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“I Used to Think You Were Just a Story”: Imagined Violence in Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers' *A Red Girl's Reasoning*

By Hannah Barrie¹

Abstract

Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers' 2012 short film *A Red Girl's Reasoning* dismantles the narrative of colonial sexualized violence in its representation of the protagonist, Delia, enacting retributive violence against white men. Tailfeathers' tense eleven-minute film depicts a First Nations woman seeking violent vengeance against white men who have sexually assaulted Indigenous women. This essay explores the political and transformative potential of such stories of revenge, examining *A Red Girl's Reasoning's* fictional representation of violence against the colonial oppressor alongside J. Halberstam's discussion of imagined violence. I argue that this story of violent revenge is productive in its utopic depiction of a counterreality and futurity that destabilizes the relationship between imagination and reality, while simultaneously representing the ongoing community-based resistance of Indigenous women. *A Red Girl's Reasoning* illustrates both an alternative present and vision for a decolonized future that are politically productive, depicting a space of violence that challenges both the white male rapist and the colonial white heteropatriarchal state that protects him. This argument is complicated by narratives of non-violence and forgiveness, but ultimately, I propose that imagined violence is a decolonial intervention, effective in its moral complexity and in its refusal to provide tidy ethical answers about the violence that it represents.

Keywords: Imagined violence, Indigenous futurity, decolonization, colonial sexualized violence, decolonial intervention, counterreality, ethic of non-violence

Introduction

“I used to think you were just a story,” Nelly tells Delia in Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers' short film *A Red Girl's Reasoning*. Tailfeathers is a member of the Kainai First Nation in what is currently known as southern Alberta, Canada. Her tense, eleven-minute, 2012 film depicts a First Nations woman seeking violent vengeance against white male perpetrators. The film dismantles the narrative of colonial sexualized violence in its representation of the protagonist Delia, who has been “on the warpath” for six years, enacting retributive violence against white men who have sexually assaulted Indigenous women (Tailfeathers). Nelly is a client, another Indigenous woman enlisting Delia's help in bringing her rapist to justice. When Nelly meets Delia, she says she used to think Delia was just a story, “a legend us urban Indians wished was true” (Tailfeathers). Perhaps an Indigenous woman violently fighting back against white male rapists seemed too good to be true. In stepping back to examine the film, though, Nelly is right: Delia, and her vigilante search

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for justice, are just stories that Tailfeathers has created.

This essay explores the political potential of such stories, examining *A Red Girl's Reasoning's* fictional representation of violence against the oppressor alongside J. Halberstam's discussion of imagined violence. Such a story or representation is situated firmly in the context of settler colonialism in Canada. The Canadian state has perpetuated a genocide of Indigenous women and girls; thousands of Indigenous women and girls across Canada have been disappeared and murdered, though there is no official and reliable estimate of the actual number (Hargreaves, "*Finding Dawn*" 84-87). According to the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls,

The significant, persistent, and deliberate pattern of systemic racial and gendered human rights and Indigenous rights violations and abuses – perpetuated historically and maintained today by the Canadian state, designed to displace Indigenous Peoples from their land, social structures, and governance and to eradicate their existence as Nations, communities, families, and individuals – is the cause of the disappearances, murders, and violence experienced by Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, and is genocide. This colonialism, discrimination, and genocide explains the high rates of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people (174).

These layers of violence are central to the existence of Canada. As Allison Hargreaves states, "as a settler-colonial nation-state, Canada is premised upon historical and ongoing invasion, displacement, settlement, and expropriation" ("*Finding Dawn*" 87). The processes of dispossession of Indigenous peoples from land, language, and identity have always and continue to be "gendered and colonial in their origin and expression" ("*Finding Dawn*" 87).

