

Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr. *Sacred Smokes*. University of New Mexico Press, 2018. 162 pp. ISBN: 9780826359902

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Intriguing are the ways in which one's subjective perception of the content or spirit of a book may match or fail to mesh with the dominant hook by which it is summarized and marketed. In the case of *Sacred Smokes*, the University of New Mexico Press stresses the selling point of a "story of a Native American gang member in Chicago." With such a cue, a potential reader might be tempted to begin making comparisons between *Sacred Smokes* and Tommy Orange's smash hit novel, *There There*, published in 2018 within two months of *Sacred Smokes*, which centers on a cast of mostly deracinated, dysfunctional Natives in Oakland, California, and, on the whole, obsesses on the idea of 3D-printed firearms. However, such a superficial comparison would miss the mark since *Sacred Smokes* contains a great deal more depth, energy, and vitality.

Theodore Van Alst, Jr.'s work is a raw, torrid Bildungsroman about tough city kids and adolescents in the 1970s and 80s, sometimes focusing on a fraught relationship between a father and longhair son—for example, "Old Gold Couch" is a stone classic that will, if there is justice in this world, become anthologized and taught. With humor and pathos, Van Alst ponders inheritance and habits, friendship, masculinity (toxic and otherwise), rebellion, and forming a code of conduct. He considers what it means to be working class and Indian in "the city of big shoulders," to quote Carl Sandburg's poem, "Chicago." There is much laughter here among the reader and characters, as we often hear Teddy "laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth," again Sandburg's words. In many ways, as I hope to show, Benjamin Franklin is a much more apt comparison point for this entertaining story of self-improvement and growth. The tone, style, and sentiment of *Sacred Smokes*, however, are more reminiscent of Chicago writer Nelson Algren (*The Man with the Golden Arm; Walk on the Wild Side*), Harlan Ellison, Junot Díaz, Bret Easton Ellis, and Stephen Graham Jones, whose short fiction Van Alst collected and edited for *The Faster Redder Road*. Although Ben Franklin might be seen as an odd figure to compare with Van Alst, he was something of an ally to American Indians since, in the 1780s, Franklin praised the manners and customs of New England Indians, contrasting them with the ubiquitous chicanery of exploitative American settlers in "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America."

Sacred Smokes is incredibly funny and compelling, and its voice is lively and freely digressive, almost always in a good way. It is vibrant and vital, brimming with confidence and brio. These are apparently the author's life stories which, while they may be embellished or fictionalized, seem to be derived from his impoverished upbringing in Chicago. *Sacred Smokes* could be called a story cycle, or a novel, but it has the heart of a memoir. It has no evident political agenda; it just tells amazingly funny, surprising, heartbreaking, and sometimes violent stories with a sense of the joy of storytelling—and of living. It is somehow both hard-boiled and emotional, hilarious and poignant. One punchy story ends, and immediately the eye is caught by the opening line of the next, pulling the reader further. This is a great CHICAGO book, one that recollects the edgy 1970s and 80s, the street-fights and shenanigans at Pottawattomie Park, and gang fashion fetishes to die for, perhaps literally. Van Alst elaborates the semiotics of gang sweaters, which were bright, outrageously colorful varsity-style cardigan sweaters, in two categories of "war sweaters" and "party sweaters," which became war trophies. The narrator explains: "back then

those cardigan-style sweaters were the shit—they were everything. Those were your colors” (18). *Sacred Smokes* shares the Nelson Algren vibe in its romantic celebration of those on the margins of society as the salt of the earth, and its depiction of those in power as grotesque, greedy animals. For example, older gang members who had done time were likely some of the best people the narrator had ever known, even up to the present. The book seems to implicitly echo Sandburg’s challenge: “Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning” (Sandburg 14-15). Another innovative aspect that merits mention is the novel’s striking use of unorthodox typography and gothic fonts and crown icons when referring to gang names, which are often turned upside down. The University of New Mexico Press must be praised for the book’s design by Felicia Cedillos, which is hip and contemporary; the cover painting in the leger art tradition is by Blackfoot artist, Lauren Monroe.

