

# **“Forget What Disney Tells You”: Redressing Popular Culture in Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers’ A Red Girl’s Reasoning**

Svetlana Seibel

Volume 46, Number 2, 2021

Indigenous Literary Arts of Truth and Redress  
Arts littéraires autochtones de vérité et de réparation

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091110ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1091110ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Seibel, S. (2021). “Forget What Disney Tells You”: Redressing Popular Culture in Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers’ A Red Girl’s Reasoning. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 46(2), 234–255.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1091110ar>

# “Forget What Disney Tells You”: Redressing Popular Culture in Elle-Máíjá Tailfeathers’ *A Red Girl’s Reasoning*

SVETLANA SEIBEL

redress (transitive verb): to set right  
— *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*

out of the horror, out of the muck, like  
troubled teeth and bone fragments  
their spirits gather and rise, and rise

all of our dead sisters lifted by those winged women  
well-versed in the protocols of the battlefields  
recognizing the existence of the battlefields, here

as along the highway of tears  
— Joanne Arnott (Métis), “She Is Riding”

## Introduction

DESCRIBING THE PREMISE of her short film *A Red Girl’s Reasoning*, released in 2012, Kainai and Sami filmmaker Elle-Máíjá Tailfeathers comments:

Our film is about a young First Nations woman who was failed by the justice system after surviving a brutal, racially-driven sexual assault. She decides to take justice into her own hands and becomes a motorcycle-riding, ass-kicking vigilante who takes on the attackers of other women who’ve suffered the same fate. Our film is neo-noir and graphic novel inspired and we just can’t wait to see a Native sista kick ass on-screen. (“A Hungry Crew”)

The film, unfolding in a dark urban setting, tells the story of Delia, an Indigenous vigilante who deals out private justice on privileged white men who perpetrate violence against Indigenous women without being held accountable by the Canadian penal system. As the plot picks up

speed, *A Red Girl's Reasoning* raises some of the toughest questions pertaining to the situation of Indigenous women in an ongoing colonial context. Sexual, physical, and structural violence against Indigenous women and the system's overwhelmingly inadequate response to it are at the heart of Tailfeathers' narrative and its critical exploration of contemporary settler colonial society, in Canada and indeed elsewhere. The film exposes the systemic causes of the staggering numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, highlighting the fact that "Violence against Indigenous women is an on-going crisis with roots deep in Canada's colonial history" (Hargreaves 1).

The structures that contribute to this crisis rest not only on institutions and legal systems but also on popular discourses that sexualize and trivialize Indigenous women, overwriting their humanity and their womanhood with colonial fantasies. In her book *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America*, Sarah Deer (Muskogee Creek Nation) notes that "rape in the lives of Native women is not an epidemic of recent, mysterious origin. Instead, rape is a fundamental result of colonialism, a history of violence reaching back centuries" (x). Janice Acoose/Misko-Kisikàwihkwè (Anishinaabekwe-Métis-Nehiowé) also points out the structural and discursive roots of violence against Indigenous women and the role of what she calls "the polemical stereotypical images" (39), perpetuated among other arenas in and through popular culture, that "foster dangerous cultural attitudes that affect human relations and inform institutional ideology" (39-40). In her groundbreaking book *Iskwewak — kah'ki yaw ni wahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princesses nor Easy Squaws*, Acoose names and deconstructs two of the most insidious of these negative tropes, tracing their genesis and their heavy impact on Indigenous women's lives. Cree-Métis scholar Kim Anderson also stresses the severity of the negative impact of "how Indigenous women in the Americas are stereotyped: as sexual temptresses, aligned with nature, savagely promiscuous and in need of salvation from the white man" (79). Anderson situates these tropes at the top of "the triangle of oppression" that visualizes the interdependence of dominant ideas, structures and systems, and individual behaviour that, taken together, lead to "low self-worth, violence, and sexual abuse" in the lives of Indigenous women (91, Figure 6.1).

In its ten minutes of screen time, *A Red Girl's Reasoning* confronts both institutional and popular practices, as well as the historical and discursive dimensions, on which violence against Indigenous women is

predicated. In doing so, it creates a (self-)referential framework within which the film moves for its duration, integrating and activating intertextual connections to classics of Indigenous women's literature as well as to genres and productions of popular culture in order to strengthen its message. The film's intertextual network structurally underscores the imperative of redress that is traceable throughout the film. In this article, I examine these intertextual aspects of *A Red Girl's Reasoning* and the role of popular culture as a formal, textual, and aesthetic point of reference in its narrative. In my view, the film engages with popular culture on several levels and in a variety of dynamics by textual, intertextual, and visual means. It does so both by criticizing the part that popular culture plays in creating and reinforcing negative representations of Indigenous women and by making use of certain pop cultural themes, genres, and aesthetics in order to reframe these narratives and create its own. These dynamics are at the centre of my analysis.

To perform such an analysis, it is necessary to consider the relationship between Indigenous representation and popular culture. Historically, this relationship was a troubled one to say the least, since popular culture served as one of the most powerful vehicles of dissemination of precisely those harmful tropes and ideas that the Indigenous scholars quoted above identify as the source of violence against Indigenous women. It is well recognized in current scholarship that popular genres such as the western, historical romance, and children's narratives across media have much to answer for in this regard. Although misusing Indigeneity through tropes that fed and fuelled the industry, until recently popular culture excluded any participation of Indigenous creators in its productions. To a great extent, this exclusion itself is based upon stereotypical expectations that work to limit Indigenous presence and futurity. In his book *Indians in Unexpected Places*, Dakota Sioux historian Philip Deloria unpacks the underlying assumptions that govern such expectations: "Those expectations have concerned, among other things, Native technological incapacity, natural proclivities towards violence and warfare, a lack of social development, distance from both popular and aesthetic culture, and an inability to engage a modern capitalist market economy" (230). All of this led to a situation in which Indigenous people were frequently the objects of the popular gaze but rarely the acknowledged subjects of popular representations. Deloria provides a critique of these discursive and institutional structures "by telling histories of Indian unexpectedness" (231), which

demonstrate that, contrary to popular assumptions based upon narratives of the “vanishing Indian,” Indigenous people have always actively engaged with all phenomena of any age, including modernity.

