

## Book Reviews

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*UNRULY VOICES: ESSAYS ON DEMOCRACY, CIVILITY  
AND THE HUMAN IMAGINATION.*

BY MARK KINGWELL.

BIBLIOASIS, 2012. 272 PAGES. \$21.95.

TRADITIONAL PHILOSOPHERS TRY TO TEACH us about the unity hidden in diversity, the one in the many: so we get the Form of the Good, the Unmoved Mover, the Monad, the Absolute, and so on. For Mark Kingwell it's all multiplicity. It's multiplicity all the time, and all the way down. (Don't ask what "it" is.)

We see this in his interesting book on Glenn Gould (2009). Kingwell presents the great Canadian pianist in a series of 21 vignettes: what is his genius? Why his fascination with the North? Do his hypochondria and his gleeful role-acting have anything to do with the place of time in the ontology of a piece of music? What about his fascinations with Patsy Cline and Capriccio? We are to believe that these are not just aspects of a singular individual, but are incompatible parts that do not make a whole. Biography, Kingwell argues, is not really possible because there is not a unified story to be told about a being who is essentially multiple. Gould is not indivisible, but divisible. Not an individual but a "dividual."

In his new collection, *Unruly Voices*, Kingwell applies his neologism to himself. He, too, is a "dividual," with many incompatible voices making noises in his head. He shares some of them with us. We may at first be inclined to agree with his diagnosis. He is, after all, a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto—a job which keeps many a talented person more than overworked—who seems to make his living selling articles to magazines, and publishing books on fishing and popular culture (and see his riff on being a journalist in the chapter, "All Show"). And the essays in this collection range over infinite regression, collective action, immanence, the metaphysics of fiction, the presence of absence, and self-slaughter. So how could we hope for more than a series of unrelated vignettes from this self-declared dilettante and name-dropper? (There are hundreds of citations in the book, running from Machiavelli to Russell Smith, Socrates to Sarah Palin, and a brilliant bit of P.G. Wodehouse, to boot.)

Kingwell tells us in his introduction to *Unruly Voices* that he has been speaking in favour of ruly voices for more than fifteen years. He has even addressed Canadian parliamentarians (alas to faint effect) on the necessity of civility. It is an essential feature of democracy that citizens and their representatives be able to reason with one another, he argues; just not listening, or retorting with insults, is corrosive to the body politic. This theme haunts Ch. 7, “Intellectuals and Democracy,” in which he does some “casual philosophical analysis” on the idea that university studies are useless unless they lead to a job. He undermines that link between higher education and work, and concludes: “Education is not there to be converted into market value, it is there to make us better and more engaged citizens, maybe even better and more virtuous people” (136). One suspects that some of these engaged citizens would be more like individuals than dividuals.

Thus in Chapter 8, “What Are Intellectuals For?,” he criticizes public intellectuals (Don Cherry, Christopher Hitchens and Malcolm Gladwell, among others) for employing the contrarian rant in the service of a status-quo, or in defense of changing and incompatible positions. On the contrary, he concludes, taking good advice from Northrop Frye and Michael Foot along the way, there is a purpose to the public intellectual’s life: “Never worry about those on top ... and never try to be on top yourself ... [but] speak and provide for [those on the bottom] as best you can. There’s no other point to being here” (148). That does not sound like a dividual’s voice, confused by the multi-pointedness of life.

Chapter 9, “Fuck You’ and Other Salutations,” does re-introduce multi-pointedness in the unexpected form of Adam Smith’s conundrum: private vice (acting in one’s own selfish interest) can generate public virtue (in the form of a flourishing market in which many needs are satisfied), but if a market is not regulated it tends to generate a collective action problem: if you cheat, I’ll cheat, and we get a race to the bottom. To avoid the tragedies of the commons and the worst outcomes of prisoner’s dilemmas, markets need to be constrained by the social and civic virtue of civility. This neatly brings unruly voices back to playful and open-ended forms of discussion and co-operation.

In a witty attempt to reassert unruliness, Kingwell next offers a meditation on the mind of Barack Obama on the occasion of his first inaugural address. We see some of the dilemmas that must undermine Obama’s sense of his own integrity. Kingwell ends the book with an introduction to the Freudian concept of the ‘uncanny,’ the sense that there is some deep disquietude

between reality and our ordinary contentment. Freud feels it when he sees a disagreeable old man in the mirror. Kingwell seeks it in some films, but ends with the thesis that all cinema is uncanny. In H.P. Lovecraft's science fiction, the whole universe is alien, and one cannot feel at home in it. But of course; we once inhabited a womb, and being out in the world is never quite the same as being 'at home.' But should we despair? Invent other homes?