Sacred Smokes, although undoubtedly a great work of contemporary Native American literature, extends and updates some enduring tropes and traditions in American literature and culture. It is actually quite Benjamin Franklin-esque, which, again, might seem like a surprising comparison to make about an edgy, “gang-related” work of Chicago fiction, but hear me out. In this book, the protagonist rises from poverty and urban squalor through initiative and hard work. Through his father and other figures, such as his employer at a local Italian restaurant, Teddy learns diligence and practical skills, eventually lifting himself out of poverty through his intelligence and willpower. We should note that the author is a success story, an associate professor and the Chair of Native American Studies at the University of Montana, and a former Assistant Dean and Director of the Native American Cultural Center at Yale University, among other distinctions. This book is not a vindictive gripe-fest about oppression and racism. In the book, racial antipathy flows in multiple directions; thin-skinned white readers, though I doubt they are reading *Transmotion*, might whine that, with a couple of exceptions, every white or “whiteish” character in this book is of poor character, avaricious, repellent, grotesque, and usually worthy of the scathing, on-target satire, beating, or bullet he receives. But this is, after all, a book that begins with an epigraph from the report of an Indian agent in 1854, writing that the Blackfeet (Sihasapa) band of Sioux, from whom Van Alst seems to be descended, along with the Honepapas (Hunkpapa), were “continually warring and committing depredations on whites and neighboring tribes, killing men and stealing horses. They even defy the Great White Father, the President, and declare their intention to murder indiscriminately all that come within their reach. They, of all Indians, are now the dreaded on the Missouri” (Van Alst, n.p.). However, white people are also seen as a group who generally live well, who saw something they wanted, and took it; growing up working-class, Teddy is envious, and wishes to have what they have. At the same time, he does not paint the world as one that categorically denies success and its trappings to people of color, though it presents special challenges to them. Rather, the world of this book is somewhat Nietzschean; the world is indifferent, and can be absurd, but individuals who exhibit drive, intelligence, and the Will to Power find ways to improve themselves. In frigid Chicago, dwelling in a marginal neighborhood, Teddy would often dream of the “warm air at night” of the West Coast, we are told in “Push It” (114). He imagines the trio of characters in the Nicholas Ray film *Rebel Without a Cause* famously played by James Dean, Sal Mineo, and Natalie Wood, at the Griffith Park Observatory in Los Angeles:

these kids could be make-believe parents too someday, less than zero parents, sure, but they’ll have kids of their own, and they’ll live in nice houses, ones with year-round azaleas

and pools and tiled roofs, and they'll have that warm air at night and, shit, well I want that too, how the fuck is it these people get that, claim that, own that, like it was left at their doorstep and they just had to take it, no questions asked? Where and *what, after all, is justice but someone taking some goddamn initiative any goddamn way?* (115, my emphasis)

It is a bit Nietzsche and quite Franklin in the sense that Teddy learns the lessons of thrift, diligence (Industry), innovation, and reading habits that are counseled by Franklin in his Autobiography and in his iterations of *Old Richard's Almanac*. Teddy first learns a lesson the hard way in "Old Gold Couch" when he neglects to do his chore, washing the stacks of dishes in the sink, day after day, until this negligence finally prompts his father to do something shocking and drastic. The lesson sinks in. (This story also includes a wonderful allusion to Gordon Lightfoot telling stories "from the Chippewa on down about the big lake they call Gitchigoomi" (8); the pop culture references are wide and knowing).

Continuing the Franklin theme, in "Lordsprayer" the protagonist's father tasks Teddy with memorizing "the Lordsprayer" before he can go out, and the experience of being given a new challenge, and using one's abilities and ingenuity to meet the challenge and reach one's desired end is another life lesson from dear ole dad, who, though often drunk and undemonstrative, yet conveys some bits of wisdom and advice to his son over the years. Thanks to his "lesson in memory," in the future, Ted is able to memorize swatches of critical theory, such as the excerpt from Vizenor's *Manifest Manners* he memorized decades later (anthologized in the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*), which becomes a meta-commentary on the book we are reading: "Postindian autobiographies, the averments of tribal descent, and the assertions of crossblood identities, are simulations in literature; that names, nicknames, and the shadows of ancestors are stories is an invitation to new theories of tribal interpretation" (qtd. in Van Alst 32). Germane to *Sacred Smokes*, Vizenor also writes in *Manifest Manners*: "The Postindian simulations and shadows counter the dominance of histories and the dickered testimonies of representations; at the same time, trickster stories, transformations, and the shimmers of tribal consciousness are heard in the literature of survivance" (63).

Like Ben Franklin and Sherman Alexie, Teddy always has his nose in a book, an avid reader who thirsts for knowledge, as seen in "Great America." (One story is about the tragedy of a friend's illiteracy.) In "Blood on the Tracks/No Mas," Teddy shows how he learned lessons of thrift from his father, who gave him a dollar a week. By necessity, he learns how to stretch nickels and dimes, and when pennies aren't going far enough, he takes a job at an Italian restaurant and works his ass off. He learns how to cook all kinds of things, which is a lesson he applies daily in cooking for his family, the narrator says, and he boasts that, decades later, he even pleases Martha Stewart with one of his scrumptious sangies (sic). In "Push It," Teddy embodies the American virtues of innovation and entrepreneurship. After hitchhiking to New Orleans with a friend and becoming stranded temporarily, while hanging out in a bar, a "handsome white man" with a heavy New Orleans accent asks him what he's up to. Teddy says nothing much, he's broke. The man asks if he has any skills, and Teddy replies that he paints faces. The man gives Teddy a twenty-dollar bill. Teddy buys the face paint, hits the streets, works hard, makes a hundred bucks, and gives the handsome white man forty in thanks for his twenty-dollar loan. "I knew you be good for dis. Good job, bwai" (122). Even though we see

Teddy intermittently drinking and occasionally snorting lines, he yet embodies Franklin's virtue of temperance in the sense that he rejects the cannabis haze that many of his young peers often settled into, wishing to be more present and motivated.

