

Ken Coates, *#IdleNoMore and the Remaking of Canada*, Regina: University of Regina Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-88977-342-4 (paper)

I am ambivalent about Ken Coates' *#IdleNoMore*. It offers a preliminary glance into the meaning of #IdleNoMore¹ for a non-specialist audience. The text provides an overview of the #IdleNoMore social movement that swept across the world from an epicentre in Canada with a concentration of activities from 2012-2013. Written as contemporary history, the author's main argument is that the movement's strength was its peaceful, positive and hopeful celebration of Indigenous culture and community. He believes that the movement should have had more currency and received more attention from mainstream Canadian presses, and is condemning settler (non-Indigenous) audiences and media for ignoring and "missing the point" of the movement. Nonetheless, to Coates' mind the movement was a success because of the way it inspired Indigenous peoples—especially youth—to "expect far more out of life and their country than they have received to date" (p.201).

A main theme is that #IdleNoMore was a movement by, for and about Indigenous peoples, and was not for settler peoples. Despite this lack of focus on settlers, he argues that the future of Canada has been rerouted through the actions of Indigenous organizers. He believes that this has been achieved through Indigenous peoples "finding their feet"—in essence, that the movement has strengthened Indigenous communities such that the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples has necessarily also changed. Settlers now know that Indigenous organizers are strong and here to stay. Indigenous peoples are more confident in their collective power.

I am ambivalent because I don't think he should have written the book. I think that the opportunity should have been given to an Indigenous scholar with background knowledge of the topic area. Had this happened, I think that the book would have been better—more analytically nuanced and more useful to scholars interested in the movement. I am concerned

¹ For more information on the past, present and future of actions under the umbrella of this social movement, as well as to learn about its origins, see: <http://www.idlenomore.ca/> (last accessed 27 April 2017).

that Coates has taken up too much space in publishing this book. I also think the book fell short of its potential to provide in-depth analysis of a critically important modern social movement.

My concern begins with the origin story of the book.

I believe that scholars invested in the production and dissemination of knowledge about Indigenous issues need to be attentive not only to textual content but also to methods and systems of production. The way individuals create platforms for knowledge production about Indigenous organizing should respond to the political objectives of the #IdleNoMore movement. More broadly, the publishing industry and scholars need to acknowledge the politics around representation and who is given access to platforms for disseminating knowledge from a position of inferred authority.

Knowledge and scholarship do not exist in a vacuum but are instead created from within particular constraints of time and place, politics and histories. Clare Hemmings makes this argument in her treatment of the politics of making feminist history. She asserts that, “in a feminist context, which stories predominate or are precluded or marginalized is always a question of power and authority” (2005:118). In *Why Stories Matter* (2011) she shows how the political agendas of feminist scholars unwittingly influence how they tell feminist history—what references they use, and how they evaluate and ascribe meaning to past events. In the context of a settler researcher (Coates) commenting on a critical Indigenous-led social movement, we need to consider Coates’ relative standpoint because it undergirds what he can see from his perspective (Harding 1993).

Besides a person’s standpoint influencing what they can see, we can also think of the act of narration as a subjective one. Referring to the field of dialogical narrative analysis, Arthur Frank explains that, “[i]n their work of boundary setting, all stories are political” (2011:45) The facts of an event might be discretely knowable but the way that a person narrates a story—what they leave out, what they draw in—structures every re-telling of stories/history in such a way that the narrative cannot be neutral. This impossibility of neutrality does not mean we should be historical nihilists. Rather, we need to be attentive to

what a story says and what it does not. Every historian and story-teller should be expected to be a human with limitations.

Now, this matters in the context of *#IdleNoMore* because in this case we have a settler historian telling the history of Indigenous peoples and an Indigenous-led social movement. He is allowed to comment on these issues but we should be aware also of the likelihood of there being gaps in his knowledge and more fundamentally in his epistemology. Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred argues that “[s]ettlers have serious difficulties thinking thoughts that are outside foundational premises of their imperial cultural background” (2008: 10). Coates is a scholar who was educated in imperial systems and comes from an imperial cultural background. We should expect that his background education and affiliations will influence how he can and will tell this story.

Coates freely positions himself in the preface as a settler scholar who grew up in Whitehorse, Yukon. He is not a scholar of social movements, of Indigenous theory, or of digital humanities research (the key method he relies on for his analysis in the text). Rather, he is the Canada Research Chair in Regional Innovation and a well-published Canadian historian. His Canada Research Chair online profile explains his work as “[p]romoting scientific and technological innovation in non-metropolitan areas, including First Nations, rural and northern communities”.² He has worked with First Nations communities through the lens of economic development. He readily admits that he never participated in any of the movement actions. None of this inherently means he should not be writing about this topic but it does mean that he will write about it from a place grounded in his experiences and affiliations. His lens is particular to where he sits in the world.

