

Literary Review

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King, T. (2013). *Inconvenient Indian: A curious account of native people in North America*.

Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Thomas King (Cherokee/Greek/German) is an academic, teacher, lecturer, activist, and writer who in *The Inconvenient Indian* examines the history and current events of natives in the United States and Canada, offering abbreviated summaries in colloquial form as well as commentary on the connections between the past and present. He points out discrepancies in tales of history and analyzes the myths from which those discrepancies were borne. He questions Indian policy and relates it to a repeating history in which the dominant party creates a framework to justify a claim to everything, while the other party is perpetually assimilated until they are no more than memories.

King was born and formally educated in the United States, earning his Ph.D. in American Studies and English from the University of Utah in 1986 (Ruoff, 1994, p. 459). He has taught at universities in the United States and Canada, and is an English professor emeritus at the University of Guelph in Ontario. He won the National Aboriginal Achievement Award for arts and culture in 2003, and was named to the Order of Canada in 2004. *Inconvenient Indian* won the British Columbia National Award for Canadian Non-Fiction and the RBC Taylor Prize (“King wins literary prize duo,” 2014).

What makes this *Inconvenient Indian* different from other native histories is that it uses wit and opinion to underscore realities. King does not shy away from the nature of this fiction/non-fiction. In an interview for the University of Guelph (Pitman, 2015), King says that academic writers “have to stick to facts, which I hate. They have to do real research, which I loathe. I much prefer to be God of my own world and just make things up” (Pitman, 2015). He defends his choice in *Inconvenient Indian*’s prologue, explaining the chronological flexibility his

history-cum-accounting offers, and noting that his narrative is “salted” with facts, as “[f]ictions are less unruly than histories... the endings [are] more in line with expectations of morality and justice” (King, pp. x-xii). For these reasons, King’s dialogue with the reader blends personal experience, choice historical accounts, and newsprint headlines, making it accessible beyond academia, and helping to send it to mainstream bestseller status (Stratton, 2015, p. 196).

King opens with the myth of the 1863 Almo massacre, a fiction of a bloodthirsty Indian attack and mass murder, commemorated by the Sons and Daughters of Idaho Pioneers on the site where the event did not take place. Despite the events being discredited, a plaque marks the “event” as a monument to culture and history (pp. 4-7). King dryly remarks that this is indeed a cultural and historical moment, as it allows the dominant society to revel in a history that “encourages us [to] remember the hindrances that Native people posed to the forward momentum of European westward migration” (p. 19). Such a remembrance is that Custer “died with his boots on” over a decade later, bravely attempting to save the west from Indian savagery (p. 14). This hero myth allows us to mourn the U.S. deaths at Little Bighorn in tribute to American pride, a cause that was celebrating its centennial (p. 12-13). By amplifying the perspective that whites were fighting valiantly to civilize America, Custer’s forces ascended to martyrdom and Indians were further vilified.

King dives deeper into the harm of myths as he points out the motives of various groups. Explorers reported positive dealings with the Indians, but colonists—the people who wanted to live on what was once Indian land—saw the natives as impediments to their notions of civilization (p. 23). King highlights this toward the end of the book in a subsection called, “What do Indians want?” He explains that this is the wrong question to ask, and that we should be asking “What do Whites want?” (pp. 215-216). When we approach this critically, and when we

understand that the sole answer is “land,” we can see that this Anglo desire, as expressed from the moment British subjects decided to make North America home, has been the root of all conflict and resulting policy.

That is not to say that Anglos lack compassion, but that the compassion may be guided by the underlying land motive. Looking back to the 1880s, we may consider the self-titled Friends of the Indians who met annually at the Lake Mohonk Conferences to plan for the future of American Indians. Land was viewed as a precious commodity and deemed, as King put it, “too important to be left in the hands of a community that had no real sense of its value” (pp. 129-130), and the Friends (Anglos) wanted the land “improved” with civilization. But the Indians did and do value land—as a home and integral part of culture, both physically and spiritually (p. 218). The historical Anglo attitude of land as producer of wealth creates conflict with the Indian ideals, and so we end up with a mismatch such as the U.S. government attempting to pay the Lakota for stolen and irreparably damaged sacred space (pp. 221-222).

