

Inconvenient Returns: Teaching Indigenous Literature amid Identity Controversy

I learned about Thomas King's *Globe and Mail* op-ed on a teaching day, just weeks after undergraduate students in my Indigenous literatures course had read his writing on Indigenous identity formation in *The Inconvenient Indian*. In the weeks prior, King's distinctions between "dead," "live," and "legal" Indians had provided the conceptual groundwork for the course: the framework through which we were preparing to move from generalized discussions of Indigeneity towards more specific engagements with particular Indigenous nations, communities, and political and cultural practices more broadly. The sudden appearance of King's declarative statement—"Not the Indian I had in mind. Not an Indian at all" (King, "Most Inconvenient")—forced that trajectory into question. While this was undoubtedly a blow for King—something he states plainly when he writes that he found the news "so very devastating" (and, from all accounts, I have no reason to disbelieve him here)—the immediate problem for me, as a professor of Indigenous literatures, was pedagogical. How does one explain to students that an author whose work had just taught them to think carefully about Indigenous classification, relation, and specificity, now appears to have misapprehended those distinctions himself? To the students, King (of all people) should know *who* is classified as *what* in a given context. That he should, in a sense, "know better."

The op-ed was published on a busy day for me, so, while I was aware of its existence (and had been aware of the questions surrounding King's claims to being Cherokee for some time), I had not yet had the opportunity to read it carefully. That said, I thought it best to alert the students in the class to its publication, while making clear that we would engage the text more robustly once I had had the

chance to read it—particularly since we also had other texts to work through that day, ones I had been looking forward to discussing. Even though I framed my remarks as simply “flagging” the op-ed’s existence, and despite my stating explicitly that I had not yet read it, students wanted to discuss it immediately. Given the content of the course (i.e., Indigenous literatures), this made perfect sense. To be clear, I do not begrudge the students their curiosity, nor their very real concerns about “pretendianism.” Rather, I want to note the effect that pretendianism so often produces: it prevents or impedes conversations about the important work being done by Indigenous artists, writers, and peoples more broadly. In this instance, its effect was precisely that, as we were prevented from discussing the short films of two Indigenous women directors—Danis Goulet (Cree-Métis) and Helen Haig-Brown (Tsilhqot’in)—and their narratives of Cree and Tsilhqot’in resurgence. Instead of examining how Goulet frames her short film *Wakening* as a metaphor for Cree cultural resurgence, we found ourselves back at the beginning of the course, speaking about Indigeneity in the broadest, most general, and most abstract terms. We were likewise impeded from engaging fully with the significance of Haig-Brown’s work: in her words, “*The Cave* is the first-ever Indigenous science fiction film shot in Tsilhqot’in, my native language. This recognition means a lot to me and my community” (qtd. in Rugged Media). Rather than focusing on the specificity of these films—their use of Indigenous languages, their grounding in particular nations and communities, their enactments of resurgence—we returned to abstract debates about identity.

We had returned, in a sense, to talking about “the figure” of “the Indian.” King became a metonym for all “Indians” and “pretendians,” and broad, abstract notions of Indigenous identity came to supplant the specific and particular articulations of Indigenous political and cultural resurgence that the class had been intended to explore. This abstraction came to embody the argument King himself makes about “the Indian,” and the way in which it signifies wildly, and comes to stand in for “live” and “legal” Indians (to use King’s own parlance; see *Inconvenient Indian* 53). In short, the discussion of King’s identity (and of King himself) became inconvenient, though not in the cheeky way he might have meant it. It was “inconvenient” because it returned our discussions to the beginning of the term, to the generalized and

abstract frameworks we use before we can begin to approach the specificities under which these two Indigenous filmmakers are working and creating. At the expense of two Indigenous women artists, we returned to King: “Not the Indian I had in mind. Not an Indian at all” (“Most Inconvenient”).

Ultimately, like many conversations about “pretendianism,” the discussion was belaboured and unsatisfying—and yet, as is often the case, necessary. Paradoxically, it was the terminology King had supplied us with that enabled students to articulate the problems with his assertions of Cherokee identity. That vocabulary made it possible to name how asserting an identity is also asserting a relation, or set of relations, that constitute who one *is* in relation to others. To make such a claim pre-emptively, without establishing those relations, is to build on shaky ground, on a foundation that cannot hold. My point here is not to give King undue credit for helping us address the very problem he created. Rather, it is to note the pedagogical and disciplinary consequences that follow when prominent figures become flashpoints for debates about identity. In the classroom, such moments risk re-centring abstract arguments about “the Indian” at the expense of sustained engagement with the work of Indigenous artists, writers, and communities, particularly those whose practices are grounded in communal and nation-specific resurgence. More broadly, they reveal how easily institutional conversations about Indigeneity can be pulled backward, towards generality, spectacle, and adjudication, rather than forward, towards specificity, relation, and responsibility. That my students arrived, through King’s own writing, at the conclusion that “he should have known better” is, perhaps, the most instructive outcome of all. That is to say, it suggests that the tools we give students matter, that careful teaching can still foster ethical clarity, and that the work of Indigenous literary studies must continue to insist on relations over representations, even—and especially—when those representations prove “inconvenient.”

Works Cited

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