

Power through Testimony: Reframing Residential Schools in the Age of Reconciliation edited by Brieg Capitaine and Karine Vanthuyne

Sean Carleton

Volume 110, Number 2, Fall 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1053524ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1053524ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Carleton, S. (2018). Review of [*Power through Testimony: Reframing Residential Schools in the Age of Reconciliation* edited by Brieg Capitaine and Karine Vanthuyne]. *Ontario History*, 110(2), 252–254. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1053524ar>

is in the authors' mindset absolutely essential if we are to see a post-capitalist future: "A politics of class that speaks directly to the betterment of humanity through insistence that the expropriated are as one in their ultimate needs has never been more necessary" (21).

All in all, this is a fantastic project, and while many of the particular issues covered in the book have been addressed by other scholars, the distinct lens surrounding this manuscript gives a unique spin to how those events are examined and those stories are told. Additionally, the book's coverage of the recent past offers a fresh take on campaigns, policies, and developments which may have been studied in other disciplines, but which are only just now falling into the historian's gaze. It would not be a gamble to say that this book's final section, which focuses largely on the efforts of OCAP over the past 35 years, will be a formative read for young scholars looking to study social and political movements in

the information age.

A Rebellious History is a must-read for anyone interested in the theoretical issues employed in the book, as well as anyone with a curiosity in the history of the Canadian working class, or in a history of Toronto that includes an oft-understudied population. The sheer length of the book may limit its accessibility to some readers beyond core academic spaces, but the conviction and passion of the book offers a style that is rigorous in its research, yet aimed at readers who want to change the world, and not merely interpret it. Such a project—either as a whole or in parts—should be on the reading list for activists, trade unionists, students, educators, civil servants, and any politician even half-heartedly claiming to represent the interests of the poor, the working class, or progressive causes more generally.

Christo Aivalis
Department of History,
University of Toronto

Power through Testimony
Reframing Residential Schools in the Age of Reconciliation

Edited by Brieg Capitaine and Karine Vanthuyne

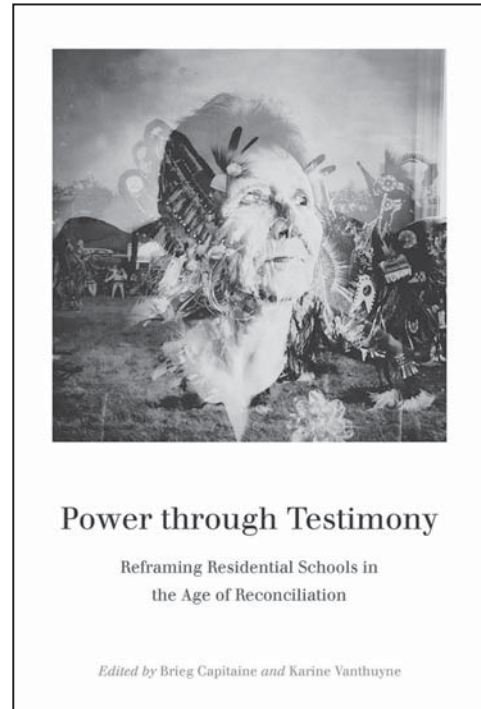
Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017. 252 pages. \$32.95 paperback. ISBN 9780774833905. (www.ubcpress.ca)

The ink had barely dried on the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) when, in March 2017, Conservative Senator Lynn Beyak from Northern Ontario publicly criticized its findings and defended Canada's Indian Residential Schools as being "well-intentioned." Instead of dwelling on horrific incidences of abuse and neglect in the schools, Beyak insisted that Canadians

focus on all the "good" residential schools accomplished in terms of assimilating Indigenous children into Canadian society. When asked by reporters if she had even read the TRC's report, Beyak responded by saying, "I don't need anymore education." As a result of her comments, Beyak was dismissed from all senate committees and kicked out of the Conservative caucus; however, she is still a senator and she is re-

fusing to apologize for her remarks. Instead, Beyak is doubling down on her attempts to undermine the findings of the TRC and minimize the intergenerational trauma caused by residential schooling. In light of Beyak's actions, it is important for Canadians to familiarize themselves with the work of the TRC and to better understand and critically evaluate its contributions. A new collection of essays edited by Brieg Capitaine and Karine Vanthuyne, *Power through Testimony: Reframing Residential Schools in the Age of Reconciliation*, helps with this important task by examining the TRC and reflecting on how residential school history is currently being "remembered and restored" in Canada (7).