Indeed, Indian policy has been unfailingly created in the image of Anglo civilization, relentlessly assimilating native structures into something that Anglos can recognize. At issue have been not only land, but also Indian nations’ own sovereignty. The indigenous people were considered sovereign enough to sign treaties upon “discovery” by Euroamericans, but once the United States became its own independent union, the Anglo mechanisms of constitutionality were used to govern its people, land, and anything that fell within the borders agreed upon at the Treaty of Paris. Based on Anglo notions of land value, discovery, and ownership, the Supreme Court ruled from 1823 to 1832: 1) that Indians did not properly own the land, 2) that Indians nations were dependent nations under the United States, and 3) that the federal government was the exclusive gatekeeper of Indian rights and privileges (pp. 81-82). Through this authority, they

were able to enact President Andrew Jackson's removal era policies, forcibly moving Indians off of prime real estate east of the Mississippi and into Indian Territory (pp. 87-88). Soon after, the Canadians did the same with the Songhee, moving them to new land, smaller than the old land (p. 91).

Anglo notions of civilization have also provided the contractual "legal Indian" ("status Indian" in Canadian), creating a "one size fits all" approach for Indian policy (p. 60; p. 83). Wanting to avoid a history of continuous "not sharing" as indicated by numerous Indian-European wars that had taken place since 1622 (p. 25), an approach to Indian relations through a Panindian identity allowed federal governments to control trust arrangements with tribes, and in the case of the U.S. Termination Era, ending those arrangements (p. 69-72). Also in the U.S., the earlier-mentioned Supreme Court rulings (the "Marshall Trilogy") created guidelines that governed dealings with *all* legal Indians, rather than treating each nation as a unique entity, expediting procedures for the U.S., but ignoring the wide range of geography and culture (p. 82-83).

King's discussion moves back and forth in history, ignoring chronology (as he warned us he would do in the prologue), connecting events and policies while maintaining a conversation with the reader. This conversation and his authority become most poignant when he draws on his experience as an activist in attempted support of the American Indian Movement's (AIM) occupation of Wounded Knee (pp. 151-152). While we can find humor in his retransformation back to a scared university administrator from a courageous Indian warrior, it also offers us a glimpse at internal conflicts in support of Indian civil rights: who should do what, how should it be done, and what kind of reception will it receive from the dominant authorities? This tableau also helps show that the actions of what otherwise might seem like an anarchist faction actually

has support from many of the marginalized people AIM strives to support, regardless of media attention.

King also connects his and AIM's actions to centuries-old efforts of North American indigenous people to protect the lands and ways of life that existed prior to contact, those of Opechancanough, Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa, Pontiac, Osceola, and others who came after (p. 153). Truly, King's coup de grace with *Inconvenient Indian* is that he highlights Indian history and policy with relevancy to events in living memory. One hundred years after the Cherokee and Songhee were moved to their respective new, "permanent" lands, Canada renewed its enthusiasm for removal, relocating the Ojibway multiple times on increasingly smaller parcels, and consolidating the Mi'kmaq until they were reduced to a welfare state (p. 91-94).

It is the relevance that King makes of the situation, combined with his conversational narrative, that makes the book accessible, as demonstrated by its bestseller status. By understanding the fundamentals of desire, we can make sense of history and make predictions about the future. The colonists came with a desire to obtain land, which had to be taken from its existing occupants. Indian efforts to defend the land posed threats to what the colonists wanted, and so Indian actions were vilified, and access limited. With growing colonies and finite land resources, the Indians were crowded out and forced into ever-smaller reservations and allotments. The U.S. and Canada have apologized, but those nations still want the land. Even in the most recent arrangements, the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) "allowed" Alaska Natives unoccupied land and a share of the natural resources. But rather than recognizing this as a step forward toward the recognition of native rights, King points to the similarities to the Dawes Act of 1887, as both then and now the deal comes with limited protections on the land. Plus, the acts only account for the generation in which the deal was

made, perhaps not taking into consideration the growth of native populations who will divide the assets into increasingly smaller shares, as resulted from the Dawes Act (pp. 256-257).

ANCSA brings King's conversation full-circle about difficult issues of mediating the general difference between native and Anglo approaches, from the early days of contact to the modern day. As King tells us, it is not sufficient to hop in the van and head to North Dakota without a plan. With ANCSA, tribes were again told that they need to organize themselves in a civilized manner, this time as corporations, and King points out the similarity of a corporation to a reservation (p. 255-256). By now, the reader cannot overlook that these events happen in modern day, to real people, in our civilization. He invites us to continue to make these past-to-present connections: "If nothing else, an examination of the past—and of the present, for that matter—can be instructive." While he does not foretell outright a dim future, he stimulates our intellectual curiosity by posing questions about native priorities toward sovereignty, land, and culture. Inaction would only allow natives to "sink into the stewpot of North America." So he essentially ends with a call to thoughtful action—to think about what Indians want, when everyone else's decisions have been based on taking Indian land.

## References

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