In recent years, Indigenous creators who claim popular culture as their field of influence have become ever more vocal; Indigenous popular culture is currently a vibrant and thriving artistic field that creates its own unique aesthetic and develops its political vision in line with contemporary Indigenous concerns. As Sonny Assu, a Kwakwaka'wakw interdisciplinary artist, puts it, “I too am a product of pop culture. I grew up in the age of mass media advertising, subliminal advertisements, and the stories/mythos of Saturday morning cartoons. I am able to combine my pop roots with my learned traditional Laich-kwil-tach heritage” (147). As an Indigenous artist of the popular, Assu interprets his engagement with popular culture through the lens of his Indigenous cultural heritage: “My work is the embodiment of Raven’s transformation, his ability to adapt,” he asserts (149). Such interpretations that acknowledge connections and demand participation, but on their own terms, are an integral part of Indigenous pop cultural poetics.

In her statement quoted at the beginning of this article, Tailfeathers also highlights pop cultural influences that play into the composition of her short film, naming neo-noir, graphic novels, and vigilante narratives as some of its relational points. *A Red Girl’s Reasoning* converses with these popular genres, as is evident in its aesthetics as well as its storyline. However, Tailfeathers engages with these genres from the perspective of an Indigenous creator, simultaneously utilizing, complicating, and questioning their generic conventions. Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon describes such a dynamic of generic engagement in relation to Indigenous futurisms: “Writers of Indigenous futurisms sometimes intentionally experiment with, sometimes intentionally dislodge, sometimes merely accompany, but invariably *change* the perimeters of sf. Liberated from the constraints of genre expectations, or what ‘serious’ Native authors are *supposed* to write, they have room to play with setting, character, and dialogue; to stretch boundaries . . .” (3). In my view, what Dillon postulates for science fiction and Indigenous futurisms is also true for other kinds of generic frameworks. In what follows, I trace how these dynamics become manifest in *A Red Girl’s Reasoning*, providing an interpretive analysis of the film informed by Indigenous (Literary) Studies scholarship as well as scholarship on popular culture.

As a woman of Russian-German descent based in Europe and a non-Indigenous scholar who works with Indigenous literatures, I am aware that the insights that I offer in these pages are necessarily limited by my position as a cultural outsider vis-à-vis Indigenous cultures of Turtle Island. I therefore rely heavily (and gratefully) on the published teachings provided by many Indigenous scholars and artists as well as on the work of settler and non-Indigenous scholars. I do not claim to speak authoritatively on Indigenous women and their experiences; rather, I understand this article as entering into a conversation from my own unique position and understanding. I bring to it a certain amount of insight from a prolonged and active engagement with popular culture and its critical potential in my personal and professional lives, and my fascination with Tailfeathers' film not only as a scholar but also as a member of its audience.

The plot of *A Red Girl's Reasoning* focuses on the character and story of Delia, the film's protagonist portrayed by Jessica Matten (Red River Métis-Cree). Delia is a vigilante who specializes in pursuing and punishing men who commit acts of violence against Indigenous women but whom the criminal justice system has failed to hold accountable. Based in an unidentified urban setting somewhere in Canada, Delia takes on cases of women whom she calls "clients," although she does not accept payment for her services, suggesting that what she does is work but not a job. After setting up this general framework, the episode that the film zooms in on is the case of Nelly (played by Tailfeathers herself), an Indigenous woman assaulted by a wealthy white man, Brian. Before turning to Delia, Nelly takes Brian to court, which rules him innocent, citing inconclusive evidence and Nelly's "high-risk lifestyle" as grounds for the ruling (02:28-02:42). When Delia opens the envelope handed to her by Nelly that contains Brian's pictures, she immediately recognizes him as the man who assaulted her seven years ago. In Delia's case as in Nelly's, the official judicial channels proved to be useless in redressing the wrongs that Brian had done, setting Delia on a path of vigilantism. The pictures show Brian as a well-groomed, obviously well-off man, implying much economic and social power in addition to the privileged subjectivity of a white man in a colonial society.

Taking on Nelly's case, Delia goes to a bar that Brian frequents; the bartender, also an Indigenous woman, knows of her vigilante identity and assists Delia, presumably not only in this case but also on a regular basis. Brian crudely tries to pick up Delia, who pretends to go along

with it and, with the bartender's help, spikes his drink while he is in the bathroom. She takes the unconscious Brian to a deserted backstreet, strips him to his underwear, ties him up in a Christ-like pose, and once he regains consciousness confronts him first about Nelly's assault and then about her own. Initially, Brian denies his involvement, but eventually he admits to it and attempts to persuade Delia to let him go, first with a bribe, then with tears and pleas, and finally with threats and insults. The film culminates as Delia drenches Brian in gasoline, puts a lit cigarette in his mouth, and rides away on her signature motorcycle.

### Not Your Princess: Redressing Disney<sup>1</sup>

Much of the main thrust of the plot and message of *A Red Girl's Reasoning* is condensed into the opening voiceover monologue with which Delia introduces herself and contextualizes the events that follow:

I've been on this war path for six long, lonely years. The white boys have been having their way with Indian girls since contact. Forget what Disney tells you — Pocahontas was twelve when she met John Smith. It's pretty little lies like this that hide the ugly truth. My clients come to me with their requests for justice when the justice system fails them. This business of revenge is both a calling and a curse. (00:57-01:37)

In her voiceover narration, Delia explicitly links sexual violence against Indigenous women to the history of colonialism, not only by directly mentioning contact, but also by invoking the sugary, romanticized version of the story of Pocahontas and Smith, a made-up, ahistorical romance that became mythologized both in the colonial narrative and in the popular imagination. As Heike Paul notes, the story of Pocahontas as told by colonial sources “for a long time has been considered the first love story of the ‘new world’ and thus paradigmatic for casting intercultural relations in the early colonial history of the Americas as harmonious and peaceful” (89). Today the story has lost none of its potency: “After four hundred years, this story continues to circulate as evidence of Indigenous women's willing subservience to white men” (Hargreaves 179). This romantic colonial fantasy seeps into popular iconography, among other outlets, and to this day is catered to by the so-called Indian Princess or Pocahottie Halloween and carnival costumes that put scantily clad female bodies on display while codifying them as “Indian.” Jessica Deer (Kanien'keha:ka) notes that “Not only do these costumes

paint all Indigenous people with the same Spaghetti-Western brush but . . . many of them also objectify, victimize, and romanticize Indigenous women and girls as exotic other” (61). Of these visual politics, sexual violence is the next step.

