

**The Motivations, Consequences, and Recovery Efforts Behind the Alcoholism  
of Jacquie Red Feather in *There There***

by Sophie Nicholson

Alcoholism has long been over-represented among Native Americans. Historically, European colonization is to blame for the high prevalence of alcohol misuse among Native people, for colonists first made large amounts of alcohol available to Native people without allowing them time to properly develop their own social or moral guidelines to regulate its use. Further colonial atrocities and marginalization have left lasting impacts on Native populations in the form of poverty, poor education, and a variety of other factors which in turn have further contributed to alcoholism within Native communities (Beauvais 253). Tommy Orange's 2018 novel *There There* reflects these issues as it explores the relationship of substance abuse, mental illness, and trauma in Native American populations. Through the example of Jacquie Red Feather, Orange reveals the ways in which alcoholism and the associated mental health problems ultimately stem from larger systemic issues of poverty and generational trauma. Although drinking might provide short-term relief, Jacquie's story illustrates how alcohol abuse ultimately results in greater harm to those struggling with addiction, making recovery essential to improving life overall.

Through his sympathetic and nuanced characterization of Jacquie, Orange establishes the motives for her drinking and other self-harming behaviors. A part of this struggle appears to be associated with historical loss and generational trauma. The theory of generational trauma is based on the idea that historical loss of population, land, and culture caused unresolved grief to

be passed down across generations of indigenous people, which can lead to development of maladaptive coping mechanisms (Brown-Rice 120). Native American social worker and associate professor Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart argues that generational trauma “plays a significant role in motivating substance misuse as a pathological coping strategy” for a variety of emotional problems, such as feelings of hopelessness (10). Jacquie’s psychological motivations for drinking appear to fall in line with this explanation, for she herself contemplates the generational trauma and oppression as it relates to addiction when she thinks of the Native mythic spider, Veho, as the white man who says “...first you’re gonna give me all your land, then your attention...until...there’s nothing ahead, and...the bottle is the only thing in sight that makes any sense” (Orange 106). This stream of thought emphasizes the historical trauma caused by colonists stealing everything from indigenous people, the impacts of which are still felt today. Under this oppression, Jacquie thinks of substance abuse as “the only thing in sight that makes any sense,” suggesting an absence of control and proper resources to cope with trauma and mental health issues. This lack of resources reflects the reality for many indigenous Americans who struggle with mental health issues, as IHS reports that many “have long experienced lower health status when compared with other Americans,” while reportedly less than 10% of their funds were used for substance abuse and mental health treatment in 2010 (Brown-Rice 120).

Jacquie’s difficult upbringing, instability of home life, and other personal traumas reinforce similar historical traumas through social and environmental means. This is clear in the way Jacquie thinks about her family in the moments during the meetings she attends, remembering how home for her mother, sister, and her had been “anywhere with the three of them safe for the night” (Orange 99). This detail shows how Jacquie has been deprived of a stable home life and view of her family unit, further fracturing her cultural identity, for she

lacked a stable community. These elements of Jacquie's past present realistic risk factors for her alcoholism, as studies have shown that loss of family connections and ethnic identity can increase risk for of alcoholism, depression, and suicide in Native American adolescents (Brown-Rice 120). Furthermore, one of Jacquie's biggest traumas and main emotional struggles is the suicide of her daughter. She attends a suicide prevention conference through her job as a substance a substance abuse counselor, which showcases the broader systemic problems facing Native communities as the speaker reveals Native youth are "making the decision that it's better to be dead and gone" than alive in the life "they've inherited" (Orange 104). The discussion hits too close to home for Jacquie, subsequently triggering a psychological stress response in reaction to the reminder of her personal trauma and almost causing her to relapse. She feels tempted to repeat the self-harming coping mechanisms she used after her daughter's death, which included "slamming her fist... until she couldn't anymore" and drinking herself into a "manageable oblivion" every night (Orange 106). Her daughter's death thus links to increased Native suicides rates fueled by systemic generational trauma and marginalization. As a result, Jacquie's subsequent self-harm and alcoholism represents a broader system of Native mental health issues. Through Jacquie's example of personal and generational trauma, Orange reveals how substance abuse within Native communities is the symptom of larger systemic problems.