With this context in mind, I argue that *A Red Girl's Reasoning*, as a story of violent revenge against white male perpetrators of sexualized violence and against the Canadian state itself, is productive in its utopic depiction of a counterreality and futurity that destabilizes the relationship between imagination and reality, while simultaneously representing the ongoing community-based resistance of Indigenous women.² This argument comes up against Judith Butler's ethic of non-violence as well as typical reconciliation narratives of forgiveness, rejected by Rachel Flowers in her article "Refusal to Forgive: Indigenous Women's Love and Rage". Ultimately, I, like Flowers, refuse a narrative of harmony and forgiveness, and propose that imagined violence is an effective decolonial intervention in its moral complexity and in its refusal to provide tidy ethical answers about the violence that it represents.

Imagined Violence

Creative representations of violence enacted by oppressed subjects upon their oppressor are subversive, complex, and often discomfiting. J. Halberstam discusses the potentials of imagined violence in the article "Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance." Halberstam argues that representations of "unsanctioned violences committed by

² The film's dialogue and Verstraten's interview with Tailfeathers leads me to believe that the film tells the story of Indigenous women specifically, hence my use of 'women' here, though I acknowledge that such resistance also includes Indigenous Two-Spirit, trans, and queer people, who, as Sarah Hunt notes, have been resisting colonial rape culture for years.

subordinate groups upon powerful white men” open up a political space of rage; this place of rage can blur the boundaries between imagined and real violence, and thus has the potential to instigate a “productive fear” in the oppressor (195). Imagined violence is violence that takes place in literature, film, or art—but Halberstam refuses to relegate it to the realm of the not-real. The line between imagination and reality is rendered unstable through these representations of retributive violence, and according to Halberstam, this instability is productive. Artistic representations of violence trouble the lines between non-violent resistance / rage / expression / violent political response; while it might be more palatable to think of imagined violence as existing solely in the realm of fantasy, Halberstam argues that fantasy can quickly lead to emotion and response, though it is impossible to ascertain if and when it does (187). These questions that such representations pose about the possibility of actual retaliation are “rhetorical, hypothetical, and unanswerable,” and the situations represented are threatening in their potentiality (187, 195). Imagined violences produce counterrealities, potential realities that “may only ever exist in the realm of representation” but have the power to create real consequences as a strategy of revolt against the oppressor (189-190).

A Red Girl's Reasoning

Tailfeathers' film *A Red Girl's Reasoning* is a compelling example of such imagined violence. The film flips the narrative of colonial sexualized violence in its representation of Delia enacting retributive violence against white men. The film begins with a white male ‘hoodlum’ and white male cop running from Delia, who is speeding towards them on a motorcycle—a stark juxtaposition to the standard image of white police officers or aggressors chasing marginalized subjects.³ The first instance of violence occurs when Delia corners these men, who are represented as interchangeable by Tailfeathers' short bursts of alternating action. Delia overpowers them easily, punching and kicking their bodies and faces, then leaves them defeated and bloody on the ground. In these opening vignettes, Tailfeathers also shows Delia grinding a lit cigarette into a white man's forehead. Throughout this introduction, Delia's violence is framed by her brief narration of the historic and ongoing sexualized violence perpetrated by white men against Indigenous women, setting Delia up as the vigilante fighting against this “ugly truth” (Tailfeathers). Delia tells the viewers that clients come to her seeking justice when the justice system fails them (Tailfeathers). Soon, Nelly comes to meet Delia, showing her a picture of the white man who raped her. We learn that this is Brian, who had also assaulted Delia seven years prior. Delia continues to reverse the typical narrative of sexualized violence, finding Brian at a bar and slipping roofies into his drink. Before he is drugged, Brian leaves for the bathroom and tells Delia, “Don't disappear,” alluding to the naturalized script of colonial sexualized violence in which white men ‘disappear’ Indigenous women and girls.⁴ Tailfeathers portrays dramatic irony here: from what we have seen so far, we know that Delia will not disappear—instead, Brian might.

³ ‘Hoodlum’ is the term used in the film's credits for this character.