Of all contemporary pop cultural productions that cast the story of Pocahontas in a romantic light, arguably none has as much cultural weight as Disney’s by now classic animated feature film *Pocahontas* (1995), and thus it is no wonder that *A Red Girl’s Reasoning* takes issue with this particular production at the beginning of its narrative. The visual imaginary of Disney’s *Pocahontas* is so familiar that a simple mentioning of it in Tailfeathers’ film is enough to achieve a striking contrast by juxtaposing it with the visual representation of Delia and her surroundings: leather jacket, low-rise pants and boots instead of buckskin dress; urban jungle instead of pristine forest; and instead of a romance with a blond colonialist, Delia is shown smashing her boot into the crotch of a white hoodlum who attacked her with a knife earlier.

It becomes clear early on that the film is not only addressing the topic of violence against Indigenous women but also engaging in confronting and dismantling related sexualized stereotypical representations of Indigenous women in popular culture, including popular (mis)representations of the historical figure of Pocahontas and the notion of “her apparent romantic interest in various Englishmen” (Paul 90). If viewed as a matrilineal historical progression between Indigenous women, however, the connection between Pocahontas and Delia that the film establishes might serve to demonstrate comparatively what four hundred years of colonial patriarchy and silencing have espoused: the story of Pocahontas is “appropriated by contemporaries” — all of them white men — for their own purposes; testimony from Delia (and Nelly) is disregarded as untrustworthy by a biased settler colonial courtroom (Paul 89).

These intertextual references in the film are thus especially intent on deconstructing the myth of the apolitical colonial romance, or “the myth of transatlantic love,” to use Paul’s term (89). This is evident both in the evocation of the short story “A Red Girl’s Reasoning” by E. Pauline Johnson Tekahionwake in its title, to which I will return later in the article, and in its mention of Disney’s version of the story of Pocahontas and Smith. By referencing Disney’s *Pocahontas* in such a way, Tailfeathers criticizes the romanticization and depoliticization of the narrative of contact-turned-conquest that romantic renderings of the



story of Pocahontas and Smith perpetuate. Her film sets itself in opposition to Disney's narrative, which Delia calls "pretty little lies," to expose "the ugly truth" that they conceal: *A Red Girl's Reasoning* reconfigures the myth of the colonial romance by exposing colonially sanctioned sexual exploitation of Indigenous women that is its consequence. As Chris Finley writes, "These images of Native women equate the Native female body with the conquest of land in the 'New World.' In other words, the conflation of the 'New World' with Native women's bodies presents Native women's heterosexual desire for white male settlers as justifying conquest and the settlement of the land by non-Natives" (34). By foregrounding the colonizing nature of the story of the colonial romance that Finley stresses, Tailfeathers forcefully brings politics back into the equation, exposing links between sexualized versions of the story of Pocahontas and the colonial occupation of Indigenous lands. Dismantling the romantic legend of Pocahontas and Smith, Tailfeathers substitutes it with a contemporary Indigenous-authored legend of women's fight against colonial violence.

Tailfeathers' film revises the story of Pocahontas and Smith by juxtaposing it against the story of Delia and Brian. This becomes especially obvious when *A Red Girl's Reasoning* and Disney's *Pocahontas* are read against each other. In the following analysis, I employ the methodological tool of a dialogical reading, placing Disney's *Pocahontas* and Tailfeathers' *A Red Girl's Reasoning* in conversation with each other in order to understand better the latter's critical and meaning-making strategies.

In Disney's animated film, the sequence that shows the first meeting of Pocahontas and Smith consists of three basic parts. In the first part, there is a scene during which Pocahontas and Smith look intensely at one another in complete silence for a relatively long time (29:18-30:10). Underscored by romantic music and the rushing water of a waterfall, the scene communicates their growing admiration for each other. The scene starts with Smith pointing his rifle at Pocahontas and then gradually putting it down. With wavering mist, Pocahontas's billowing hair, Smith's half-open mouth, and close-ups of both characters' faces and eyes, the scene establishes a silent emotional connection between the two. In the second part, when Smith attempts to approach Pocahontas, she runs away, and he pursues her (30:10-30:25). In the third part, he catches up with her and introduces himself; Pocahontas, who initially addressed him in Powhatan (Virginian Algonquin), through "listening

with her heart,” not only suddenly understands and accepts him but also miraculously begins to speak English on the spot (30:25-31:58).

Whereas Disney heavily romanticizes the first meeting between Pocahontas and John Smith and downplays its initial violence when Smith attacks Pocahontas with a rifle, the encounter between Delia and Brian in *A Red Girl's Reasoning* is dramatized as a crude pick-up attempt. The prolonged silence of Pocahontas in the Disney production is used as a device to underline dramatically the striking effect that Pocahontas has on Smith's imagination, and vice versa, as well as the more practical issue of her not speaking Smith's language — yet. The lack of dialogue for such a long stretch of screen time produces an effect that is striking and commands attention. Pocahontas' silence is proud and stoic, and coloured by the stereotype of the “noble savage,” whereas Smith's silence is both stricken and patronizingly benevolent — he is trying not to scare her off.

