



REVIEW ESSAY

“Story and memory. Memory and story”: Manifesting Vacancy in Thomas King’s *Indians on Vacation*

Thomas King. *Indians on Vacation*. Harper Collins, 2020. 286 pages. ISBN: 9781443460545.

<https://www.harpercollins.ca/9781443460545/indians-on-vacation/>

In a 1999 interview, Thomas King observes that “In a number of my books editors have asked me to gloss terms or events so the reader understands what’s happening”; he adds that the refusal to explain is strategic: “I wanted people to understand that I think Native history is as common as Jacques Cartier arriving in Canada” (“Border Trickery” 180, 181).¹ I have argued elsewhere that while King creates narrative worlds that demand that the reader cultivate a tolerance for uncertainty, his novels are also full of answers, if readers will do the work of decoding.² But whether it is the undefined and

untranslated Cherokee language in *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) or oblique references to the role of the church in the residential school system in *Truth and Bright Water* (1999) or the mysterious link between the Haudenosaunee Sky Woman origin story and the chemical defoliant GreenSweep in *The Back of the Turtle* (2014), King's fiction is often characterized by a tendency to evoke rather than explain. In this, King manifests in text an epistemological condition that takes for granted that Indigenous history, stories, and knowledge are known – or are important and pervasive enough that they *ought* to be known. The narrative worlds he creates are saturated in forms of awareness – if often allusive and sometimes elusive – that refute the notion that knowledge of these histories, cosmologies, and lifeways is in any way esoteric or specialized. And in case readers feel left out by gaps in exposition or by the destabilizing effect of the worlds he creates, his works sometimes even include apologies for hurt feelings (“‘Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry,’ says Coyote”) (*Green Grass* 469). His recent novel *Indians on Vacation* (2020) is no exception. Indeed, gaps, absences, mysteries, and uncertainty together constitute the novel's organizing principle. The valences of “vacation” – from the state of being free from something (work, for example) to the state of being vacant (the condition of absence) – are woven together in this novel, in which the story of an Indigenous couple traveling on holiday to Prague, furnished with all the expected narrative detours into scenes of sightseeing, dining out, insomnia, and occasional bickering, is suggestively interspersed with vignettes and allusions that situate the novel's travelers within a wider historical context of settler colonial displacements and the enduring legacies of the vacancies they create.

With *Indians on Vacation*, King returns to a motif he first explored in “You're Not the Indian I Had in Mind,” an essay he delivered as part of the 2002 Canadian Massey Lectures, in which he develops the concept of the “postcard Indian,” a racialized construction defined by homogenizing clichés (“Indians in feathers and leathers, sitting in or around tipis or chasing buffalo on pinto ponies”) whose ongoing ubiquity (for sale at a gas station near you) attests to the enduring presence of a centuries-old appetite to consume what he defines variously as the “literary Indian,” the “visually Indian,” or the Indian of imagination: exotic, noble, stoic, and extinct (34, 43, 35). For King, the “postcard Indian” proffers a narrow, static idea of what constitutes “authenticity” for the “Indian” – a suffocating pre-contact ideal that consigns Indigenous authenticity to the past tense and functions to debilitate contemporary Indigenous peoples, whose nuanced identity (and, indeed, ongoing presence and vitality) it calls into question.



While postcards do play a meaningful role in *Indians on Vacation*, it is not through the 4x6 reification of the idealized “Indian” archetype that the novel revisits the concept. Instead, *Indians on Vacation* recognizes the postcard Indian as a commodity that manifests across an array of consumer environments, from traveling “Wild West” vaudeville shows to manufactured ceremonies (like a powwow in Aarhus, Denmark) to “Indian-themed” restaurants, all of which, in some way, attest to vacancy. As one of King’s protagonists, Mimi Bull Shield, observes, ““World is crazy about Indians”” (48). Whether such commodifications are produced in the absence of Indigenous people, as with the powwow in Denmark, or whether they involve the removal of Indigenous people - often by coercion or force - as with the Wild West shows, or whether they depend upon acts of theft (what Mimi in the novel refers to as “Robbing graves and selling culture”), the principle of evacuation common to all can itself shed light on the interests that might be served by the propagation of the fantasy of the Indian. As King writes in “You’re Not the Indian I Had in Mind,” the Indian of imagination represents “the only antiquity that North America would ever have” (56). Propagating that fantasy thus serves hegemonic interests by establishing a noble foundation upon which North American settler nations are built and a naturalized teleology that recognizes settler supremacy as the coefficient of modernity. As a relic of a bygone past, the Indian of imagination is a useful lie: in de-authenticating living Indigenous people, it serves to symbolically effect the forms of erasure that motivate state and federal policies of removal, relocation, and assimilation.