In addition to demonstrating the underlying contributing factors of increased substance abuse rates among Native people, Orange uses Jacquie's narrative to highlight both the psychological and concrete consequences that accompany alcohol abuse disorders. For example, Jacquie's addiction and associated mental health problems prove responsible for the destruction of many interpersonal relationships. Her drinking compounds psychological issues like her avoidance coping and fear of intimacy as seen through her strained relationship with her sister

Opal and her distance from her grandsons, Orvil, Looter, and Lony. Readers learn that Jacquie has only recently begun texting Opal again after years of silence. Jacquie's avoidance behaviors, which are an effort to protect herself from perceived stressors, result in her distance from her family since she fears getting too close to them. Orange reveals her avoidance through subtle details, such as Jacquie previously "refus[ing] to look at" all the pictures of the boys Opal has emailed and telling Opal not to text her pictures "because of how it could mess up her day" (106, 109). These specific factors show her psychological patterns of avoidance and intimacy issues, for in response to the trauma left by her painful family history, Jacquie avoids reminders of her pain and chances of building close relationships for fear of repeating past trauma. As Jacquie struggles with sobriety she "wanted to go to [her family]. She wanted a drink" (Orange 107). Here Orange explicitly ties Jacquie's continued struggle with intimacy and avoidance to her struggle with addiction, for while she is preoccupied with drinking she fails to act on her conscience and reach out to her family. Jacquie even says that she "fucked [her relationship with her daughter] up too with [her] addiction," linking her consumption to the destruction of her familial relationships (Orange 110). Her avoidance of her living family may be partially in an effort to avoid repeating this traumatic mistake, since she only makes a physical effort to reconnect with them after achieving some sobriety. Thus, Jacquie's addiction clearly distances her from the relationships she has left.

Furthermore, the temptation to relapse acts as a constant inner struggle for Jacquie that impairs her ability to go about daily life. Psychologically, one of the biggest consequences of Jacquie's addiction is her near constant desire for alcohol. Although Jacquie's basic urge dictates this desire, at a higher level she seems aware of alcohol's destructive consequences for her. Jacquie relates drinking to her mother's story of spider webs, believing that "home was to drink.

To drink was the trap,” which encapsulates a common experience in struggling to remain sober—both desiring alcohol to gratify the short-term, but avoiding it to protect long-term health. Readers also learn she has been sober on and off since she began drinking, with her longest stretch of sobriety lasting six months. In Jacquie’s first point of view chapter, she has been “sober again” for ten days, which she feels “is the same as a year when you drink all the time” (Orange 99). Orange’s characterization of Jacquie’s constant struggle with relapse reflects the reality of alcohol use disorder, some of the symptoms being “making unsuccessful attempts” to stay sober and having a “strong craving or urge to drink” (“Alcohol Use Disorder”). Moreover, Jacquie’s feeling she has to trudge through sobriety shows how her addiction has degraded her quality of life, as she feels a diminished ability to enjoy her daily life without alcohol. Orange further illustrates this consequence of alcoholism through the detail that amidst her struggle, Jacquie “can’t remember a day going by when at some point she hadn’t wished she could burn her life to the ground” (Orange 152), echoing the psychological toll of Native oppression and the subsequent consequences of addiction. Thus, Jacquie’s drinking ultimately causes greater harms to her life, indicating the destructive nature of addictions for those suffering from them.