The first on-screen meeting of Delia and Brian is also marked by a long silence that carries a meaning of its own. In this case, however, the silence is one-sided: whereas Brian starts talking to Delia the moment that she enters the scene, the only two words that she utters for the duration of the scene are directed at the bartender: “Whisky. Neat” (03:31-03:33). Delia's silence is promptly ridiculed by Brian with a snide remark: “Uh, a strong, silent type” (03:46-03:50). This comment immediately unveils not only his lack of basic respect but also his propensity to view women as “types” rather than persons while he dispassionately arranges them into his own taxonomy of abuse. Whereas the silence in *Pocahontas* is mutual and codified as respectful and romantic, *A Red Girl's Reasoning* uses silence to expose Brian's predatory and entitled ways. In addition, what Brian fails to notice is that Delia is silent only verbally. Although she refuses to say a single word to him throughout the scene, she and the bartender maintain constant non-verbal communication through mimic, gesture, and eye contact. All that he can see are two potential victims while they are agreeing on and putting in motion a plan that not only thwarts his short-term plans for Delia but also ultimately neutralizes him as a threat to Indigenous women altogether. His self-centred disposition and his sense of being untouchable prevent Brian from noticing these signs, however.

As he goes through the motions of his seduction ritual, Brian ends up putting his lips very close to Delia's ear; the camera zooms in for an extreme close-up of his mouth almost touching her hair as he whispers

“Don’t disappear. Maybe I’ll buy you a drink” (04:00-04:03). Employed in such a way, the phrase “Don’t disappear” carries a great deal of subtext. On the one hand, it echoes a similar phrase that Smith directs at Pocahontas in the Disney film. During the first meeting sequence, when Smith catches up with the fleeing Pocahontas shortly after she jumps into a canoe intent on paddling off, he calls after her “Don’t run off. It’s all right. I’m not gonna hurt you” (30:30-30:36). The effect, of course, is quite different from Tailfeathers’ film: Pocahontas does indeed stop, accepts Smith’s outstretched hand, and steps onto the shore next to Smith, where they continue to hold hands until the end of the scene. Again, his intentions are presented as benevolent and romantic, he assures Pocahontas that he does not constitute a threat, and his general demeanour is respectful and considerate. Although the following events in *Pocahontas* uphold this version of the story, the historical facts tell us that the meeting between Pocahontas and Smith and his people eventually resulted in her abduction and captivity in Jamestown, her conversion to Christianity (of which the circumstances are unclear), and her marriage to colonist John Rolfe (Paul 90).

Brian’s use of the phrase “Don’t disappear,” on the other hand, has nothing reassuring about it: his tone is barely concealed mockery, his attitude entitled. Whereas Disney uses every tool in the box to position Smith as a romantic hero, *A Red Girl’s Reasoning* clearly sets up Brian as a predator, exposing “the ugly truth” underneath the “pretty little lies” by virtue of the resulting contrast. Taking this reading a step further, the way in which Brian whispers into Delia’s ear “Don’t disappear” acquires a sinister and darkly ironic meaning — if Delia were to give in to his advances, then the probability of her disappearing and being added to the statistics of missing and murdered Indigenous women would be high indeed. In its conclusion, the film turns this power dynamic on its head: by ultimately taking Brian off the streets, Delia not only does not disappear herself but also prevents all of the disappearances that he has the potential to cause in the future.

One of the most overtly problematic moments in Disney’s feature film is when Pocahontas suddenly begins to speak English as a result of “listening with her heart.” The advice to do so comes to her from Grandmother Willow, who sings “Listen with your heart, you will understand,” softly in the background of the scene and can evidently be heard only by Pocahontas (31:00-31:42). Thus, the ancient female spiritual power of the land herself pushes Pocahontas toward

Smith and sanctions their union, metaphorically accepting the colonial domination that he brings with him. To establish a connection with Smith, Pocahontas (and, by extension, Grandmother Willow as well) is represented as willingly entering his cultural sphere and accepting his cultural domination. Although Pocahontas effortlessly speaks fluent English from this moment forward (even if Smith sometimes teaches her new words), in a later scene he is shown marvelling at the unfamiliar languages of the land: “You have the most unusual names here. Chickahominy. Qui-yough-co-hannock. Pocahontas” (34:43-34:51).

Tailfeathers’ revisionist politics in *A Red Girl’s Reasoning* are arguably at their strongest where the issue of language is concerned. It comes up during the final scene of the film when Delia is dealing out her judgment on Brian. *A Red Girl’s Reasoning* ends on a high note in terms of urgency, viscosity, sound, and writing. The red gasoline canister stands out as particularly sinister against the dark and almost colourless background that frames the final encounter between Delia and Brian. After his strategies of faking innocence, bribery, pleading, and victim blaming fail to buy his freedom, Brian resorts to hurling open threats and racial insults at Delia — “You dirty fucking squaw! You’ll never get away with this” (07:50-07:55) — to which she responds in forceful Cree subtitled “Just watch me” (08:10-08:13). This is the first openly racialized insult in the film, using the word that Nahanni Fontaine (Anishinaabe) identifies as “the most degrading word to describe women” (25) and that Janice Acoose describes as signifying “the shadowy lustful archetype” (44). Explaining the historical origins of negative tropes projected onto Indigenous women during the colonization of the Americas, Kim Anderson writes that “Native sexuality was also transformed into the ‘squaw’ who was ‘lewd and licentious’ and morally reprehensible. This representation was projected onto Native women to excuse the mistreatment they endured from white settler males” (83-84). As a consequence, “Native women seeking justice against the violence in their lives are overshadowed by the image of the squaw” (90). The insult that Brian chooses to use therefore explicitly confirms the colonial origins of rape culture as experienced by Indigenous women.