My question is this—why is Ken Coates’ *#IdleNoMore* one of only two books published by Canadian presses about the largest and most impactful contemporary Indigenous and/or Canadian social movement? Why should his voice—coming from a place outside the movement and outside the group that the movement was by and for—be granted

² See <http://www.chairs-chaire.gc.ca/chairholders-titulaires/profile-eng.aspx?profileId=2773> and <http://kencoates.ca> (last accessed 19 April 2017).

access to the privileged opportunity to write this book? We have a finite amount of energy, money and publishing contracts to go around. We need at least to ask for an explanation as to why a book about asserting Indigenous voices is written by a settler scholar and to think about what limitations are invoked in this scenario.

A bit of background about publishing on the topic of #IdleNoMore: The first text addressing #IdleNoMore to hit the shelves was *The Winter We Danced*³ by the Kino-nda-niimi Collective, published by Arbeiter Ring Publishing (2014). It is an edited volume that contains many types of texts—editorials and articles, speeches, blog articles, creative pieces, and so on—that were written during #IdleNoMore. The second and at this moment the last was *#IdleNoMore and the Remaking of Canada* by Ken Coates, published by the University of Regina Press (2015).

There is a peculiar origin story to the book that Coates openly explains in his preface.

Apparently, early in 2013 the newly appointed director of the University of Regina Press, Bruce Walsh, visited Coates personally in Saskatoon (p.xv). During this visit, Walsh asked Coates the question: “If you could write one book [for the Press], what would it be about?” (p.xv). Coates told him “#IdleNoMore”. Coates goes on to explain in the preface to *#IdleNoMore* that he had been interested in the movement from the outset and at that point was following it extensively through mainstream media coverage. He was intrigued and confused about many aspects of the movement—what were its origins, the intent of its organizers, and what direction would it take? However, at that point in time he had never participated in any of the movement actions. His interest was genuine and academic. Within weeks of their conversation, Walsh had sent him a contract to produce the book within a year.

3 The back of the book reads : “*The Winter We Danced* is a vivid collection of writing, poetry, lyrics, art and images from the many diverse voices that make up the past, present, and future of the Idle No More movement. Calling for pathways into healthy, just, equitable and sustainable communities while drawing on a wide-ranging body of narratives, journalism, editorials and creative pieces, this collection consolidates some of the most powerful, creative and insightful moments from the winter we danced and gestures towards next steps in an on-going movement for justice and Indigenous self-determination.”

Coates accepted the contract and went on to address the subject matter of #IdleNoMore as a project of contemporary history. He candidly states that it is his “view of what happened”, based on his and his research assistants’ extensive review of social media, YouTube videos, and newspaper articles about #IdleNoMore (p.xvii). He readily admits that he watched from the sidelines and never participated in any of the organized events (p.xiv). Already in the preface I had begun to question why his “view of what happened” should matter to me or to Canadians at large—I was shocked by the casual way Walsh handed him the reins with the book deal.

The University of Regina Press editor entrusted Coates with writing the book on #IdleNoMore despite Coates having limited expertise in the area of research. Walsh likely recognized that Coates was in a position in his career to be able to take time out to write and could invoke a platform for a readership because of his standing. Further, Walsh might have sensed that if they could get a text out before the close of the movement it would carry a particular weight, being the first analysis of the social movement underway. Perhaps it seemed like a good marketing strategy from the position of the Press: a book on the movement would certainly sell to popular and academic audiences.

However, to feel comfortable about the origin of this book, I would have needed to hear a different story. I would need to hear about how Walsh was scratching his head about who could carry forward the idea of a text on #IdleNoMore, recognizing its significance for the Press and for Canada; I would need to hear that Walsh recognized the political platform he had at his disposal with an academic publishing press. I would have wanted to know that Walsh and Coates considered critically and rationally what Coates could bring to the analysis from his particular place in time and space; I would have wanted to know that they assessed the pros and cons of giving the contract to Coates over any number of capable Indigenous social science and humanities scholars. Maybe a scholar who was academically and personally better positioned to place #IdleNoMore within the ongoing history of creative Indigenous resistance to colonial norms and practices. Someone, ideally, who could have told the story of #IdleNoMore with nuance and a deep understanding of where it came from and

to where it might lead. I want to know that they thought about these things and decided Coates was the very best candidate for the job and most deserving of the opportunity and platform. I don't see this evidence. Further, I see evidence to suggest he was not an ideal candidate at all.

After reading the book I looked for evidence suggesting his qualifications to write on this topic. Instead of finding supportive evidence, I found an essay published by Crystal Fraser and Ian Mosby in April 2015 where the authors critique an opinion piece Coates published under the title "Second Thoughts About Residential Schools" (2014). In this short essay, Coates had argued that depictions of residential schools are too negative. Coates wrote in the piece that: "The focus on the negative ... while clearly justified in many personal and community instances, leaves the country with a distorted view of Indigenous realities" (quoted in Fraser and Mosby 2015).