Although it’s clear Jacquie has been experiencing a lot of pain and suffering that has fueled her alcoholism, Orange offers glimpses of her recovery attempts that suggest a wider sense of hope for the Native community. Through subtle details of her inner desires and characterization, he underscores the importance of community, personal acceptance, and interpersonal connection in recovering from substance abuse. Jacquie’s biggest community support as she continues her recovery is the AA group meetings she attends. While the text does not present the meetings as an instant fix, Jacquie’s experience supports the positive influence of having a group of peers with which to discuss addiction. When Jacquie feels temptation to drink

after the conference triggers her personal trauma, she “wanted to drink. She needed a meeting” (Orange 107). The support and community the AA group offers her helps her resist relapsing, for after attending she manages not to drink the hotel alcohol. Research backs up this portrayal, as some studies suggest that mutual-support groups like AA might be more effective than cognitive behavioral therapy for some individuals, particularly those at risk of relapsing (Kelly). Furthermore, the fact that the AA meeting reconnects her with Harvey has subtly positive implications, for he represents successful recovery whose sobriety and offers of help lead Jacquie on the right path to see her family again. Only after the AA meeting and receiving a ride offer from Harvey does Jacquie make active efforts to return to Oakland, suggesting far-reaching positive effects of AA meetings on individual recovery.

Furthermore, Jacquie’s acceptance of her situation and personal efforts to overcome her addiction also seem to offer hope for her recovery. When Jacquie becomes tempted by the alcohol in her hotel fridge, she vacillates and tries to run away from her addiction by getting rid of it, but ends up taking the bottles down to the hotel pool. Alone, it is Jacquie’s own acknowledgement of her addiction, that she wants the relief of “drinking after telling yourself you wouldn’t,” and the acknowledgment that succumbing will not help her but will ultimately “take,” that allows her the strength to make the healthier decision (Orange 116). Jacquie “heaved” the bottles “high in the air” and throws them in the pool, watching them sink (Orange 117). Symbolically, this grand gesture is her effort to drown her addiction and take back her agency—rather than continuing to hold herself under water, she drowns the offending substance that has kept her there. Only after making this step to overcome her alcoholism does Jacquie at last feel prepared to reconnect face-to-face with the family she’s left behind. Thus, Orange shows

how personal effort to stay sober helps aid recovery from addiction along with recovery of the positive things made inaccessible by the consequences of addiction.

Orange further portrays reconnecting with family as both a positive motivator for maintaining sobriety and a type of reward for successfully doing so. Jacquie's biggest guilt surrounding her drinking appears to be the distance it puts between her and her living family, saying in the meeting "I'm trying to make my way back... it's just, it's that you get stuck, and the more stuck you get, the more stuck you get" (110). Here, as Jacquie tries again to abstain from drinking she acknowledges one of her core motivations for her sobriety. Her commentary on her own struggle also highlights the cycles of addiction that have divided her from her sister and grandsons. After Jacquie makes the grand gesture to drown her addiction in the hotel pool, she finally prepare herself to confront the family she's long avoided. Immediately following the sinking of the bottles, Jacquie texts Opal, "*If I come to oakland can i stay?*" (117). The word "stay" subtly connotes a more permanent reunion, offering a hopeful future for rebuilding her relationships. By having Jacquie reach out directly after making a small win in her effort to stay sober, Orange suggests a hopeful alternative to drinking that applies to the Native community at large. Jacquie's reconnecting to her family appears both to aid and reward her sobriety, providing a positive representation of recovery for Native Americans struggling with alcoholism. Thus, Orange highlights the message that continued sobriety paves the way for rebuilding the relationships addiction previously damaged.

Through Jacquie's story, Orange paints an honest and deeply human portrait of the struggling alcoholic, specifically portraying how this struggle manifests in the lives of Native people. He connects personal and generational trauma as explanations for disproportionately high rates of substance abuse in Native communities. Furthermore, Orange demonstrates the

consequences of putting alcohol before one's health and relationships, all while still lending a sympathetic and understanding tone. Although Orange provides no easy fixes, a deeper reading suggests a hopeful solution for recovery can be found in family and community support. His overall message seeks to highlight the many Native Americans who continue to suffer from generational trauma and oppression and cope through alcoholism and other self-harming behaviors. In showing their struggles as an injustice which begs to be righted, he offers support for increased resources for addicts in recovery. Orange leaves readers with a hopeful message about Jacquie's recovery and, by extension, the recovery of many like her: on her way to reunite with family after recommitting to sobriety, Jacquie realizes she feels that day is the first in memory where she hasn't wanted to burn her life down. In Orange's words, this step toward recovery "was something. That was not nothing" (152).



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