Against this background, Delia’s answer in Cree becomes even more profound. As the retribution scene in *A Red Girl’s Reasoning* suggests, taking back one’s bodily autonomy and dignity and taking back one’s

language and land are linked in a colonial context. Cree scholar Neal McLeod stresses that “The connection Indigenous people have to the land is housed in language. Through stories and words, we hold the echo of generational experience, and the engagement with land and territory” (6). There is but one phrase uttered in an Indigenous language in the entire film, yet the fact that it occurs during the scene in which Delia deals out her justice on a serial abuser is significant. In this situation, she is in complete control, and by reverting to her Indigenous language under these circumstances she claims cultural and political power over colonial politics of erasure in addition to claiming the power of retribution over the abuser. With her reply, Delia symbolically reclaims Indigenous womanhood from the grip of colonial abuse and dehumanization. Adding to this effect, the scene is underscored by A Tribe Called Red’s track “Electronic Pow Wow Drum,” which rises and falls suggestively with the events on screen, underlining their details acoustically and reinforcing the atmosphere of Indigenous power and resurgence. The poignant use of Cree is a large part of the overall effect since, as Lakota writer and scholar Theodore van Alst Jr. contends, “Native filmmakers use language in a way that instantly propels their characters (we might say even projects them) into the future via their tribal languages” (446). The film thus uses Indigenous language in such a way as to contextualize its vigilante narrative historically within the framework of Canadian colonialism: for Delia, to “listen with her heart” means defiantly to speak her Indigenous language in the face of colonially sanctioned violence.

### Taking Care: The Vigilante as a Figure of Redress

While critiquing and redefining pop cultural phenomena such as Disney’s *Pocahontas*, *Tailfeathers*’ film engages and activates those parts of popular culture that are productive for the film’s purposes. From the beginning of the film, Delia is clearly set up as its heroine. She is the only character whose name is known to the audience from the start because it is presented in the opening credits. It is done in a visually startling manner: the shot shows a close-up of her determined eyes, and the credits spell her name in dark red capital letters (01:34). The visual is constructed to guide the viewer’s attention to the significance of her character, thereby establishing Delia as a heroine visually even before the film does so narratively. As the film unfolds, it becomes more and more

evident that Delia, although she does not have any superpowers in the strictest sense, can be read as not just a vigilante action heroine, a female example of what Angela Ndalians calls a “non-super-powered everyday hero” (1), but also as a superheroine to the extent that her character and her storyline display a certain legendary flair often associated with warrior women in pop cultural narratives. Roz Kaveney points toward the close link between superhero\*ine narratives and vigilantism, observing that “Almost all superheroes are to some degree vigilantes” (6), and Ndalians stresses “the dual focus of these character types — the hero and the superhero — who have much in common” (2).

Indeed, not only the makeup of Delia’s character but also Tailfeathers’ cinematographic and editing strategies reflect comic book influences, particularly in the opening sequence, which makes ample use of the split screen with images arranged in a manner reminiscent of comic book panels. In terms of the resemblance to comic book content, Delia’s character reminds me most of Marvel’s Jessica Jones. Jessica was introduced in the first issue of *Alias*, a comic book series that ran from 2001 to 2004, set in Hell’s Kitchen. Her story was picked up with modifications by Netflix and converted into a popular TV series released in 2015, three years after *A Red Girl’s Reasoning*. The series builds its visuality upon the same gritty urban aesthetic that Tailfeathers’ film also foregrounds. Jessica is a superheroine-turned-detective who specializes in fringe cases and has a storyline in which she is abducted and abused by a mind-controlling villain, Zebediah Killgrave, a.k.a. the Purple Man. Netflix’s *Jessica Jones*, therefore, is marked by a distinctive noir flair and centred on the theme of sexual violence and power abuse, and it is one example demonstrating that *A Red Girl’s Reasoning* operates within a pop cultural tradition of female urban superheroines who practise vigilante justice on abusive men.

Both Delia’s and Jessica’s stories, in the words of Rebecca Stringer, are “shaped as a survivor story, a story about a woman’s personal effort to survive violent victimization” (272), and, though Jessica also has superpowers and Delia does not, both are presented as characters shrouded in legend. Nelly’s remark during her meeting with Delia in *A Red Girl’s Reasoning* is no coincidence: “I used to think that you were just a story. Like a . . . like a legend us urban Indians wished was true. But here you are, in the flesh” (03:02-03:18). When Nelly turns around after uttering those words, she finds Delia gone without a trace or sound, almost as if she simply vanished into thin air, and Nelly’s

face expresses both confusion and awe as if confronted with evidence of something, or someone, larger than life. Delia's name adds to this effect: as Allison Hargreaves notes, Delia "is an epithet for Artemis, Greek goddess of the hunt" (170), so named for her birthplace on the island of Delos, the deity whose mythological makeup includes aspects of protection of women and holding to account men who transgress boundaries of respect.<sup>2</sup> Such subtle hints and fleeting instances introduce a supernatural/spiritual element into the otherwise grimly realistic narrative of the film. Superheroines such as Jessica Jones and other superpowered characters of Marvel and DC universes have always been portrayed as a starkly urban phenomenon, and characterizing Delia as an Indigenous urban legend not only evokes these influences but also adds Delia to the popular pantheon of urban superhero\*ines of comic books, films, and television, many of whom have vigilante storylines.

The centrality of the concept of redress for its narrative is therefore manifest not only in Tailfeathers' film's revisionist practices but also in its generic set-up. *A Red Girl's Reasoning's* connections to the popular figure of a female vigilante, whether superpowered or not, are obvious and articulated by Tailfeathers explicitly in the statement quoted at the beginning of this article. Defining the genre of "vigilante literature written by women," Alison Graham-Bertolini describes it as "the literature of the brave hearted, and of women who may be bruised, but who finally refuse to be beaten" (1). The same can be said about the female vigilante in popular media. In her study, Graham-Bertolini stresses the communal nature of narrative vigilantism in general, and female vigilantism in particular, evident in its focus on matters of justice rather than revenge. As Kevin Grant notes in his book *Vigilantes: Private Justice in Popular Cinema*, although there is an obvious overlap between narratives of revenge and vigilantism, there are also notable differences that influence the reading of these figures:

If vigilantism as a concept can be slippery to pin down, the same is true when it is treated on screen, where it comes under the rubric of the cinema of revenge but is really a separate branch. The line of demarcation can be obscure, . . . but there are nuances that separate the avenger from the vigilante, a refinement captured in the French term *justicier*, meaning "righter of wrongs" in a broader sense.