⁴ As Hargreaves notes, Brian's line, ‘Don't disappear,’ is “resonant of that nostalgic colonial fantasy of the vanishing Indian” (“*A Red Girl's Reasoning*” 175). Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang similarly discuss the notion of ‘disappearing’ Indigenous people as the very foundation of settler colonialism: “In order for the settlers to make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the Indigenous peoples that live there” (6). Brian's brief, vaguely threatening quip also contrasts the typical pick-up line of ‘You from around here?’ (Hargreaves, “*A Red Girl's Reasoning*” 175). But Delia “can't help but *be* ‘from around here,’ and there's no risk of her disappearing” (175).

When Brian comes to, he is nearly naked, his wrists affixed to a wooden beam in an urban alleyway. His body is vulnerable, bare, and powerless; he cannot escape even when he struggles hard. Delia confronts him. She asks him about Nelly, asks him about herself. She slaps him when he says he doesn't remember, and that Nelly was the only one. Delia grabs his crotch and squeezes, harder and harder. She is smiling and serious interchangeably, but always unconcerned with his excuses or his pain. Finally, she douses him head to toe with gasoline, places a lit cigarette between his lips, and drives away on her motorcycle, leaving him terrified and shaking.

Tailfeathers' short film, representing an Indigenous woman smoothly overpowering and potentially murdering a white male perpetrator of colonial sexualized violence, depicts a counterreality—an imagined reality that exists solely in the realm of representation, where violence is avenged with violence. As Hargreaves argues, “Delia presents an alternative moral universe in which male violence is punished by an avenging heroine-survivor” (“*A Red Girl's Reasoning*” 171). What is the effect of this alternate universe, this counterreality, this imagined violence? Halberstam proposes that such representation is a threat of the “return of the repressed,” it is “the return of the gaze in cinematic terms,” it refuses peaceful activism and “demands to be heard as the voice that will violate” (195). We see terror in Brian's eyes before Delia turns her back and drives away. She does not care what the outcome is; she does not care about his fear or his life. She is permitted the privilege of not caring, while he experiences the violence and terror so often felt by marginalized groups. As Halberstam states, it is in “the realm of fantasy and representation that we make the system nervous, and that we can control and use our illusions” (190). By depicting a universe where rapists face fatal repercussions for their actions, this imagined reality has the potential to make the system that shelters and perpetuates sexualized violence nervous.

Shifting the Script

Considering how colonial sexualized violence is constructed as a narrative is useful in understanding the political potential of Delia's actions in the film. Although such violence is naturalized in settler-colonial Canada, watching *A Red Girl's Reasoning* reveals the construction of this script, while the imagined violence depicted in the film reverses it. As Sharon Marcus states, thinking about rape as a linguistic fact reveals its construction through narrative; rape derives its strength from its power to structure lives as an imposing cultural script (389).⁵ The violence of rape is not enabled through the unbeatable force of perpetrators, but rather through narrative and institutional structures—“gendered grammar[s] of violence”—that perpetuate a culture of rape (392, 389). Tailfeathers reveals these scripts in the film; Brian's insistence that “[Nelly] wanted it,” as he attempts to placate Delia, exemplifies the ubiquitous refrain of rapists; similarly, when Brian attempts to flirt with Delia at the bar and offers to buy her a drink, viewers are reminded of the typical date-rape script premised on heteropatriarchal power dynamics (Tailfeathers).

In addition to being scripted, rape also scripts. Marcus argues that rape is used as a tool to impose a label of powerless, feminine victim on the survivor (391). Revealing sexualized violence as a tool, script, or narrative, rather than a fixed reality, allows for revision of that script. Both Halberstam and Marcus note the power of women enacting violence to shift or subvert this

⁵ Many feminist scholars have discussed rape as a cultural script; see Kathryn Ryan's 2011 article, “The Relationship between Rape Myths and Sexual Scripts: The Social Construction of Rape,” for a helpful review of rape script research.

