

THOMAS KING, *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013), 287 pp; (originally published in Canada by Doubleday, 2012)

Thomas King's *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* is not a historical account of the indigenous peoples of North America, nor does it qualify as anthropological or socio-political study; it is a manifesto in the tradition of Charles Eastman's *The Indian Today* (1915), D'Arcy McNickle's *They Came Here First* (1949) and Vine Deloria Jr.'s *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969) and as such a must-read for every student, scholar, and aspiring scholar of Native American and Postcolonial Studies. Discarding the cloak of objectivity usually required for writing that wants to be taken seriously, King provides a narrative of North American dealings with Native affairs that reaches from the past to the imagined future(s): after exploring the realm of legends (the 1861 massacre of 295 whites in Almo, Idaho, that never happened), simulacra (Hollywood policies, cowboys, and Indians), and political travesties (broken treaties, residential school grievances) King proceeds to shed light on the ongoing political repressions by asking "What do Indians want?" (193; 215).

The question is, of course, ironic. To King, the term 'Indian' amounts to Tolkien's 'One Ring.' Thus, instead of answering the question, King subverts it, which is in line with the book's general subversion of familiar history, and asks instead: What do whites want? The answer—"Land. Whites want land" (216)—is at the heart of colonialism and imperialism, which leads King to end his book on a critical commentary on two major land claims settlements, the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in the USA and the 1993 Nunavut Land Claims Settlement Agreement in Canada that have influenced the life of every indigenous person in North America and that will have an impact long into the future.

The Inconvenient Indian is a book that professes a distinct consciousness of the reader. Thomas King's narrative voice openly performs as an authorial instance that strings together selected moments of what has come to be commonly known as North American history to a surprisingly coherent whole in spite of (or because of) interjections of the thoughts and critical objections of King's partner, Helen

Hoy, and his son Benjamin, as well as King's own anecdotes and sarcastic comments, all of which slow down the narrative pace and loosen up what would otherwise have been a dense web of historical facts. This is after all one of the remarkable things about King's book: it can be read and valued by scholars familiar with Gerald Vizenor's concepts of 'survivance' and 'manifest manners,' with knowledge about ethnocriticism, cosmopolitanism and pan-tribalism, Native storytelling, indigenous humor, trickster tales, and Native American and First Nations history throughout the twentieth century, but the content is also easily accessible to the Anglophone readers outside of the international Native American scholarly scene. The book implicitly draws on all of the aforementioned concepts, yet no explicit knowledge is required in order to follow King's line of argumentation. The author, for instance, develops three categories to describe the common view of Native people in the United States and Canada (to be taken, as usual, with a grain of salt): First, 'Dead Indians': the image promoted in Hollywood movies of the noble savage fully equipped with headdress, war paint, tomahawk, and a Yoda-like English that Alan Velie once described as "Indianspeak"; this noble savage always belongs to long bygone times: according to King, the idea of 'the death of the Indian' is integral to North American ideology and nation building. Second, 'Live Indians': the indigenous people of North America that have inconveniently refused to die out. Third, 'Legal Indians': those Natives that either belong to the more than 500 federally recognized tribes in the United States, or count among the approximately 550,000 Status Indians in Canada; King points out that only about 40% of all Live Indians in the United States and Canada are also Legal Indians. Dead Indians, Live Indians, Legal Indians—while that sounds fairly simple, it represents King's own take on the multilayered complex of the politics of Native American representations constituted by stereotyping and Hollywood simulations and is reminiscent of Gerald Vizenor's distinction between simulacral *indians* and Postindians. Based on both his own terminology and contemporary Native North American critical writing, Thomas King thus paints a humorous, yet dark picture of Native-white relationships throughout the centuries and unveils a repetitive pattern of imperialist claims on Native land that reaches far into the twentieth cen-

tury and in which the concerns and voices of Native peoples were formerly unheard and are today largely unspoken:

Moving Indians around the continent was like redecorating a very large house. The Cherokee can no longer stay in the living room. Put them in the second bedroom. The Mi'kmaq are taking up too much space in the kitchen. Move them to the laundry. The Seminoles can go from the master bedroom into the sunroom, and lean the Songhees against the wall in the upstairs hallway. We'll see if that works. For the time being, the Ojibway, the Seneca, the Métis, and the Inuit can be stored in the shed behind the garage. And what the hell are we going to do with the Blackfoot, the Mohawk, the Arapaho, and the Paiute? Do we have any garbage bags left? (97)

King sarcastically unveils the absurdity of the so-called Indian problem—a problem, as King specifies, that is still extant today because after 400 years of colonialism, “a condition much like Malaria” (128), “Indians were still being Indians” (107): the indigenous people of North America still cling to their cultures despite residential school re-education. While King’s criticism is poignant and outspoken, it is not only the content but the perspective that matters: if you read *The Inconvenient Indian* solely for historical anecdotes you will miss half of what is being said. King never eschews to take a clear position, to assume responsibility for his words on the page: he allows for mistakes, partiality or misinformation on his part, his call for change that looms over every page of *The Inconvenient Indian* is aimed not so much at non-Natives but at the indigenous people of North America who alone can change their condition. I said before that King’s book does not require a reader well versed in Native American Studies and issues;

that is true. It does, however, require an attentive reader, the more so since the book is a quick read and can be too easily dismissed as entertaining yet superficial.

Aside from its nature as the socio-political manifesto of an Indigenous writer, *The Inconvenient Indian* subsumes Thomas King’s personal artistic program since it features the central ideas and techniques (borderlines, land claims, metatextuality, the importance of stories, etc.) from his former works such as his novel *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), or his short story collection *The Truth About Stories* (2003). In his insightful review,¹ Michael Bourne traces the impact of *The Inconvenient Indian* as King’s thirteenth published book in the United States and Canada, concluding that it has had a curious history itself: it was rejected thirty-one times by U.S.-publishing houses until finally being accepted by the University of Minnesota Press only to trigger a poor, solely academic, echo in the United States; in contrast, the book topped bestselling lists in Canada where it won the British Columbia’s National Award for Canadian Non-Fiction on February 21, 2014. It did not stop there; one month after its publication in November 2012, the Idle No More movement kicked off, a national movement of Canadian Native rights activists, First Nations, Métis, and Inuits protesting for the government’s respect of treaty rights and indigenous sovereignty. According to Lynn Henry, publishing director at Doubleday Canada, the protesters were responding to an inconvenient question that has never been seriously considered throughout the last centuries and that is central to Thomas King’s *The Inconvenient Indian*: “In essence: ‘What do Indians want?’ was the question; and this book gave a frank answer.”²

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¹ Bourne, Michael, “The Curious History of ‘The Inconvenient Indian,’” Review of *The Inconvenient Indian* by Thomas King, *Los Angeles Review of Books* (26 Sep, 2013). Web. 6 March 2014.

² Henry, Lynn; qtd. in Bourne (2013)