Graham-Bertolini uses the definition of vigilantism articulated by William C. Culberson as the starting point of her analysis, precisely because “it references the acts of people who operate individually, but whose intentions to elicit change fall under the rubric of a larger collective movement. . . . Their acts are rooted in a communal desire for impartial treatment and so should be understood as collective” (Graham-Bertolini 6). In addition, when working with vigilante narratives female authors have particular concerns: “Female vigilantism is most often a recuperative act that addresses systematic flaws in the . . . system of justice” (4):

The specific triggers for female vigilantism shift from abstract values concerning the law to the much more concrete and determinable, such as the casting away of an abusive spouse. In stories of female vigilante justice, women reach beyond prescribed social roles to take action, sometimes for their own protection, sometimes for the protection of others, sometimes for a moral ideal. (6)

When interpreted in these terms, a female vigilante becomes a figure who embodies redress as a politics of care while combining it with a critique of systemic conditions that work to disempower women in their social and private lives.

Tailfeathers’ statement and a closer look at her heroine reveal that Delia is purposefully conceived of as a vigilante figure. In keeping with the focus of many female vigilante narratives on communal good and systemic change outlined above, her quest in *A Red Girl’s Reasoning* above all highlights the impact of Canadian colonialism on Indigenous women and looks for effective practices to counteract it with integrity. Although stemming from a personal brush with the violence that Delia is fighting, her vigilantism is collective rather than personal, executed on behalf of all Indigenous women and addressing a systemic problem rather than a personal grievance alone. In other words, the main guiding impulse of her vigilantism is setting things right — the very definition of redress. As much as her vigilante justice is a form of redress and restitution, however, it is also a form of care, protection, and sisterhood that flows in multiple directions and envelops not only Delia but also other female characters in the film. As Hargreaves notes, “Delia . . . conducts her calling through a covert network of other Indigenous women” (173).

There are multiple small but significant gestures through which the film showcases this attitude of care and support among its Indigenous



female characters. It is expressed in the fine-tuned, synchronized, cooperative action taking that occurs effortlessly between Delia and the bartender; it is demonstrated through a quiet, almost tender apology when Delia unexpectedly appears and startles Nelly at their arranged meeting place — an apology that shows Delia's awareness of and consideration for Nelly's probable PTSD symptoms; it is evident in Nelly's offering of tobacco to Delia as a gift, a gesture that bestows honour and signifies utmost respect "in the context of Indigenous epistemes" (Hargreaves 175); it is also evident in Delia's refusal of the gift and her non-verbal thank-you, both expressed as Delia caringly holds Nelly's offering hand in her own for a heartbeat longer than necessary. These moments of tenderness not only highlight the bonds of care among Indigenous women but also serve to offset and balance the violence that permeates the plot. The coexistence of violence and tenderness shown in *A Red Girl's Reasoning* enacts the assertion articulated by Rachel Flowers: "As an anticolonial project of resurgence it is essential that we direct Indigenous love *inward*. . . . [I]t is because of our profound love for one another and our lands that we are full of rage. Anger and love are not always mutually exclusive emotions" (40).

Vigilante narratives commonly deal with themes connected to violence, and the role of violence in vigilante justice is frequently the bone of contention in their reception. As outlined above, violence is also omnipresent in *A Red Girl's Reasoning*, whether as text, subtext, or context. However, the violence of the plot that is sometimes criticized or causes uneasiness more than anything else operates as a realistic staging of the brutality and trauma of sexual assault and of a life in its shadow.<sup>3</sup> Rather than a call to violence as a way of solving problems, it is used in the film to address the issue head-on and demonstrate the severity of what is at stake. In other words, violence in *A Red Girl's Reasoning* is descriptive, not aspirational, and it is *meant* to make the viewers uneasy. As Tailfeathers explains, "Some people ask how violence solves violence. . . . But it's metaphorical violence. Indigenous women, particularly in Canada, particularly in Vancouver on the Downtown Eastside — these women live violence on a daily basis. It was interesting to flip that reality" (qtd. in Verstraten).

Significantly, although not shying away from depicting violent acts, the film is careful with its visuality: there are no direct depictions of violence against women or women in subjugated positions, sexually or otherwise, except for the presumably forensic photograph of Nelly's

facial injuries as a result of Brian's assault that Delia shows to Brian as evidence and that viewers are barely able to glimpse. Rebecca Stringer's analysis of the depiction of women in film, although referring to a different movie, can be applied seamlessly to *A Red Girl's Reasoning*: "Even as this film's sustained inferences to violence are palpable and intense, absent are the spectacular scenes of rape, injury, sexual exploitation, and death that we expect to see in films in the cognate genres of thriller, horror, crime, and action" (275-76). According to Stringer, this shows an awareness of "the feminist complaint that graphic depiction of victimization objectifies the victim and can operate pornographically" (276). *A Red Girl's Reasoning* tactfully "refrain[s] from visually exploiting female suffering and victimization" (276), never showing graphic scenes of assault on women even as it makes clear that grave violence has taken place. Instead, the film makes a point of only showing women in positions of taking action and exercising agency, standing up for themselves and one another. This includes not only Delia and Nelly but also the female bartender who assists Delia in putting drugs into Brian's drink; even in this scene, in which Brian is on the hunt and singles out Delia as his prey, the role reversal of victim and perpetrator — complete when Delia kidnaps Brian — is foreshadowed through the subversion of the drink-buying ritual of seduction when Delia first buys Brian a drink and then slips what has become known as rape drugs into it. The only scene in which graphic visual language is employed in a depiction of disempowerment and humiliation has a tied-up Brian, the privileged white male assailant, at its centre. Disturbing though it might be, even this scene refrains from showing the actual execution of Brian, leaving the outcome open to interpretation when Delia douses him in gasoline, puts a burning cigarette in his mouth, and walks away.