narrative.⁶ Marcus writes, “by fighting back, we cease to be grammatically correct feminine subjects and thus become much less legible as rape targets;” similarly, Halberstam argues that “female violence transforms the symbolic function of the feminine within popular narratives and it simultaneously challenges the hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right under the sign of masculinity” (Marcus 396; Halberstam 191). Both theorists concur that instilling fear in the oppressor is necessary for shifting this narrative. Although *Tailfeathers* portrays aspects of the rape script, the narrative of *A Red Girl's Reasoning* subverts this script from the start. Even when Brian offers, somewhat ominously, to buy Delia a drink, the viewers already know she is not a grammatically correct feminine subject. Although she is a survivor, Delia refuses to be scripted as a powerless victim; her journey of violent revenge disrupts the hegemonic narrative of patriarchal violence.

While Marcus' discussion of the rape script is relevant for analysis of aspects of *A Red Girl's Reasoning*, *Tailfeathers'* film, portraying Indigenous women avenging sexual assault within a colonial context, represents revenge against specifically colonial sexualized violence. Therefore, shifting the script of sexualized violence in this framework necessitates shifting a gendered colonial script that encompasses white men's violence against Indigenous women as well as state violence against Indigenous land. These forms of violence are inextricable (Flowers 41). As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes:

It's not enough to just recognize that violence against women occurs but that it is intrinsically tied to the creation and settlement of Canada. Gender violence is central to our on-going dispossession, occupation and erasure and Indigenous families and communities have always resisted this (“Not Murdered and Not Missing”).

Audra Simpson writes that “an Indian woman's body in settler regimes [...] is loaded with meaning—signifying land itself, the dangerous possibility of reproducing Indian life, and most dangerously, other political orders” (15). She argues that Canada, the state, “requires the death and so called ‘disappearance’ of Indigenous women in order to secure its sovereignty,” and that sexualized violence is an essential aspect of this disappearance (1). As Flowers notes, the process of settler colonialism begins with the bodies of Indigenous women; the connection between land and Indigenous women's bodies is clear:

Often, Indigenous women's bodies are explained in symbolic terms, as a microcosm of Indigenous lands; her body is where our sovereignty begins. Indigenous women represent our political orders, our political will, our cultural teachings, our laws, and the power to reproduce Indigenous life (41).

But as she further states, this connection does not erase the agency of the women themselves: “it is critical not to lose sight that we are also legal and political actors” (41). Hargreaves clearly explains the processes by which the Canadian state forcibly removed the agency and political power of Indigenous women, citing the Indian Act and the residential schools system as examples of “the deliberate dismantling of Indigenous kinship relations through the targeting of women and children for forced dislocation and assimilation,” used as a “key strategy in the colonial

⁶ Enacted by women, or queer subjects/oppressed subjects more generally, in Halberstam's article.

appropriation of land and resources” (“*Finding Dawn*,” 91-92).⁷

Delia portrays this double revenge in the film, both against men’s violation of Indigenous women’s bodies and the colonial state’s violation of Indigenous land and sovereignty. As evidenced by her attack on a cop in the opening sequence, in *A Red Girl’s Reasoning*, “both the individual perpetrators of violence and the system that protects them are under indictment” (Hargreaves, “*A Red Girl’s Reasoning*” 171). In Tailfeathers’ depiction of imagined violence, revenge is not enacted only against Brian, but against all that he stands for as a white male rapist colonizer, depicted in the introduction that frames this violence as systemic and ongoing, the mention of this country’s “pathetic excuse of a justice system,” and the references to disappearing and handouts. As Audra Simpson notes, the state “has a male character, it is more than likely white, or aspiring to an unmarked centre of whiteness, and definitely heteropatriarchal” (3). Tailfeathers portrays a counterreality where Indigenous women successfully, violently, defeat the white men and white state who have attempted to colonize their bodies and their land. Thus the script of colonial sexualized violence is both revealed and subverted.