This was the year before the publication of the final report from Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation* (2015) named Canada's actions around residential schools to be indicative of cultural genocide. In the best case scenario, Coates did not know any better. In which case, he was not making use of the copious amounts of material available before the Commission's publication that referred to the systemic failure of the schools to provide safe, quality education. Worst case scenario, he actually does not believe the historical evidence to support the notion that the systemic deprivation of Indigenous children and their families of their basic human rights constitutes a negative situation we should all know more about. He chose in 2014 to tell a story about residential schools that denied Indigenous peoples' overwhelmingly negative account of the schools. He told history to meet a particular argumentative agenda. Maybe we all do. But maybe scholars who have a history of denying and distorting Indigenous voices and perspectives should not be given platforms to write about critically important Indigenous topics.

Fraser and Mosby (2015) argue in the conclusion to their essay that:

As historians of a new generation, we encourage our academic colleagues to consider their own status not only as scholars writing from a position of privilege, but as Canadians living in a country whose past and present has been fundamentally shaped by settler colonialism and dispossession. And the fact that most of the overwhelmingly white, settler community of Canadian historians have benefited directly, and in profound ways, from Canada's history of settler colonialism means that we need to be especially careful to avoid speaking for Indigenous peoples or passing judgement about which stories are worth telling.

I agree with these scholars. We need to be especially careful about issues of representation when it comes to telling Indigenous stories. Like Fraser and Mosby, I believe it is significant that a settler scholar is telling this Indigenous-centred story. It is striking that a settler with a record of denying history about residential schools was tasked with writing about the resurgence of Indigenous voice.

Was he aware that he and Walsh were both flexing their own privilege and power as they decided behind closed doors to hand Coates this platform above any other possible writer? This book on #IdleNoMore was a feather in the cap for the Press and Coates—but how did it interface with the movement or its objectives?

Think: Coates has literally taken the name of the movement as the title of his book. The cover is beautifully designed and visually stunning with a huge red hashtag symbol against a white background and an image of a drum held in a fist.⁴ The symbolism of the imagery capitalizes on images used throughout #IdleNoMore. He is capitalizing on the interest and intrigue that exists in the public around the movement.

I'm concerned with the space this book takes up. Now Coates has written the book on #IdleNoMore, how will Canadian publishing houses respond when they receive manuscripts about the movement? Writers and scholars who were participating whole-heartedly in the movement as it happened did not have time to research their own movement—they were

⁴ See <http://uofrpress.ca/publications/IdleNoMore-and-the-Remaking-of-Canada> (last accessed 19 April 2017).

shooting off press releases and blog posts. I think I am correct to worry that other major publishers are going to hesitate before publishing a second or third text that will compete with this one for readership and market space.

Of the two books currently published on the movement, the University of Regina also has a considerable advantage to Arbeiter Ring in terms of marketing budgets and reach in Canadian book markets. If Coates believes that settler Canadians were failing when they “missed the point” of the movement, what does it mean that he is now competing for shelf space with the only book that is a platform for the movement? I worry that in comparison *The Winter We Danced* would be considered too niche—*#IdleNoMore* is visually flashier, easier to digest for a reader without background, and is written with one easily-followed narrative voice. One could be construed as the easier read—the other undoubtedly allows for a fuller and more nuanced impression of the movement. Moreover, *The Winter We Danced* reproduces many diverse ideas and the words of many people. The possible meanings of *#IdleNoMore* are necessarily constrained by being part of one person’s narrative arc.

There is no reason why there cannot be a diversity of books written on the topic by a diversity of people. Yet, there are financial and pragmatic reasons where they may not be others—at the time of my writing in 2017 there are no others.

A feature point of *#IdleNoMore* that Coates iterates very clearly is that one of the most mystifying parts of the movement for settler peoples was that it was not for them. It was by and for Indigenous peoples and specifically for Métis, Inuit and status and non-status First Nations peoples. His book, however, was by a settler person and is written for settler peoples—to help “mystified” settlers understand the movement. There was a huge opportunity lost here for the University of Regina Press to respond to *#IdleNoMore*’s agenda and create a platform for Indigenous voices of analysis. It is extremely predictable that a non-Indigenous, non-participant with a different disciplinary background would be privately recruited, quickly commissioned and handed the resources to write the very first analytic book on the movement. It is nonetheless disappointing that it happened.

There is nothing amiss whatsoever, in theory, with any scholar weighing in on any particular topic. Settlers have to weigh in on these issues—colonialism is, after all, a settler problem—but not at the expense of space and resources for platforms that centre Indigenous voices and perspectives. Creating platforms does not happen by accident. We are denying history if we don't recognize that right now what we desperately need in Canada—in order for settlers to stop missing the point—is more content and more platforms that centre Indigenous experiences and voices.

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