

***Truth and Indignation: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools.*** By Ronald Niezen. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. Pp. 273. Paper CDN\$ 24.95.

For over 150 years nearly 150 000 indigenous children were taken from their families and incarcerated in Canada's 'residential schools' wherein they were physically, sexually and emotionally abused, malnourished, and subject to a genocidal process of 'civilization'. After the revelations of the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the hard work of thousands of claimants, and the personal triumph of Assembly of First Nations Chief Phil Fontaine, in 2006 the Canadian state, churches and indigenous First Nations agreed to a settlement over a billion dollars. Involving two compensation programmes, a prime ministerial apology (added later), a variety of memorials and education programmes, the settlement is capped by a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), through which, together, state and church would rectify their brutal treatment of Canada's indigenous peoples.

Such is the broadly accepted narrative of the TRC's origin and purpose. But this monograph by Ronald Niezen is a work of critical scholarship. Niezen draws our attention to the ways by which that broad narrative of wrongdoing and repentance is created and sustained, how it is periodically disrupted, and how it works to exclude certain components of this history [i.e. exclude what?]. Niezen's main topic are the processes that constitute the TRC. The focus, Niezen tells the reader, is 'ideographic', attempting to give an account of the values, ideas, concepts and purposes through which rectification operates (7).

There is much already written on the background and operation of Canada's residential institutions and Niezen rightly restricts his discussion to the minimum needed to introduce the subject. He spends some time describing the settlement process from which the TRC emerged and outlines the redress measures that both anticipated and accompanied the TRC, particularly the financial compensation programmes. That discussion pays particular attention to how those programmes are shaping who is seen as an appropriate survivor.

For example, Niezen describes how the compensation programmes' contact with alleged perpetrators of abuse affects indigenous communities. In small communities, where generations of residential school survivors live a double-life of both survivor and perpetrator, the private process(?) of accusation and denial provides a largely unseen background to the public work of the TRC. The grand narrative of abuse by (white) church officials makes it difficult for the TRC to acknowledge--publicly--that abuse was also carried out by indigenous students; the reductive nature of the TRC report demands instead an overly simplified categorization of victim/survivors and perpetrators. But residential schools are part of the causal matrix within a large number of difficult and messy human lives that fail to fall into either of these categories and, too often, traverse both. Intergenerational harm is a prominent TRC theme, but best dealt with at the abstract level. The narrative is disrupted, even censored, when indigenous

perpetrators occupy the microphone or former students and church officials say that the schools benefited indigenous individuals and communities.

In terms of the TRC itself, Niezen considers the processes through which representation and imitation shapes the process of testifying. Niezen argues that many of the TRC's public forums operate according to popular understandings of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in terms of survivor accounts. The standard model assumes that testimony will be emotionally harrowing for both the testifier and the audience (61-62). As a result, those whose experiences are not sufficiently traumatic may feel they have nothing valuable to share. The TRC works as a repository for testimonies of trauma and, beyond the abstract work of archiving and recording, it has invented physical traditions of deposition. For example, the book has a beautiful photograph of a bentwood box on the front cover.<sup>1</sup> Depicting a crying grandmother with fingers broken through abuse, the box was commissioned by the TRC and converted into a reverential object used for 'rituals of deposition' involving mementos by and of survivors (67). Similarly, the facial tissues used for crying by audiences and testifiers are collected in baskets before being deposited and ceremonially burnt in the 'sacred fire' (65). These rituals of deposition reflect the imagined work of testifying as both the placing of personal traumatic truth 'on the record' for historical reproduction and analysis and traumatic catharsis. Niezen argues that such rituals shift testimony beyond propositional truth. The meaning of the tears and the depiction of the broken-finger survivor is one that cannot be contested. TRC ritual 'brackets the testimony within a kind of ontological invulnerability' (67).

But only some things are to be deposited and one of the book's themes is 'exclusion'. The excluded range across both people and ideas and include: positive memories of, or justifications for, the residential schools (91-92); indigenous complicity in the schools (54, 93); survivors of 'day schools' (74); church officials (unless repentant) (52); federal government representatives (78); survivors without a sufficiently traumatic story (95); survivors with mental illnesses (48); survivors without an uplifting narrative conclusion of healing and redemption (98-99). Niezen attends to these exclusions so as to demonstrate how the TRC is not a passive mirror, but an active 'schema' of ideas, expectations and performative rituals (112), but one that can hardly be considered inclusive of the community in its entirety.

Niezen pays particular attention to the absence of those state and church officials who were the primary operators of the residential schools. The TRC has failed to connect with the people who worked in and managed the schools. Whilst high-ranking officials offer platitudinous speeches, they are not 'full' participants. In a wonderful anecdote, Niezen describes the participation of Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, John Duncan. Duncan did not hold government office until 2008 and has no personal involvement in the residential schools system. Nevertheless, Duncan's speech claims that, "I know about your culture. I know about your pain", then, Niezen dryly remarks, 'he left early to catch a plane' (78), and the absence of a meaningful connection with or contribution of employees and managers of the schools – i.e. perpetrators -- continues.

One of the main contributions this book makes is to record the absence of data provided from the standpoint of these 'perpetrator group' members. Niezen bases part of the book on interviews with church members and he returns regularly to the perspective of those church officials. These men and women, many now elders, had long understood themselves to be members of a religious and social establishment. Throughout their careers, they worked for human betterment, both material and spiritual, and were esteemed as leaders in their communities. Then the scandal of systemic abuse (and associated cover-ups) in Canada and around the world, together with the secularization of both politics and society, meant that these men and women lost the public sources of respect they once could rely upon. Now, their membership in a religious order is an object of derision, if not suspicion, in many circles (94). They watch a history being written by and for the TRC that depicts them as abusers, racists and *genocidaires*. History is clearly not on their side and Niezen is drawn to their stories and the task of representing their increasingly marginalized worldviews (136-142).

The final chapter offers a short reflection on the role of reconciliation. It is, after all, a book about a Truth and *Reconciliation* Commission and Niezen reflects upon some of the possible ways survivors might be reconciled, with what and with whom. That reflection leads into a broader meditation upon what the TRC encompasses and excludes, for whom its activities are produced, and how it fits into the larger dynamics of indigenous politics. Niezen concludes with the familiar claim that the TRC facilitates a 'politics(?) of distraction' wherein the remedy of past wrongdoing 'distracts public attention from ongoing forms of neglect and active sources of indignation for which the state is responsible' (155).

This well-written and thoughtful study provides a timely, critical perspective on the TRC. In so doing, it fits in well with other critical writing on state redress that attends to the limits and problems associated with the practice. And that project is perfectly good and right, as far as it goes. But the reader might wonder whether there is any larger justification for the practice of state redress as it stands. Niezen tells the reader that the TRC is a sort of stage show of 'national-scale persuasion' that uses 'spectacular suffering' for 'public consumption' (155). That is perhaps a bit unfair, not only to the TRC, but also to Niezen's own work. Indeed, one might say, that by paying so careful attention to the limits of rectificatory practice, Niezen also demonstrates the limits of critical analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> The photo is viewable on the publisher's [website](#).