Set in the near-present, the novel’s action centers on a European vacation: it’s 2018 and Cherokee-Greek Blackbird Mavrias (Bird) and Blackfoot Mimi Bull Shield are in Prague as part of a years-long scavenger hunt to discover the whereabouts of the Bull Shield family medicine bundle, missing since the turn of the twentieth century, when Mimi’s great uncle Leroy Bull Shield departed with it, never to return, when he was exiled from the Kainai (Blood) Reserve for transgressions against its Indian Agent. Mimi and Bird are following a trail of postcards sent by Leroy - from Paris, Nice, Athens, Amsterdam, and Prague - that serve as the only record of his European journey as an “Indian” curiosity in Captain Trueblood’s Wild West Emporium, a punishment devised by the Department of Indian Affairs for Leroy’s rebellions against its authority in leaving the reserve without permission and in repeatedly painting the Agent’s house brown

with diluted cow shit. Just below the humour of the novel's premise lurks a narrative of colonial dominance and exploitation, in which Leroy's story evokes at once a long history of forced removals - from kidnappings by early European explorers to the U.S. and Canadian states' reservation and residential school systems - and an equally long tradition of treating Indigenous peoples as curiosities, suitable for display in pageants tacitly designed to celebrate the ingenuity and control of the colonizer or, more recently, reducible to a set of fixed (and tired) stereotypes - totem poles, headdresses, bows and arrows - as readily consumed as the pizza on offer at the "Indian-themed pizza parlor" visited by Bird and Mimi in Prague (48).³

On one hand, Mimi and Bird's search for the missing Bull Shield medicine bundle is treated with levity, as though the quest itself might be dismissed as a conceit - a flimsy justification for world travel: "Uncle Leroy had sent the family a postcard from Nice, and Mimi thought we might find the Crow bundle in the Picasso Museum in Antibes, which was just up the road" or "As far as Uncle Leroy and the Crow bundle were concerned, Athens was a bust" (73, 111). On the other, the recurring motif of Bird's sudden and bewildering symptoms - debilitating leg cramps, sudden loss of energy, intense vomiting - resulting from autoimmune pancreatitis and diabetes suggests that the search for medicine is neither a narrative device nor, strictly speaking, a metaphor. Bird suffers from IgG4, a disease of the blood in which the body attacks itself, mistaking healthy cells for harmful antigens, destroying them in a confused response to tissue-level trauma. An incurable illness, IgG4 is chronic rather than fatal; in delivering this news, Bird's doctor adds that "We've been seeing it in Asian and American Indian populations" (10). King doesn't always go in for subtlety, and here, the reader is afforded an invitation to recognize in Bird's incurable and persistent illness - which is a constant both in his life and in the novel - a means of suturing together the narrative's staccato references to injuries inflicted by "Indian" policy and the individuals and institutions that have enacted it, as well as the enduring legacies of settler supremacy. In the context of the unpredictable flare-ups of Bird's disease, whose episodes he is often helpless to treat and must simply endure until the symptoms pass, Uncle Leroy's decision to take the Crow bundle with him into exile reminds the reader to acknowledge the crisis that may be masked by playful, parodying narrative gestures, like replacing the historical - and (somewhat) more soberly named - Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show with the slightly absurd fictionalization, Captain Trueblood's Wild West Emporium.



