

**Book Review: CHELSEA VOWEL. Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis and Inuit Issues in Canada. (2016)**

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CHELSEA VOWEL. *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis and Inuit Issues in Canada*. Portage & Main Press. (2016). 290 pp. \$26.00 (paperback). (ISBN 978-1-55379-684-8)

Chelsea Vowel's *Indigenous Writes* is a highly informative and engaging collection of 31 essays addressing a wide range of issues related to Indigenous peoples in what is currently called Canada. The book offers the intellectual, witty, and interdisciplinary writing that readers of Vowel's popular blog (<http://apihtawikosisan.com>) are familiar with. Vowel writes with first-hand knowledge of having lived and worked in the Prairies, the Northwest Territories and Québec as a Métis woman and parent. Moreover, her approach and analysis are clearly informed by her degrees in Education and Law, and years of teaching and activist experience. She writes in a conversational tone, uses accessible language, and offers a straightforward engagement with often difficult social and political issues.

The book is organized into five broad themes: Terminology of Relationships; Culture and Identity; Myth-Busting; State Violence; and Land, Learning, Law, and Treaties. While each essay and section can stand on its own, together they build on one another, producing a strong cumulative effect when the book is read in its entirety. Vowel begins by providing a historically grounded, practical discussion of issues of naming and categorizing various Indigenous peoples (Chapter 1) and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada (Chapter 2). She goes on to discuss Indigenous cultural identities, with reference to current events, providing information on how to respect cultural boundaries (Chapter 9) and "find authentic Indigenous stories" (Chapter 10, p. 92). Vowel's section on Myth-Busting (Chapters 13-19) not only identifies and "busts" persistent misconceptions and stereotypes about Indigenous peoples, but offers critical analysis of how such ideas have been constructed, how they are damaging to individuals and communities, and how such fallacies inform and enable structural oppression. Finally, Vowel examines Canadian state relations with Indigenous Peoples and the use of Canadian law to further state interests (especially Chapters 20-31). Topics addressed in this section include Residential

Schools, Treaties, and a number of government policies targeting and affecting First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. The breadth of knowledge, clarity, courage, and generosity with which Vowel achieves this project are exceptional. *Indigenous Writes* is thus an important and appropriate book for a wide range of readers – Indigenous and non-Indigenous, adolescent and adult students, self-directed learners of all ages, and all teachers.

In the introduction to the book, Vowel orients our reading by explaining that it is inspired by conversations about Canadian politics that she had during law school with two friends – one Liberal and the other Conservative. Having these discussions and listening deeply to one another across enormous differences of experience and political opinion demonstrated for Vowel the importance and potential of such work. *Indigenous Writes* is convincingly written in this spirit and reflects Vowel's commitment to continuing such transformational conversations across differences. She reminds readers that what and how she writes is “not about you as a person,” and asserts that while her tone is not always what some will find “polite,” she does her best to “keep things light” and is “genuinely trying to communicate with you” (p. 3).

Vowel's voice and personality remain present throughout each essay. Her use of vernacular, humour, and at times, sarcasm add layers of meaning, underscore arguments and carry her and her readers through discussions of infuriating facts and difficult, often painful issues. Contemporary Indigenous artists and writers have often used humour and satire as an assertion of resilience and humility, as political strategy, a weapon of self-defence, and/or to make (things) fun (Baker, 1991; Taylor, 2006). Those familiar with *Métis in Space* (<http://www.metisinspace.com>), a podcast co-produced by Vowel and Molly Swain, will know this to be part of Vowel's repertoire. Framing and delivering political critique in this manner foregrounds Indigenous presence and agency while providing the listener or reader opportunities to smile and even laugh, lower their defenses and become open to learning.

And learn we must. *Indigenous Writes* could hardly be timelier, with many Canadians scrambling to respond to a newfound collective interest in Indigenous peoples in the wake of the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). As Chair of the TRC (and now Independent Senator) Murray Sinclair asserts, there is need for a “wholesale change in thinking” that foregrounds Indigenous peoples and nation-to-nation relationships; “education is the key” to moving toward reconciliation (Macdonald, 2016, para. 7, 10). The TRC findings regarding the history and legacies of the Residential School system in Canada – what Vowel powerfully refers to as *Monster* (Chapter 20) – highlight the role of education and the inextricable links between schooling and other institutions (e.g. the law, the Church) within the context of Canadian settler colonialism:

For over a century, the central goals of Canada's Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as "cultural genocide." (TRC, 2015, p. 1)

The ideologies and social relations that supported the Residential Schools system remain embedded in the foundations of Canadian education systems and continue to shape government approaches to Indigenous peoples and land. Whether or not there is any hope for significant change and "reconciliation" remains to be seen, determined by long term processes of un-schooling and re-educating ourselves and deconstructing and replacing colonial institutional foundations. Vowel helps us to begin this work without reducing the complexity of historic and contemporary relations between the Canadian nation-state, Indigenous peoples, and other populations now occupying this territory. *Indigenous Writes* offers readers the opportunity to learn from and engage with the ideas of this knowledgeable Métis intellectual and teacher and provides a wealth of annotated references for further study in meticulous and extensive footnotes. It is a critical contribution to teaching and learning about Indigenous peoples in Canada and leaves Canadians with no excuses for ongoing and willful blindness to Indigenous presence, experiences, rights, and struggles.

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