Keeping in mind Grace Dillon's assertion that Indigenous creative interventions "invariably *change*" genres (3), it is important to consider not only how *A Red Girl's Reasoning* follows the generic conventions of vigilante narratives but also how it modifies and speaks back to them. Although within the framework of Eurowestern generic conventions Delia's actions can be interpreted as an example of a woman "reaching beyond prescribed social roles to take action" (Graham-Bertolini 6), in Indigenous cultural contexts this is not necessarily the case. Kim Anderson explains that, in traditional Indigenous societies, "When violence against women did happen, there were systems to deal with it. Abusers could be met with violence in return, often at the hands of

the women. Lee Maracle recalls her grandmother physically beating a cousin who had been violent with his sister" (74). Such a punitive system appears to have worked well, judging from the fact that, according to Anderson, instances of violence against women and children in traditional Indigenous societies were relatively rare (74). When read through Indigenous cultural and historical lenses, therefore, Delia's actions in the film are in keeping with traditional Indigenous modes of exercising justice in cases of gendered violence, and so is the notion of women protecting each other against such violence. The significance of the vigilante framework shifts when viewed from this perspective, highlighting once again the colonial nature of the society in which Delia lives and its legal codes and institutions. When interpreted in this light, Delia's actions have to be viewed not as instances of extralegal private justice but as a form of reclaiming jurisdiction from the colonial state. Because it happens within the context of the colonial state, however, Brian's punishment takes an extreme form that demonstrates why Delia understands her "calling" as simultaneously "a curse," a responsibility that weighs on her.

Such a reading stresses that her vigilantism is necessary only because of the colonial social context that surrounds Delia, and it is legible only within that context. Because, traditionally, there are pathways to address violence against women and children in Indigenous cultures that are effective and taken seriously, within these socio-cultural frameworks there is simply no need for vigilantism. A vigilante by definition is situated outside the agreed-upon social contract and the law that upholds it; punishments prescribed by Indigenous laws in cases of violence against women, however, happen *within* their respective legal systems. Delia's vigilantism is thus needed only within the colonial legal contexts that frequently fail to provide other forms of effective redress. Again, this is why her vigilantism is "both a calling and a curse": it is a calling because Delia responds to her responsibility to protect herself and other Indigenous women, but it is a curse because she is forced to do so within the power structures of colonialism that criminalize and distort her protective actions and throw her into a darkness that she should not have to inhabit. The film's engagement with the vigilante genre, therefore, shows how the entire idea of female vigilante justice — and with it the controversial genre of vigilante narratives — are predicated on certain social systems and asymmetrical power relations skewed along gendered trajectories that spring from specifically colonial frameworks of legal

justice. In this way, by participating in the vigilante genre on its own terms, *A Red Girl's Reasoning* activates it as a site of decolonial critique.

### Conclusion: Through Redress to Resurgence

In closing, I would like to note another prominent intertextual reference that frames the narrative of *A Red Girl's Reasoning*: E. Pauline Johnson Tekahionwake's short story of the same title, first published in 1893. Although there is no direct allusion to the story in the plot of Tailfeathers' film, their intertextual kinship is acknowledged both through the use of the title and through thematic echoes of Johnson's story. Johnson's "A Red Girl's Reasoning" can be read as a tale of colonial romance, but unlike Disney's *Pocahontas* this romance is highly political and fails because of the pressures of the colonial mindset, notwithstanding the deep personal affection between the partners.

The marriage between settler Charlie McDonald and Christine "Christie" Robinson, the daughter of an Indigenous mother and a settler father, the focus of Johnson's short story, fails because of the lack of respect for and recognition of the customs and peoplehood of Christie's Indigenous relations that Charlie demonstrates one night. Although still in love with her husband, Christie leaves him immediately after the incident and, when he finds her, refuses to return. Charlie's state after Christie's refusal is pitiful indeed: "Then his whole life, desolate as a desert, loomed up before him with appalling distinctness. Throwing himself on the floor beside his bed, with clasped hands and arms outstretched on the white counterpane, he sobbed, he sobbed" (202). In his naive sense of entitlement, Charlie is surprised by Christie's determination to remove him from her life completely; he should not be surprised, though, for he was duly warned by Christie's father: "Remember, what you are, she will be" (189). Johnson thus frames Charlie's unhappiness as a logical result of his own misguided actions and stages Christie's refusal as a gesture of redress against injustice and inequality. In this respect, Johnson's "A Red Girl's Reasoning" connects to Delia's narrative of redress, the vigilante framework into which it is integrated, and her defiance of the colonial legal system, a connection that is perhaps most prominent in Christie's defiant words: "You cannot *make* me come. . . . [N]either church, nor law, nor even . . . love can make a slave of a red girl" (201).

In acknowledging Johnson's story as an ancestor text, Tailfeathers'

film brings it, its author, and its character into the network of Indigenous women who take care of each other on the level of the film's plot. In her analysis of *A Red Girl's Reasoning*, Allison Hargreaves invokes Craig Womack's (Muskogee Creek-Cherokee) assertion about Johnson's text, that "Christie needs an ally" (Hargreaves 181; Womack 62), and observes that "the film imagines for Delia (and its viewers) what Christie did not have — a community of reasoning, allied Indigenous women" (181-82). By aligning itself with Johnson's story through the borrowing of its title, Tailfeathers' film arguably goes even further and offers Christie the allies whom she is missing and claims Johnson as an ally for its own women.<sup>4</sup> The decolonial vision of *A Red Girl's Reasoning's* redress, its version, as it were, of setting things right, thus goes beyond vigilante justice for the perpetrator, with its bitter aftertaste of a curse, toward building and strengthening communal ties among Indigenous women — characters and authors alike — across texts and generations. These politics of care among members of an extended Indigenous community of women counteract and disrupt discourses of "absence, nihility, and victimry" that often surround their image in colonial societies (Vizenor 1). By doing so, Tailfeathers triumphantly guides her female characters through redress to resurgence.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The title of this section of the article echoes many instances of Indigenous scholars and writers challenging the "Indian princess" stereotype by adopting a rhetoric of refusal. The book titled *#NotYourPrincess: Voices of Native American Women* (2020), edited by Lisa Charleyboy (Tsilhqot'in) and Mary Beth Leatherdale, and the poem "I Am Not Your Princess" by Chrystos (Menominee), published in her poetry collection *Not Vanishing* (1988), are only two examples of this.