Utopic Futurity/Counterreality

Halberstam concludes that imagined violences “create a potentiality, a utopic state in which consequences are imminent rather than actual, the threat is in the anticipation, not the act” (199). This utopia of imagined violence is compelling, yet perplexing: if a utopia is an imagined place of perfection, can that include violent revenge? Does *A Red Girl’s Reasoning* represent a utopia? In the introduction to the inaugural issue of *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, authors Aman Sium, Chandni Desai, and Eric Ritskes discuss decolonization as a “tangible unknown,” while utopia, for José Esteban Muñoz, is “an insistence on something else, something better, something dawning” (Sium et al. XII, Muñoz 189). In this light, utopia and utopic desires must include decolonization, a tangible unknown that is ‘something better’ than the violence and harm of colonialism. And in this unknown, might decolonization not include its own violence, imagined or otherwise? For Frantz Fanon, the violence of colonization requires an equivalent force for its eradication. Fanon’s chapter “On Violence” outlines his views on the necessary unsettling of colonial powers; as he writes, “In its bare reality, decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives” (3). The power of Delia’s actions, the resistance she shows, the violence and consequences for the men and the extractive colonial state, could be part of utopic potentialities, part of the tangible unknown that is decolonization.

Muñoz’s conception of utopia also involves futurity, potentiality, ideality—the dawning (189). Delia, in her vindictive glory, represents a decolonial futurity where the script of colonial gender violence holds no power. As Maille Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill note, “one of the most radical and necessary moves toward decolonization requires imagining and enacting a future for Indigenous peoples—a future based on terms of their own making” (24). If futurities are “ways that groups imagine and produce knowledge about futures,” Tailfeathers’ narrative presented in this film imagines and enacts a future on Delia’s own terms (Goodyear-Ka’ōpua 86).

But I propose also that the ongoing nature of colonialism necessitates this film’s grounding in the present, as a counterreality as well as futurity (Martineau & Ritskes II). In her article “Land

⁷ See pages 87-90 in Hargreaves’ article “*Finding Dawn* and Missing Women in Canada: Story-Based Methods in Antiviolence Research and Remembrance” for a historical explanation of the Indian Act and residential schools in Canada.

as Pedagogy,” Leanne Betasamosake Simpson tells the story of Kwezens discovering maple sap,⁸ and writes that this story takes place in the now, every spring, and that framing this story as present and ongoing should propel us to rebel against the permanence of settler colonialism (8). She asks readers to not simply “dream alternative realities” but to create them, see them as already present, grounded in the physical world (8). The ongoing resistance of Indigenous communities against colonial sexualized violence also serves to situate the film in the present moment. As Sarah Hunt states, “Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, trans and queer people have been resisting colonial rape culture for years;” similarly, Arvin et al. describe an ongoing project of resistance “that continues to contest patriarchy and its power relationships” (Hunt 4; Arvin et al. 21). This film represents a violent example of such present, grounded resistance.⁹

Yet *Tailfeathers*' representation can embody both futurity and presence at once. Lucy Sargisson's work on feminist utopianism emphasizes this flexibility of utopic thinking:

The function of utopianism [. . .] is not to blueprint and enclose the future but to explore alternative states of being to those presently existing—to stretch and expand our understanding of the possible, thus making a multiplicity of radically different futures not only desirable but also conceivable (52).

Muñoz, too, in a discussion of the performance of writing as queer world-making, considers the performance of “a utopia that understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated—a utopia in the present” (37). And just as Qwo-Li Driskill writes about *asegi* stories,¹⁰ *Tailfeathers*' storytelling is an act of “‘utopia’ in the present, one that resists the ongoing dystopian reality of heteropatriarchal terror through genocidal settler occupation of our homelands” (9). Thus, Delia's journey of revenge is both a futurity of decolonial imagined violence and an imagined example of ongoing resistance against colonial sexualized violence;¹¹ *A Red Girl's Reasoning* exemplifies Halberstam's utopic counterrealities and Muñoz's utopic futurity.

