

Review: *What We Learned: Two Generations Reflect on Tsimshian Education and the Day Schools.*

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Raptis, Helen with members of the Tsimshian Nation. *What We Learned: Two Generations Reflect on Tsimshian Education and the Day Schools.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press. 207 pages. ISBN 978-0-7748-3019-5

Helen Raptis' book, written in collaboration with her Tsimshian nation interlocutors, is a thoughtful, reflexive documentary and oral history concerning the educational experiences of two generations of Indigenous students on the northwest coast of lands claimed by Canada. From the 1930s to the 1970s, both generations attended day schools run by the Methodist Church and the colonial public school system (in addition, two individuals attended a residential school). Their varied experiences with these schools and their relationships with the teachers there are at the heart of this book. At the same time, Raptis and her collaborators describe what these two generations learned outside of school, often informally, with parents, grandparents and other community members (p.54-55). Hence, when the title, drafted by the participants in the study (p.22), describes "what we learned", this refers both to colonial schooling and Tsimshian education in the broad sense of "spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical" learning in the natural settings of everyday life (p.55; see also p.133). If Raptis' inquiry began with the discovery of a 1947 list of Tsimshian students in an Indian Day school (p.6), her research thus transformed into a broader inquiry around two generations of learning, as described by twelve former students from the Tsimshian nation.

Raptis found extensive written records by colonial officials concerning the Indian Day School, a "meticulous recordkeeping" that she suggests is symptomatic of the routine, intensive surveillance of Indigenous peoples by the colonial state (p.7). Although strikingly partial, in both senses of the word, these written sources nonetheless offer some descriptive insight. In operation from 1897 to 1947, the Indian Day School had a high turnover of teachers, due to poor wages, poor housing, isolation and lack of cultural familiarity with Indigenous students (p.28, p.130). Working conditions were made more difficult by the clumsy interventions of the Methodist Church and teaching inspectors, and further exacerbated by the everyday negligence of the federal government (p.130), content to "outsource" the day to day running of the school to the Church (p.41). With some important exceptions, officials and teachers describe poor schooling performances, notably due to absenteeism during seasonal

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subsistence labour. Yet, there are descriptions, too, of some successes, as defined by colonial officials, including the first Indigenous student in British Columbia to pass the high school entrance exam from an Indian Reserve Day School (p.47). If the overall narrative is one of consistent difficulties in finding and maintaining good teachers, Raptis is careful to emphasize the range of teacherly personalities, including those who stressed their students' accomplishments (p.43), (albeit perhaps for self-interested reasons of job security.)

Despite the challenges they faced, Raptis finds that many of the teachers who taught at Port Essington were "certified and experienced" (p.28). One, Mrs. Elizabeth Pogson, taught for twelve (interrupted) years from the 1930s onward (pp.45-48), including the first generation of Tsimshian students who collaborated in producing this book. An exception was the catastrophic appointment of the missionary Roy Vannatter, who was not certified as a teacher and had a known criminal record (p.131). He admitted to "sexual interference" with three boys at the school and was dismissed, after one year at the school from 1941-1942, on unrelated charges (p.50). As Raptis observes, this is a reminder that the better-known residential schools have not been the only sites of egregious abuse of Indigenous children, although she likewise cautions against overly-simplified narratives that suggest all residential schools were sites of abuse for all students (p.138). In 1947, the Indian Day School was permanently closed. The Tsimshian students were integrated into the local public Elementary School a few years before such de-segregated schooling was made officially possible through federal law (pp.51-52).

What these written, official colonial accounts do not provide is insight into how the students themselves experienced their formal schooling (p.132). In other words, the documentary evidence by colonial and religious actors is only part of the story, misleading in critical ways. As Raptis observes, such descriptions tend to suggest that history begins with the increasingly invasive colonial presence on Indigenous lands, especially from the 19th century onwards. This erases thousands of years of Indigenous history prior to the written accounts of the colonizers (p.35), a point made clear through a brief sketch of some of that history (pp.35-39). With respect to learning, specifically, colonial accounts imply that meaningful learning takes place in classrooms. This overlooks the ways that colonial schools were specifically conceived as sites of programmed "cultural loss (and) disconnection", that is, as sites of *unlearning* of Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing (p.63). Further, textual, colonial records do not describe the rich cosmologies, ontologies and epistemologies of Indigenous peoples, from their own perspectives (as Raptis seeks to do pp.35-39). Nor do they explain how learning changed and adapted over generations of Indigenous civilisation, including through resistance to colonialisation and resilience despite colonial violence and oppression. Finally, colonial accounts marginalize and even

erase Indigenous expertise concerning their own diverse histories, reproducing Indigenous parents and students as the voiceless objects of the authoritative, colonial gaze (p.13).