Power through Testimony contains a forward by Ronald Niezen, an introduction by the editors, an epilogue by Charles R. Menzies, and nine core chapters by various scholars and writers which explore different facets of TRC, residential school history, and reconciliation efforts in the wake of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) and the TRC process that concluded in 2015. In the introduction, Capitaine and Vanthuyne explain that the collection aims to outline how different "actors involved in the implementation of the Settlement Agreement, and the TRC in particular, have produced a new story about the Indian residential school system and how this symbolic action has succeeded, or not, in forging new attitudes and practices toward Indigenous peoples" (8). On the whole, the collection interrogates the TRC as a contested site, as a collector *and* producer of knowledge about residential school histories. The collection's overall message is that though the TRC has various limitations it has opened important spaces for memory-making and decolonizing dialogue in Canada. Nevertheless, the book makes clear that much



work remains in ensuring that the history of residential schooling is not forgotten and that the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism are confronted to create better relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada.

The essays of *Power through Testimony* are divided into three parts. Part 1 explores the ways in which residential school history and the work of the TRC has been represented and understood by different segments of society. Historians will be particularly interested in Eric Woods' essay that traces the trajectory of dominant representations of the schools from humanitarian institutions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to sites of genocide in the contemporary context. Janice Cindy Gaudet and Laurence Martin explain how Indigenous communities have understood the schools and Brieg Capitaine focuses on how the TRC was perceived by mainstream

Canadian society. Part 2 looks specifically at the TRC hearings and how different carrier groups, specifically Indigenous peoples, played a role in—or were excluded from—shaping the meaning and collective memory of residential schooling (Arie Molema, Katherine Vanthuyne). Part 3 examines how former school staff and church organizations responded to the TRC and calls to reconciliation in supportive yet self-serving ways (Jula Hughes and Cheryle Gaver). One thing that links the essays together is the authors' attempts to show how the TRC helped craft and curate a collective memory of residential schooling that proved useful for Indigenous peoples to leverage political demands for recognition and redress. Yet, many of the essays also acknowledge Indigenous critiques of recognition (Coulthard, 2014) and reconciliation (Alfred, 2009; Simpson, 2011) and stress the need to demand more radical strategies for Indigenous resurgence and decolonization.

Power through Testimony offers an important contribution to discussions about residential school history and the politics of truth and reconciliation in Canada. One of the collection's key limitations, however, is an overemphasis on the "symbolic dimension" (16) of the TRC which is mostly divorced from the material, socio-political context of Canada's capitalist settler society today. In this vein, the majority of the essays do not offer a sustained critique of the state and its role in deliberately circumscribing the IRSSA and the work of the TRC. Indeed, many essays argue that residential school history needs to be con-

nected to the wider matrix of settler colonial policies of dispossession, but the collection as a whole offers a rather shallow understanding of how the state seeks to address residential school history in narrow ways that fundamentally protect the power, privilege, and profit of ongoing colonial dispossession. Thus, it is fair to call attention to the limitations of the IRSSA and TRC, but critiques must more clearly take into account the role of the state in designing those very limitations for purposes of colonial preservation. At the very least, the collection could have grappled more directly with the role of the state as a gatekeeper of information in the TRC process. In this way, the TRC can still be understood (and critiqued) as a producer of knowledge about residential schools, but the government's central role in determining what is knowable could be better illustrated, a point recently made clear by the state's withholding of sensitive documents in the case of the St. Anne's Indian residential school in Ontario.

Overall, *Power through Testimony* offers useful reflections of residential school history and the ways in which the TRC sought to collect and produce knowledge to support reconciliation efforts. Hopefully the collection can spark new conversations in various fields about the ways in which residential school history is remembered and restoried for future generations.

Sean Carleton

Assistant Professor, Department of General Education, Mount Royal University