The film is utopic in its vision of the tangible unknown of decolonization, where perpetrators are brought to justice and Indigenous women refuse to care about their fate; and in producing knowledge about possible desirable Indigenous futures. And, simultaneously, it is a counterreality grounded in the present, already here, where the line between representation and reality is productively blurred, forcing difficult questions about resistance, justice, and violence.

⁸ *Kwezens*: The Anishnaabemowin word for girl.

⁹ See Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's 2012 article “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor” for a related discussion of Indigenous sovereignty and futurity. As they write, “Reconciliation is concerned with questions of *what will decolonization look like? What will happen after abolition? What will be the consequences of decolonization for the settler?* Incommensurability acknowledges that these questions need not, and perhaps cannot, be answered in order for decolonization to exist as a framework” (35).

¹⁰ *Asegi* translates as “strange” in the Cherokee language. Driskill notes that the word is also used by some Cherokees as a term similar to “queer.” See page 6 in Driskill's “Introduction” for further context.

¹¹ *Tailfeathers*' depiction of the rape revenge story is also, perhaps, utopic in its narrative choices. She depicts Delia's retributive violence without falling into the typical problematic gratuitous rape scene that is a convention of the rape revenge genre; instead, Delia's brief introduction discussing colonial sexualized violence and exchange with Nelly offers the justification for revenge. Viewers are required and assumed to believe Delia and Nelly. Furthermore, Delia is framed from the beginning as a warrior; despite her past with Brian, she is never portrayed as a victim, shifting the script, unsettling the conventional film narrative of sexualized violence and providing a utopic or perfect alternative.

Violence and Ethics

But what about the ethics of imagined violence? We might wonder whether representing violence, even in a retributive scenario, is ethical, or if imagined violence might actually lead to real violence. In blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, do these boundaries disappear? This is that “‘place of rage’ where expression threatens to become action,” where we cannot predict “what action representations will give rise to,” where fiction might be mistaken for provocation (Halberstam 191, 187, 188). Halberstam argues that it is precisely this ambiguity that is radically productive, drawing on the thought of Judith Butler to complicate what we mean by ‘reality;’ Butler writes that the ‘real’ is “a variable construction which is always and only determined in relation to its constitutive outside: fantasy, the unthinkable, the unreal” (106 qtd. in Halberstam 192). In this framework, the fantasy of Delia’s violence necessarily has some effect on ‘reality.’

If we take up the idea that the line between representation and action is not clear-cut, the ethical dilemma of imagined violence seems pressing. Butler explicates her ethic of non-violence, which argues for the necessity or obligation of addressing/responding to the suffering of others. She refers to her theory as “a possible Jewish ethic of non-violence,” in which she engages the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ concept of the face to discuss “the relation of modes of address and moral authority” (Butler 131). Butler tells us that the face of the Other conveys ‘Thou shalt not kill’ in a wordless suffering, a cry that transcends linguistics (132, 134, 144). According to Butler, “To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself” (134). But this is not an empathetic response, or a derivation of the pain that one feels in considering their own life; Butler writes: “this cannot be an awakensness [...] to my own life, and then an extrapolation from an understanding of my own precariousness to an understanding of another’s precarious life. It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other” (134). This, Butler argues, is why the face belongs to the field of ethics. It is a moral imperative to respond to another’s suffering and to not kill others. For Levinas and for Butler, there is no ethical justification for murder or violence, not even in self-preservation or retribution (137-140). In this light, Delia’s revenge was immoral; her stark refusal to respond to Brian’s face,¹² to respond to his suffering, to understand the precariousness of another human life, was unethical.

