

Truth and Indignation: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the trc's structural limitations and how it produces knowledge, Niezen argues, will provide deeper insight into the residential school system and contemporary abuses of power.

FULL TEXT

Truth and Indignation: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools Ronald Niezen Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. 173 pp. \$26.95 paper.

The struggle to articulate Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (trc) has seen varying degrees of success since the commission was established in the 2006 Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement. In 2008, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation published *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools*, which calls for closer attention to the concepts of "truth" and "reconciliation" as they existed in relation to Canadian and Indigenous contexts. Now, as the commission draws to a close, one of the most nuanced, penetrating, and sometimes disquieting examples of such scholarship has appeared in Ronald Niezen's *Truth and Indignation*.

Niezen, a professor of law at McGill University, clearly develops his argument through extensive research conducted at national trc events and through interviews with Oblates, both priests and nuns: this is a work about what is "sayable" within the discursive structure of the trc and how that structure has come to exist and persist. For Niezen, Canada's victimcentred trc produces a limited space in which testimony regarding the residential schools can be heard and received. This is not to say that the "T" in trc is a misnomer but, rather, that some kinds of truths work to overshadow others. "The events of the trc," Niezen writes, "are not just sites for gathering knowledge; they are also active in producing it" (103).

For instance, the commission focuses on the abuse of children, which has obvious visceral and affective qualities for the speakers and the audience. While child abuse in residential schools certainly must be addressed, it overshadows other important political issues, such as land claims. This type of elision functions on a smaller scale as well: as stories of egregious abuse rise to the surface of the trc, via reporting and selected editing of survivor testimony, some survivors feel that their own stories are not worthy of public testimony. Understanding the trc's structural limitations and how it produces knowledge, Niezen argues, will provide deeper insight into the residential school system and contemporary abuses of power.

This study is a welcome corrective to the too common insistence (usually coming from the liberal settler population) that Canada's trc will finally unveil the "Truth" of Canada's residential schools and shed light on "a dark chapter in Canadian history." Of course, in order to take his thesis to its conclusion, Niezen must delve into the issues that many are unready or unwilling to address, which is what makes this text so powerful and challenging. As Niezen demonstrates, if there are any truths without anyplace in the current trc discourse, it is testimony from priests and nuns who insist (1) that Indigenous children were in fact happy at the schools at which they worked

and (2) that they, too, have been injured by these events.

The testimony that Niezen provides from his interviews with priests and nuns speaking to these points is, without a doubt, the most contentious element of this book, and he does well to illustrate how and why that is so. Well after I had finished reading I found that a number of resonant questions lurked in my mind as I wrote this review: How do we in fact reconcile the need to know the capital "T" Truth of residential schools with the fact that this Truth invites stories and testimony that many survivors find repelling? Is this Truth necessary if it comes at the expense of the well-being of survivors and their families? Or is it yet another iteration of the colonial drive to know, whatever the costs may be? Niezen opens up these questions with care and precision, most particularly, I think, in his consideration of "indignation" and the survivor's right to be disgusted by and to reject the perpetrator's narrative. At times I found myself wishing that Niezen's own indignation had found its way into his analysis of Oblate testimony; however, even if the author sometimes applies them with too light a touch, the tools for expressing this indignation are certainly there for the reader to take up and apply.

That being said, for those of us who find ourselves confronted by the scope and impact of the Canadian trc, Truth and Indignation is indispensable in that it offers a clear blueprint for determining the borders and boundaries of that commission. Niezen advocates not only for a victim-centred analysis of the trc but also for an analysis directed at the peripheries of trc testimony - analysis that incorporates those who do not make the news or the trc "highlight reel." "We can start [future work]" he writes, "with narratives given by those who are categorically excluded from the highlight reels, the stroke victims, the schizophrenic, the mute-fromgrief, those who only make noises in a struggle to communicate" (149). Truth and Indignation stands as a powerful, evocative example of this kind of trc ethnography and is vital reading for anyone - both Indigenous and nonIndigenous - who wants to better understand the trc.

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