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A Culture of Violence in *Sacred Smokes* and *Sacred City*

It is no secret that Native American life in the United States is not a privileged existence. The sordid and violent history of oppression underwrites the lives of Native Americans in Chicago and laces their day-to-day lives with hardship, poverty, and injustice. These truths are clear from the outset of Theodore N. Van Alst's short stories. These collections are not the first of their kind, as authors who came before them have offered detailed vignettes of human life and its challenges. What Van Alst does astoundingly well in his anthologies is provide a heartfelt glimpse into the lived experience of Native Americans while still highlighting the grave issue of violence that has become synonymous with life in the region. Both collections are congruent with these revelations, displaying the senseless and inherent violence present in these communities through the eyes of a first-person narrator. *Sacred Smokes* and *Sacred City* demonstrate to readers how violence in the Native American community of Chicago is multifaceted. Both collections show how violence and anger are used to cope with difficult emotions, as a means to find excitement, and as an activity with sometimes grievous consequences.

From the outset of the stories, violence is woven into the fabric of Native American life as a brutal reality. Barbarity becomes a consistent and poignant theme that repeatedly appears across the stories in both collections. Violence serves a multitude of purposes within these tales, not the least of which being notions of male hegemony, oppression, and boyish bravado. It is not

just violence, but senseless and meaningless violence simply for the sake of doing so. In *Old Gold*, Teddy's father punches a set of dirty dishes that he had failed to wash (Van Alst). In situations like these, it is apparent that violence is the only solution to this man's problems in life. Teddy's father cannot clearly express himself in any other way. In *Idiot*, Teddy's desire to strangle his friend because of the poor treatment he endures further reflects the limited capacity of the characters to deal with uncomfortable situations in any other way (Van Alst). It is apparent that Teddy is upset that Idiot, someone he considers his best friend, could be so careless and harsh. He cannot communicate that Idiot's relentless torment hurts his feelings, and Teddy concludes that strangling Idiot half to death is the best course of action (Van Alst). Teddy seems to take pleasure in making Idiot feel how he has felt in the past. In contrast, the stories also mitigate the seriousness of this theme by assigning it a playful tone and even classifying acts of violence as enjoyable activities.

The playful tone of certain violent occurrences makes light of the gratuitous violence commonplace in the books, highlighting how it is something that the characters enjoy. In *The Beach*, Van Alst notes that it is a good night because no one draws their guns, and only fistfights materialize (Van Alst). Fistfights join the ranks of alcohol and marijuana as they lend to the youthful energy of the evening. The story places violence at the center of positive experiences, as if it is impossible to have fun without some kind of brawl or clash. Van Alst's fight further shows that violence makes him feel alive. In *Forever Young*, even in his later years when he has already begun his academic career, the possibility of a fight brings the protagonist excitement, with the same tangible feelings of joy. However, not all fighting explored is lighthearted, with Van Alst addressing some much more severe instances of violence in some of his other stories.

Juxtaposing this everyday urban violence with more dangerous, life-changing repercussions successfully drives home the message of just how serious such brutality can be. Violence has the power to change one's life in an instance, as the author so candidly explores throughout his work. In *Gooch*, Van Alst explains that gunshots paralyzed Gooch and left him unable to move. The story merely brushes over this fact to move on with an otherwise humorous tone (Van Alst). In *On Ice*, when Clint kills the King with a headshot, it is an undoubtedly serious event with grievous consequences that can potentially alter his life forever. Again, it is addressed briefly and made to seem like a small happening in the greater context of the story, despite the fact that this is a remarkably antisocial activity (Van Alst). A subtle but markedly different tone underpins these paragraphs in contrast to those about senseless daily violence. These passages lack the light and airy humor present in those presented in *The Beach* and *Forever Young*, which glorify the thrill of violence (Van Alst). At the heart of this juxtaposition is a deep sense of helplessness in response to an impossible situation that these individuals in Van Alst's stories see no other way of escaping besides humor and violence in tandem.

Van Alst's anthologies successfully demonstrate to the reader just how pervasive and inescapable the culture of violence is within these communities. Through the gut-wrenchingly raw and poignant words of Van Alst, one's heart is warmed and deeply moved by the gravity of the tales. It is unfortunate to think that this level of violence is just another aspect of daily life for Native Americans in Chicago, as pervasive as the icy chill of the windy city. The stories are successful in their surrounding messaging of violence and show how violence is called upon as a way of expressing what may otherwise feel repressed, as a way to entertain oneself, and most tragically, as an act that carries with it a severe set of consequences. Though violence is a taboo

activity in most cultures today, pieces such as Van Alst's anthologies work to humanize violence and those who commit it, lending readers with a wealth of insights that may not be readily available elsewhere.

Works Cited

Van Alst, Theodore C. *Sacred City*. University Of New Mexico Press, 2021.

Van Alst, Theodore C. *Sacred Smokes*. University Of New Mexico Press, 2018.