<sup>2</sup> The story of Artemis and Actaeon tells of the goddess's revenge on transgressive men, an aspect that finds further parallels in Delia's vigilante character in *A Red Girl's Reasoning*. After Actaeon wanders off from his hunting party and enters the sacred grove of Artemis, he sees her naked taking a bath. In retribution, she turns him into a stag, and running away he is torn apart by his own hunting dogs. For the full story, see Bulfinch (34-36).

<sup>3</sup> Katelyn Verstraten relates how, for Eric Paulsson, "the executive director and producer of Crazy8s," the film contest in which *A Red Girl's Reasoning* was first presented, "His one point of contention is the violence in the film."

<sup>4</sup> As Womack points out, the voice of the narrator often intervenes in the narrative of "A Red Girl's Reasoning" precisely in order to offer Christie at least one ally: "The style of this story creates a very distinct impression: Christie needs an ally; that ally is the narrator, and once Christie leaves her mother's home she is the only friend Christie will have, and this sucks because Christie will never have her — only we readers will, since narrators in

third-person fiction are not dramatized as characters in the story" (62). It therefore could be argued, somewhat against common conventions of literary criticism, that Johnson to a certain degree inserts herself into the narrative fabric of the story in order to support her character.

## WORKS CITED

- Acoose, Janice Misko-Kisikāwihkwè. *Iskwewak — kah' ki yaw ni wahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princess nor Easy Squaw*. Women's Press, 1995.
- Anderson, Kim. *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood*. Women's Press, 2016.
- Arnott, Joanne. "She Is Riding." Charleyboy and Leatherdale, pp. 40-41.
- Assu, Sonny. "Personal Totems." *Troubling Tricksters: Revisiting Critical Conversations*, edited by Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra, Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2010, pp. 135-54.
- Bulfinch, Thomas. *Bulfinch's Mythology*. Canterbury Classics, 2014.
- Charleyboy, Lisa, and Mary Beth Leatherdale, editors. *#NotYourPrincess: Voices of Native American Women*. Annik Press, 2020.
- Crystos. "I Am Not Your Princess." *Not Vanishing*, Press Gang Publishers, 1985, pp. 66-67.
- Culbertson, William C. *Vigilantism: Political History of Private Power in America*. Praeger Publishers, 1990.
- Deer, Jessica. "We Are Not a Costume." Charleyboy and Leatherdale, p. 61.
- Deer, Sarah. *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America*. U of Minnesota P, 2015.
- Deloria, Philip J. *Indians in Unexpected Places*. UP of Kansas, 2004.
- Dillon, Grace L. "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms." *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, edited by Grace L. Dillon, U of Arizona P, 2012, pp. 1-12.
- Finley, Chris. "Decolonizing the Queer Native Body (and Recovering the Native Bulldyke): Bringing 'Sexy Back' and Out of Native Studies' Closet." *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, edited by Qwo-Li Driskill et al., U of Arizona P, 2011, pp. 31-42.
- Flowers, Rachel. "Refusal to Forgive: Indigenous Women's Love and Rage." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2015, pp. 32-49.
- Fontaine, Nahanni. "Reclaiming Indigenous Women's Rights." Charleyboy and Leatherdale, p. 25.
- Graham-Bertolini, Alison. *Vigilante Women in Contemporary American Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Grant, Kevin. *Vigilantes: Private Justice in Popular Cinema*. E-book, McFarland, 2020.
- Hargreaves, Allison. *Violence against Indigenous Women: Literature, Activism, Resistance*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2017.
- Johnson, E. Pauline Tekahionwake. "A Red Girl's Reasoning." *E. Pauline Johnson Tekahionwake: Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, edited by Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag, U of Toronto P, 2012, pp. 188-202.
- Kaveney, Roz. *Superheroes! Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Film*. I.B. Tauris, 2008.
- McLeod, Neal. *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times*. Purich Publishing, 2011.
- Ndalianis, Angela. "Do We Need Another Hero?" *Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman*, edited by Wendy Haslem et al., New Academia Publishing, 2007, pp. 1-9.

- Paul, Heike. *The Myths that Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*. Transcript Verlag, 2014.
- Pocahontas*. Directed by Eric Goldberg and Mike Gabriel, Walt Disney Productions, 1995.
- A Red Girl's Reasoning*. Directed by Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers, Crazy8s Film Society in association with NDN Girl Productions, 2012. *SkinsPlex*, skinsplex.com/shows/a-red-girls-reasoning.
- "Redress." *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/redress](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/redress).
- Stringer, Rebecca. "From Victim to Vigilante: Gender, Violence, and Revenge in *The Brave One* (2007) and *Hard Candy* (2005)." *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, edited by Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer, Routledge, 2011, pp. 268-82.
- Tailfeathers, Elle-Máijá. "A Hungry Crew Is Not a Happy Crew." *Vancouver Sun Blogs*, 11 Mar. 2012, [vancouver.sun.com/entertainment/movies/a-hungry-crew-is-not-a-happy-crew](http://vancouver.sun.com/entertainment/movies/a-hungry-crew-is-not-a-happy-crew).
- van Alst, Theodore C. Jr. "Film in the Blood, Something in the Eye: Voice and Vision in Native American Cinema." *The Routledge Companion to Native American Literature*, edited by Deborah L. Madsen, Routledge, 2016, pp. 458-68.
- Verstraten, Katelyn. "For Indigenous Women, Radical Art as a Last Resort." *The Tyee*, 22 June 2013, [thetyee.ca/ArtsAndCulture/2013/06/22/Radical-Art](http://thetyee.ca/ArtsAndCulture/2013/06/22/Radical-Art).
- Vizenor, Gerald. *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. U of Nebraska P, 2008.
- Womack, Craig S. *Art as Performance, Story as Criticism: Reflections on Native Literary Aesthetics*. U of Oklahoma P, 2009.