As he often does, in *Indians on Vacation*, King shifts unpredictably between U.S. and Canadian nomenclature (reserves and reservations; kilometers and miles; residential schools and boarding schools; the Department of Indian Affairs rather than the Bureau; the way the Canadian 1967 Adopt Indian and Métis Program evokes the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act, a U.S. law resulting from similar practices promoting predatory adoption, etc.), affirming that, as far as “Indian” policy is concerned, the boundary between Canada and the U.S. is next to meaningless, as the methods and policies and programs have so often been almost identical. (As a Canadian living in the U.S., it took me years to come to terms with a joke a colleague once told me, at my expense: “What’s the difference between a Canadian and an American? Canadians think there is one.”) Consistent with this tendency to destabilize apparent divisions or distinctions, Uncle Leroy’s exile as a “Native performe[r],” playing Indian for European consumption, has its precedent in the fate of a famous Indigenous leader and war chief, whose parallel story unfolded in the American plains. After the 1876 culmination of the so-called Indian Wars, which saw the united Oceti Sakowin forces of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse soundly defeating George Armstrong Custer and his Seventh Cavalry (and by extension, the U.S. War Department) at the notorious 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn, the U.S. state sought another avenue for battlefield victory, strategizing to limit his influence amongst tribal members on the reservation while also capitalizing on his fame: for four months in 1885, Sitting Bull was coerced into touring the country as part of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show.⁴ Like Uncle Leroy, Sitting Bull had repeatedly embarrassed the state, both as a warrior and as a statesman. As was ultimately the case with Sitting Bull, who was eventually killed in 1890 for acts of resistance – sedition and religious disobedience – Leroy’s departure marks his disappearance, with only cryptic postcards to track his movements (““In Paris. Bundle is with me and safe. Home soon. Leroy.””), and like the Indigenous children stolen away from their families, either to be sent to residential schools or new adoptive families, (or, indeed, like the Syrian refugees whose devastating search for safety from crisis and persecution also dots the novel), *Indians on Vacation* manifests awareness of the brutalities of state power – dominance, displacement, and deracination – as an endemic constant of settler nations rather than an exception (41).⁵

Dissolving supposed distinctions between Canada and the U.S. forms part the novel's wider epistemological condition, in which associations and explanations are, as I have argued above, either loosely implied or withheld altogether and the reader becomes the connective tissue binding the narrative elements. Mimi tells a story she has heard from her mother, about her uncle Everett, who ran away "with two other boys" from Blue Quills in St. Paul, Alberta, a residential school "almost six hundred kilometers away" from "Standoff," a loose fictionalization of the unincorporated Stand Off on the Kainai (Blood) Reserve (20). To Mimi's explanation that their escape failed ("they had a box of matches with them, but the matches got wet from the fog, and that was that"), Bird replies enigmatically:

"Chanie Wenjack."

"Sure," says Mimi, "that's the story everyone knows. Children running away from residential schools. But it's not the only one." (20)

I know the story: I was an undergraduate at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, where my Native Studies 100 class was held in the Wenjack Theatre. At some point, I came to learn about Chanie, who, on October 16th, 1966, at the age of 12, ran away from Cecilia Jeffrey School, in Kenora, Ontario. He died of exposure and hunger, and was found on October 23rd - his only possession, a glass jar containing a few dry matches.⁶ But "everyone" does *not* know this story; collective knowledge of the inexpressible harm inflicted on children and families by the residential school system is defined by the vacancies that Mimi acknowledges when she affirms the importance of telling the stories. But in creating a double to Chanie's flight - in which both the yawning distance between the school and home is about the same, as is the number of escaped children (Chanie was accompanied part of the way by two other boys) - King educates the reader's imagination, surreptitiously creating the condition of knowledge that Mimi takes for granted. The horrific truth of Chanie Wenjack's experience is that the despair and fear and longing that define the condition of exile - of being compelled to vacate what is known and exist in a state of linguistic, familial, cultural, and environmental banishment - is at once so common as to be a thing "everyone knows" about (Chanie, Everett, Leroy, Sitting Bull, the Syrian refugees at Keleti Station in Budapest: it's all the same story) *and* a matter of public forgetting. In weaving strands and fragments of such stories into his narrative, King creates a textual simulacrum of memory: knowledge flits through *Indians on Vacation* the way remembrances surface and submerge in the mind. Confirming that Everett and the other two boys didn't die, Bird asks, "And that's the end of the story?", and Mimi's



answer, “Those stories never end,” attests to the living legacies of pain – as constitutive as a disease of the blood – that long outlast the dissolution of colonial instruments like the residential school system (21). Her answer also recognizes what I take to be a principle of King’s narrative style: his refusal to inhabit the didactic mode, to ensure that the reader is conducted through historical references to defined points of knowledge, is not a form of narrative coyness but rather expresses an expectation that the experience of not knowing will provoke rather than foreclose the questions that lead to stories and, in turn, to memory. As Oz, Bird’s breakfast companion at the Prague hotel, enigmatically observes: ““Story and memory. Memory and story. . . . Together they are history”” (261).

