaction to his first publication, an Op-Ed piece in the Los Angeles Times, November

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Left to right: Tommy Orange on stage with Samantha St. Lawrence. Students usher guests into the auditorium at LHS. Orange poses with 11th grade students, Naya Cordoso-Monteiro (l), and Navaeh Scott (r), who opened all of Tommy's speaking events by reading their poem, "Before you were Born" (inspired by Orange's chapter "Thomas Frank" in *There There*). COURTESY PHOTOS

## Interdisciplinary, Immersive Project Based Learning is Powerful Adjunct to Author's Visit

It is exciting when students are exposed to a curriculum that inspires them to love learning and to learn to learn which is a fundamental requirement of critical thinking.

At Lexington High School, English teacher Samantha St. Lawrence has successfully combined several educational approaches that are yielding powerful results for her students and the wider high school community. St. Lawrence and the entire LHS English Department has been working hard to

expose students to literature that connects with diverse cultures and experiences. Last year St. Lawrence pursued a LEF grant to underwrite an author's visit by Yaa Gyasi, the author of *Homegoing*. Building on that success, this year, she combined efforts with members of the Library, Social Studies, English, and Music Departments to develop an even more ambitious program around a visit by Cheyenne and Arapaho author Tommy Orange whose novel *There There* won the prestigious Pen/Hemingway Award. In March of

2019, English teacher Samantha St. Lawrence and Social Studies teacher, Katherine Manning, wrote a grant offered by Boston University to support their work creating a powerful interdisciplinary curriculum. The curriculum brought together the power of both project-based and interdisciplinary study—an approach that increases engagement and learning by creating powerful connections through the study of cultural and historical context.

This grant gave Samantha and Katherine access to Boston

University's library and funds for Professional Development. Samantha and Katherine worked over the summer to research and create a timeline of events referenced in *There There*. This timeline was used in the Pop Up Museum, and when they returned to LHS in the Fall of 2019, they continued to meet as a pair to plan a library day. Librarians and their Department heads, Jane Day and Rob Collins, also helped support their vision for an interdisciplinary day in the library and collaborated to make the featured exhibits. The

planning team extended an invitation to Lexington pastor Brent Maracle, (A Mohawk of the Turtle Clan from the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory), Johnny Cole (LPS Director of Equity and Student Support), Professors specializing in native history, Christoph Strobel (UMass Lowell), Amy Den Ouden (UMass Boston), and Annawon Weedon a Mashpee Wampanoag historian and cultural ambassador to speak to LHS students throughout the day. Boston University's grant helped to fund the honorariums and travel expenses for these speaking programs.



### Photos of the LHS Library Pop-Up Museum

A week before Orange's visit, St. Lawrence and colleagues in the Library, English department, and Social Studies department transformed the LHS Library into a Pop-Up Museum for the day.

With eight interactive exhibits, a speaker series, and informal book club sessions on *There There*, the museum day reached over 600 students. The exhibits included an interactive timeline of key events in Native history, a Myth Buster station debunking popular stereotypes of native people, and information about the ongoing project to reclaim the Wampanoag language.