An excerpt from The Inconvenient Indian, by Thomas King (2012, Doubleday Canada)

INDIANS COME IN all sorts of social and historical configurations. North American popular culture is littered with savage, noble, and dying Indians, while in real life we have Dead Indians, Live Indians, and Legal Indians.

Dead Indians are, sometimes, just that. Dead Indians. But the Dead Indians I’m talking about are not the deceased sort. Nor are they all that inconvenient. They are the stereotypes and clichés that North America has conjured up out of experience and out of its collective imaginings and fears. North America has had a long association with Native people, but despite the history that the two groups have shared, North America no longer sees Indians. What it sees are war bonnets, beaded shirts, fringed deerskin dresses, loincloths, headbands, feathered lances, tomahawks, moccasins, face paint, and bone chokers. These bits of cultural debris—authentic and constructed—are what literary theorists like to call “signifiers,” signs that create a “simulacrum,” which Jean Baudrillard, the French sociologist and postmodern theorist, succinctly explained as something that “is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none.”

God, I love the French theorists. For those of us who are not French theorists but who know the difference between a motor home and a single-wide trailer, a simulacrum is something that represents something that never existed. Or, in other words, the only truth of the thing is the lie itself.

Dead Indians.

You can find Dead Indians everywhere. Rodeos, powwows, movies, television commercials. At the 1973 Academy Awards, when Sacheen Littlefeather (Yagua-Apache-Pueblo) refused the Best Actor award on behalf of Marlon Brando, she did so dressed as a Dead Indian. When U.S. Senator Benjamin Nighthorse Campbell (Northern Cheyenne) and W. Richard West, Jr. (Cheyenne-Arapaho), the director of the American Indian Museum in New York, showed up for the 2004 opening ceremonies of the museum, they took the podium in Dead Indian leathers and feathered headdresses. Phil Fontaine (Ojibway) was attired in the same manner when he stood on the floor of the House of Commons in 2008 to receive the Canadian government’s apology for the abuses of residential schools.

I probably sound testy, and I suppose part of me is. But I shouldn’t be. After all, Dead Indians are the only antiquity that North America has. Europe has Greece and Rome. China has the powerful dynasties. Russia has the Cossacks. South and Central America have the Aztecs, the Incas, and the Maya.

North America has Dead Indians.

This is why Littlefeather didn’t show up in a Dior gown, and why West and Campbell and Fontaine didn’t arrive at their respective events in Brioni suits, Canali dress shirts, Zegni ties, and Salvatore Ferragamo shoes. Whatever cultural significance they may have for Native peoples, full feather headresses and beaded buckskins are, first and foremost, White North America’s signifiers of Indian authenticity. Their visual value at ceremonies in Los Angeles or Ottawa is—as the credit card people say—priceless.

Sometimes you can only watch and marvel at the ways in which the Dead Indian has been turned into products: Red Chief Sugar, Calumet Baking Soda, the Atlanta Braves, Big Chief Jerky, Grey Owl Wild Rice, Red Man Tobacco, the Chicago Blackhawks, Mutual of Omaha, Winnebago Motor Homes, Big Chief Tablet, Indian motorcycles, the Washington Redskins, American Spirit cigarettes, Jeep Cherokee, the Cleveland Indians, and Tomahawk missiles.

Probably the most egregious example is Crazy Horse Malt Liquor, a drink that one reviewer enthusiastically described as “smooth, slightly fruity with an extremely clean, almost Zinfandel finish that holds together all the way to the dregs of the bottle. Personally we think the chief should be proud.” That the Hornell
Brewing Company would even think of turning the great Oglala leader into a bottle of booze should come as no surprise. Corporate North America had already spun the Ottawa leader Pontiac into a division of General Motors, the Apache into an attack helicopter, and the Cherokee into a line of clothing and accessories.

I once bought a pair of Cherokee underpants that I was going to send to my brother as a joke, but by the time I got them home and looked at them again, they had become more embarrassing than funny.

One of my favourite Dead Indian products is Land O’ Lakes butter, which features an Indian Maiden on her knees holding a box of butter at bosom level.

Of course, all of this is simply a new spin on old notions. The medicine shows that toured the West in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries used Aboriginal iconography and invention to sell Dead Indian elixirs and liniments, such as Kickapoo Indian Sagwa, a “blood, liver and stomach renovator,” Dr. Morse’s Indian Root Pills, Dr. Pierce’s Golden Medical Discovery, featuring the caption “Used by the First Americans.”

From the frequency with which Dead Indians appear in advertising, in the names of businesses, as icons for sports teams, as marketing devices for everything from cleaning products to underwear, and as stalking goats for New Age spiritual flimflam, you might think that Native people were a significant target for sales. We’re not, of course. We don’t buy this crap. At least not enough to support such a bustling market. But there’s really no need to ask whom Dead Indians are aimed at, is there?

All of which brings us to Live Indians.

Among the many new things that Europeans had to deal with upon their arrival in the North American wilderness were Live Indians. Live Indians, from an Old World point of view, were an intriguing, perplexing, and annoying part of life in the New World.

There is no general agreement on how many Indians were in North America when Europeans first arrived, but most scholars are willing to speculate that the new diseases that fishermen and colonists brought with them killed upwards of 80 percent of all Native people along the eastern seaboard. Conflicts and wars did their part as well, and, by the time the nineteenth century rolled around, the death of the Indian was a working part of North American mythology. This dying was not the fault of non-Natives. The demise of Indians was seen as a tenet of natural law, which favoured the strong and eliminated the weak.

Problem was, Live Indians didn’t die out. They were supposed to, but they didn’t. Since North America already had the Dead Indian, Live Indians were neither needed nor wanted. They were irrelevant, and as the nineteenth century rolled into the twentieth century, Live Indians were forgotten, safely stored away on reservations and reserves or scattered in the rural backwaters and cityscapes of Canada and the United States. Out of sight, out of mind. Out of mind, out of sight.

For Native people, the distinction between Dead Indians and Live Indians is almost impossible to maintain. But North America doesn’t have this problem. All it has to do is hold the two Indians up to the light. Dead Indians are dignified, noble, silent, suitably garbed. And dead. Live Indians are invisible, unruly, disappointing. And breathing. One is a romantic reminder of a heroic but fictional past. The other is simply an unpleasant, contemporary surprise.

Let’s be clear, Live Indians dance at powwows. And when we dance, when we sing at the drum, when we perform ceremonies, we are not doing it for North America’s entertainment. Where North America sees Dead Indians come to life, we see our families and our relations. We do these things to remind ourselves who we are, to remind ourselves where we come from, and to remind ourselves of our relationship with the earth. Mostly, though, we do these things because we enjoy them.