There are eighteen essays; I cannot summarize them all. The book begins with a sketch of our new millennium, full of 'selfies' caught in a fun-house of infinite mirrors, with individual integrity refracted and dispersed in 'facebook,' while at the same time democracy (that each individual should count for one) seems more and more false, alienating and unworthy. What thoughts occupy a lively mind in such a time? One of them is already familiar: "The real software of democracy is not bare literacy ... [it is] the ability to engage in critical dialogue with ideas both agreeable and disagreeable" (13, 14). An interesting implication of this civility is that we are just mock selves unless we engage in this critical civility with our own ideas and those of others. So, if we are Mark Kingwell, we write a book as a stage in that engagement. However varied and interesting its ideas, it is a testimony to a faith in critical civility in society with other democrats of like and unlike minds.

There is more unity here than the author(s) concede(s).

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*THE INCONVENIENT INDIAN: A CURIOUS ACCOUNT OF NATIVE PEOPLE*

*IN NORTH AMERICA.*

BY THOMAS KING.

DOUBLEDAY CANADA, 2012. 288 PAGES. \$34.95.

READING THOMAS KING'S NEW BOOK, *The Inconvenient Indian*, sitting in the Saskatoon airport, I was both eager to tell everyone to "read this book!" and hoping that no one beside me would find the title offensive. I was especially thankful that it wasn't called "Pesky Redskins," the original title King had tossed around (x). Both titles, the red block letters and stylized cover illustration of a headdressed Indian waiting to ambush a cruise ship are hilarious, but at first glance—and without seeing the small print of the subtitle—they could be easily misconstrued as racist. I guess that's the danger of severe irony and satire: sometimes people just don't get it. King

himself apologizes for “caus[ing] anyone undue distress,” but continues in the kind of cutting tone of which one hopes to be on the blunt edge (xii). However, his irony and humour make the book an absolute pleasure to read. So, there I was in the airport and then on the plane laughing out loud at the inconvenience of Indians.

King provides a comprehensive overview of the stories, myths, legends, histories and truths of “White-Indian” relations in Canada and the United States in clear language, peppered with biting humour, witty asides and compelling personal stories. He covers topics such as early exploration, massacres, colonial preconceptions and expectations, the “Indian” in art, literature, film and commercial marketing, residential schools, reserve and reservation designation, treaties, Indian removal policy, termination and allotment, relocations, resource development, extermination and assimilation, apologies, casinos, tribe membership, racism, sovereignty and self-determination, land, environmental issues, and land claims. Aiming to redress the limited knowledge that both Canadians and Americans have of their own history, he laments: “Dates, people, the large and small nuances of events have all been reduced to the form and content of Classic Comics” (11). However, King also admits that “facts will not save us” (xi), and although much of his book reads as a glossary of large and small nuances of events, he is clear to point out that he is “not the historian you had in mind” (xi), echoing his Massey Lecture, “You’re not the Indian I had in Mind” in *The Truth About Stories*. King’s account unabashedly tells different stories, providing in many cases the counterpoint to those previously chosen to constitute History. Storytelling allows King to sidestep the parameters of being a “good historian,” to include bias and personal anecdote, and to forego footnotes. While this approach enriches his argument with humour and irony, makes it palatable to the reader and, arguably, utilizes a more Indigenous method of recounting history, his overriding cynicism leaves little romantic or inspirational hope: “the future should be very curious indeed” (266).

One of the most compelling distinctions King makes is between “Dead Indians,” “Legal Indians,” and “Live Indians.” The first are those stereotypes and clichés that proliferate in both commercialism and social consciousness; “Legal Indians” are recognized by Canadian and US governments; and “Live Indians” are the actual living, breathing Indigenous peoples of North America. While I agree with King’s classifications, I was hoping to find more Live Indians in his book. King is mostly concerned with debunking stereotypes of the

Dead Indian and critiquing the government's definition of Legal Indians and, in doing so ignores the perspectives and contemporary concerns of specific tribes and individuals. Aside from demystifying Indigenous people and saying, "we live modern lives informed by traditional values and contemporary realities and ... wish to live those lives on our own terms" (266), King does little to either illustrate those lives and terms. I do not suggest that he espouse what all Live Indians think or do (and so perpetuate new generalizations and stereotypes); however, much of his book is dedicated to denouncing white/outsider/government definitions and histories without, in most cases, providing any alternative. Left with only cynicism, it's difficult for the reader to take away a new view of Indigenous North Americans, despite perhaps realizing that their previous conceptions were wrong. As Richard Wagamese put it in his review: "Reading it, you can hear minds being blown everywhere" ("The true story of native North Americans: 'Whites want Land'" *The Globe and Mail* 30 Nov. 2012). Yet somehow those fragments of brain matter need to be reassembled.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Inconvenient Indian* is a must-read. Minds need to be blown, worlds shaken, and histories exposed. King moves effortlessly between grand historical narratives such as "Whites want land" (216), to references to Johnny Depp as Tonto and Victoria's Secret fashion shows. His breadth and depth is remarkable and his writing completely readable. My friends and family are growing tired of me reading passages out loud, but now know that they have to read this book.

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