Given that *Sacred Smokes* and *There There* were published within a few months of each other and are both about urban Indians, it is impossible not to compare their relative merit here. *There There* does not compare favorably to *Sacred Smokes*, although it has been widely acclaimed by follow-the-leader book reviewers and perpetrators of "book-chat," as Gore Vidal put it. Although readers I know and respect, both Native and non-Native, have privately noted their disappointment in discovering a gap between the novel's merit and its critical accolades, it would seem this assessment is an "incorrect" view that usually remains unuttered and that editors fear to publish. Relentlessly dark, contrived, and weak in characterization, this Oakland novel is notable mostly as a critical and commercial triumph for a new Native American writer, not for literary or aesthetic excellence. Its author seems to have been unaware of much of the rich history of Native American literature that preceded his bestseller. When he was writing it, despite the fact that N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), the famous novel that kicked off the Native American Renaissance, is partly set in Los Angeles, and several later novels by writers such as Vizenor, Alexie, Janet Campbell Hale, and Louise Erdrich had urban settings, Orange believed that the urban Indian experience had never been portrayed in literature, "as far as [he] could tell," as Orange told *Mother Jones* last year. The novel fortuitously benefitted from, first, good timing: its publication was contemporaneous with the decline of the #metoo-ed Sherman Alexie—who is referenced in *Sacred Smokes* as the subject of a talk given by the grown-up narrator at a Native American Literature Symposium panel in the presence of his Aunties. Second, *There There* benefitted from marketing savvy and major-press muscle: a bright orange and yellow cover reminiscent of a traffic cone matches the memorable moniker "Tommy Orange," which is a great brand name like Tommy Hilfiger, Orange Julius, or Billy Collins. Such branding was instilled in Orange growing up in an embarrassing way: "I very much knew I was white because my mom is white. She has orange hair, her last name is Orange, we had an orange van at one point," Orange told the CBC. Of course, it is not nice to make fun of someone's name, but this is *Transmotion* and I am liberated to do so by the spirit of Gerald Vizenor with his precedent of, among many other satiric depictions, mocking Ojibwe AIM leader and cocaine dealer Clyde Bellecourt as Coke De Fountain in his 1988 novel, *The Trickster of Liberty* (111-113).

The trickster spirit of Vizenor similarly flows through *Sacred Smokes*. Just as the media in the early 1970s tripped over themselves to glorify and cover the "right on" actions of AIM, a group that Vizenor criticized at length, so today does the media, focused on identity politics but fairly ignorant of questions of literary quality, bend over backwards to hail *There There* as this new literary sensation. Blazoned on the cover are two BIG feathers (natch) that clearly signify "Indian" to the potential book buyer noticing stacks of the book in an airport or Barnes & Noble; and an easy-to-remember title that makes facile reference to both Radiohead and Gertrude Stein but connotes an urban Indian's yearning for Indigenous land that was expropriated and covered up with pavement and railroad tracks. Although *There There* is well-plotted, it is ultimately a workmanlike, nihilistic novel with little in the way of a redeeming message. It seems as influenced by an episode of *24* as much as any literary work (though *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* sometimes comes to mind), with everything closing in suspensefully on the

Oakland pow-wow. The novel's cast is just as ill-fated as the crew of the *Pequod* in *Moby-Dick*, but less memorable in that some of its multiple dysphoric narrators and characters can sometimes blend together. *There There* is premised in tragic victimry, to use Gerald Vizenor's phrase, giving many white and other non-Native readers the opportunity to submerge in guilt and despair over how fucked-up these urban Indians are, and really, how degrading life is in general.

That sense of tragic victimry critiqued by Vizenor, who is quoted early in Van Alst's book, is exactly what is elegantly avoided in *Sacred Smokes*. *There There* makes the reader feel bad, but many of its readers *want* to feel bad, as in Lo, *The Poor Urban Indian!* Yet the literati so wanted a replacement for Sherman Alexie. But this kind of thinking, of there being a place for just *one* special American Indian writer known to the mainstream, is insidious and ignorant, when currently there is a boon of talent including Van Alst, Tiffany Midge, Erika T. Wurth, and Natalie Diaz, to mention just a few. This raises the question, why is a so-so book such as *There There* enjoying mega success with Knopf, while Van Alst's markedly superior *Sacred Smokes* was published by a Southwestern academic press? Though it has received awards such as the Tillie Olsen Award for Creative Writing, in comparison its audience is much smaller and more reliant on word of mouth. Unquestionably, it deserves a much wider readership.

Overall, *Sacred Smokes* is an inspirational story that is simultaneously raw and poignant and, in an odd way, an instructive tale illustrating the virtues of diligence, innovation, and applying one's native talents. Theodore Van Alst, Jr. has created an exciting, compelling, and major work of literature.

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