These arguments will be familiar to readers of Indigenous scholarship, for instance, the writings of Marie Battiste, among many others.¹ This literature is often neglected by non-Indigenous scholars in disciplines outside of Indigenous Studies, however, so that Raptis' mobilization of these insights is a useful introduction to those less familiar with this critical scholarship. Likewise, Raptis' decision to privilege the oral histories of twelve Tsimshian former students is a methodological choice rooted in Raptis' commitment to working in solidarity with Indigenous actors, including Indigenous scholars who are seeking to "decolonize methodology" as part of broad efforts to build respectful relationships against the traditions of objectification of Indigenous peoples that still prevail, in many cases, in the colonial academy.² Hence, Raptis' methodologies, developed in a dialogue with an extensive Indigenous scholarship and with the participants themselves, have epistemological but also political implications in the still-colonial context. In particular, Raptis' participatory approach to the generation and writing up of oral histories emphasizes the Tsimshian former students as authorities about their own learning experiences.

Indeed, the dual focus of the book, on both colonial and Tsimshian education and learning, was a direct outcome of a critique by Don Roberts Junior, the Kitsumkalum chief, who advised Raptis that her original intent, to focus on Tsimshian students' experiences at the Day School, was too narrow (p.22). Rather, he observed that it would be more in keeping with a Tsimshian worldview to consider the participants' lives holistically, over longer periods of time, and to consider Tsimshian learning and not only colonial schooling. Consequently, Raptis explains, she and her interlocutors situated their experiences, albeit briefly, within the context of five millennia-old human presence on the northwest coast (pp.35-39). Against this background, Raptis' twelve Tsimshian interlocutors recount and so author their life stories, with an emphasis on "how we learned". These narratives were then written up as transcripts and subsequently interpreted in manuscript form by Raptis (pp.25-26). The participants revised their own transcripts, as well as a draft of the book, each deciding what details were important to leave in or exclude from the published

¹ Battiste, M. (1998). Enabling the autumn seed: Toward a decolonized approach to Aboriginal knowledge, language, and education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 22(1), 16-27.

² See Linda Tuhiwai Smith's celebrated, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), among many others.

account (p.25). In this way, oral histories combine with a participatory, collaborative approach to develop new insights into colonial formal schooling and Tsimshian education.

What emerges are a range of experiences and dynamics, sometimes specific to individuals and sometimes more widely shared, if differing across the two generations. As one participant from the older generation, Mildred Roberts recalls, for example, she told at the Day School, “I must not speak Indian...Then 50. Then 75, 100 right up to 500 times” (p.63). Despite being punished for speaking Sm’algyax, Mildred Roberts remarks on some “really neat” aspects of school, including piano lessons, a Christmas concert and games during recess (p.62-63). Yet the experiences of schooling were often devastating. Harvey Wing describes being singled out by teachers for routine forms of harassment, including daily detention (for instance, p.92). Others describe regular and sometimes savage beatings (see p.64, p.70, p.74, p.84, p.105 for descriptions of some of these incidents). Many dropped out of school at early ages to escape both institutionalized and cruder expressions of racism. Nonetheless, in some cases, students like Clifford Bolton forged important, positive relationships with specific teachers despite the overall message from the residential school he attended that “our people...were inadequate” (p.89).

For both generations, especially the older generation, formal schooling failed to exhaust their understanding of their own learning experiences. Hence, one participant, Wally Miller speaks about learning how to fish from an uncle, including survival in sometimes life-threatening weather conditions (pp.71-72). Another, Carol Sam observed that she learned from her mother’s doing, as much as her words, including the duty to generosity with her own and others’ children (p.121). The early generation practiced canning and fishing, as well as learning the Sm’algyax language at home, suggestive of their still-intimate relationships with more traditional, if not unchanging, ways of learning. In contrast to such knowing through everyday experience and listening, the younger generation is more likely to stress formal schooling and its necessity in a colonial (white) world where competency is equated with formal educational credentials. This is true even while many in the more recent generation remain committed to reviving Tsimshian traditions (see chapter five, for instance, on the resurgence of traditions among the younger generation).

Overall, Raptis and her Tsimshian collaborators offer a rich, detailed history of learning across two generations of Tsimshian former students. We hear the individual voices of the twelve Tsimshian participants, a useful counterpart to persistent tendencies to present Indigenous peoples as monolithic blocs (p.24). Throughout, Raptis is forthright about the difficulties and complexities of seeking to produce research that fulfills a meaningful “dual accountability” to the academy and, most of all, to the Tsimshian participants (p.24). She draws on a

rich range of Indigenous scholarship, as well as the Tsimshian oral histories, in producing a nuanced account of learning that complicates the current focus on residential schools and that radically questions the equation of formal education with learning. In short, Raptis and her colleagues offer critical insights into how these twelve Tsimshian individuals learn life-long. Further, Raptis frankly explores the complexities of seeking to do ethical research as a white, non-Indigenous researcher in collaboration with Indigenous actors, given the radical inequalities of the still-colonial context. The result is a nuanced, self-reflexive and important contribution, at once substantively and methodologically.