It is hard to resist filling in the absences in King’s narrative, especially when doing so might be considered to be the job of the reader with the literacy to detect the novel’s clues. Like Bird, when Oz takes his leave one morning with ““But there is much to do. . . . And I have promises to keep,” I too am “tempted to finish the stanza,” supplying the final and famous lines from Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (149). But Bird does not finish the stanza; it is for me, the reader, to do that: “And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep” (15-16). There are plenty of opportunities for the reader to “finish the stanza” in *Indians on Vacation*. I may be tempted to gloss Bernie Bull Shield’s apparent failure of memory in her repeated references to the Indian Agent responsible for Leroy’s banishment as “Mr. Nelson or Wilson,” “Wilson or Nelson” (32, 33). By force of their repetition and inversion, I am compelled to pause and wonder why King might be merging in that individual references to R.N. Wilson (Indian Agent for the Blood Reserve from 1904-1911 and author of the self-published *Our Betrayed Wards* (1921)) and, perhaps, the Nelson Act of 1889, a law that forced the relocation of Anishinaabe peoples of Minnesota to the White Earth Reservation, enabling the expropriation of vacated lands for white settlement. But while responding to narrative lacunae may constitute acts of remembering called for by the narrative’s recognition of the reciprocities of story and memory that together make history, a reader may be guided by Bird’s refusal to give in to the temptation to *finish* the stanza. In *Indians on Vacation*, what is devastating in Mimi’s statement that “Those stories never end” is balanced by the potential tellings, retellings, and rememberings that are possible when stories are not deemed finished.

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Notes

¹ This essay was composed on lands ancestral to the Menominee (Omāēqnomenēwak) and Ho-Chunk (Hoocąk), in a city named after Oshkosh, a Chief of the Menominee from 1827-1858 whose leadership spanned the years that saw the formalization of the State's Removal policy and the establishment of Wisconsin's statehood.

² See Pascale M. Manning, "The Climate of Indigenous Literature: Thomas King's Anthropocene Realism," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2024, pp. 33-50.

³ For a detailed narrative of the kidnappings of Indigenous people by explorers, from Christopher Columbus to Hernán Cortés to Martin Frobisher (etc.), see Olive Dickason's chapter titled "Amerindians in Europe" in *The Myth of the Savage*.

⁴ See Bobby Bridger, 257-288 and *passim*, in *Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull: Inventing the Wild West*.

⁵ In *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (1970), Dee Brown famously tells the story of a speech delivered in 1883 by Sitting Bull. It is a matter of historical record that Sitting Bull was transported from the Standing Rock Agency Reservation to Bismark on September 8th; a kind of war trophy, Sitting Bull was there to deliver a speech as part of the celebrations marking the completion of the Northern Pacific Railway. Instead of delivering in Lakota the speech that had been written for him, and in spite of being accompanied by a translator, whose function was to interpret his remarks for an audience dotted with dignitaries, Sitting Bull is said to have declared: "I hate all the white people. . . . You are thieves and liars. You have taken away our land and made us outcasts" (426). While the subversion was concealed in the moment and the audience was none the wiser, the act of resistance formed part of a lifetime of refusal to adhere to conditions dictated by the settler state, including restrictions imposed by the Civilization Regulations of the 1880s, which established the practice of traditional Indigenous medicine and ceremonies as punishable offenses. His murder on December 15th, 1890, just two weeks before the massacre at Wounded Knee (in which the Seventh Cavalry, Custer's former regiment, brutally killed between 150 and 300 Lakota on the grounds that they were practitioners of the Ghost Dance religion), augured the force with which the U.S. state was willing to act to suppress expressions of self-determination and resistance (Brown *passim* 415-439).

⁶ See Ian Adams, "The Lonely Death of Chanie Wenjack," *Maclean's*, 1 February, 1967.



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