Rachel Flowers articulates a narrative of Indigenous forgiveness and love that complements Butler’s ethic of non-violence. While non-violence and forgiveness are two separate imperatives, they each hinge on responding to the suffering of another, and choosing an action generally viewed as the moral or ethical option. In the era of ‘reconciliation,’ Indigenous peoples in Canada are expected to forgive (Flowers 41).¹³ Arguments of non-violence are often convincing: dominant ethical and cultural frameworks suggest that violence, and equally imagined violence, if the two are determined in relation to each other, are unethical. Advocating for violence of any kind refuses to acknowledge the precariousness of another’s life, and thus labels these lives as disposable. Especially in light of pervasive cultural norms around non-violent activism, Butler’s argument is compelling. Similarly, as Flowers states, “Advocacy for forgiveness is steeped in promises of peace and healing; it is not surprising that forgiveness is desired and tempting because of its seemingly redemptive quality and appeals to basic Indigenous principles of harmony” (42).

But, like Flowers, I propose that subverting these norms and instead delving into the

¹² In contrast, Delia uses Brian’s face—his mouth—to hold the lit cigarette that is the potential weapon for his own death, displaying a total refusal of Butler and Levinas’ moral imperative.

¹³ See Canada’s full *Truth and Reconciliation Final Report* at <http://www.trc.ca/about-us/trc-findings.html>.

discomfort of anger, resentment, and imagined violence might be more politically productive. Decolonization is not harmonious; decolonization is necessarily unsettling (Tuck & Wang 7; Sium et al. IV). Flowers writes:

It is important to include Indigenous women's rage in/as resistance. While the world has seen our 'boundless love,' maybe Indigenous women need to better determine the boundaries of our love. [...] When the dehumanization of all Indigenous peoples is accepted as normal, especially aimed at the minds and bodies of Indigenous women through continued land dispossession and violence, it is unrealistic for settler society to expect us to forgive let alone love. (40)

Refusal to forgive is the refusal of the ongoing violence of the colonial state and an affirmation of Indigenous resistance (Flowers 43). Flowers advocates for the possibility of anger as a subjectivity or reaction to Canadian colonial practices, past and present: "The anger that we experience as a response to violence is our tool to unleash against the very techniques that brought it into being" (45, 47).

Representing violence requires the viewer to consider their own understanding of ethics, power, resistance, reality, and representation. As Mušanović and Manthripragada note, "Indigenous futurities are not for the settler colonist to interrogate, figure, or populate" (403). Butler's Western philosophical ethics, then, are perhaps of lesser importance here; Indigenous futurities "diverge from colonial epistemologies and seek rearticulations of all relations outside of the system of colonial power" (Mušanović and Manthripragada 402). Regardless, in Halberstam's imagined violence and Tailfeathers' representation of retributive violence, the thorny ethical questions do not fall to the oppressed subject, Delia, to answer. Here, the oppressed subject is allowed to be unconcerned with the question of ethics as the oppressor was before her; she can reclaim her power in not having to be concerned with the oppressor's precarious life. Halberstam writes: "power lies in the luxury of not needing to know in advance what the relationship is between representations of violence or sexuality and acted violence or sexuality" (192). The burden of articulating the relationship between fantasy and reality is lifted from the oppressed subject in the decision to represent stories with ethical complexity, stories of a potential Indigenous futurity that refuse easy classification and force the viewers to consider their morals. In *A Red Girl's Reasoning*, Tailfeathers resists "the moral imperative to not fight violence with violence" (Halberstam 191).

However, despite the theoretical power of refusing a precisely ethical representation, the burden is not yet lifted for the Indigenous creators of such representations. In journalist Katelyn Verstraten's interview with Tailfeathers, the filmmaker has to respond to those who advocate against fighting violence with violence. Tailfeathers says:

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 (Verstraten, "For Indigenous Women").

While her response of 'flipping that reality' displays the clear intention behind her subversion of colonial sexualized violence narratives, the need to clarify the representation of violence in her film shows the dominant discomfort with stories of imagined violence and the requirement to

reestablish the line between fantasy and reality in order to reassure viewers that such violence is not real.

Living Histories of Resistance

In the film's refusal to adhere to a Western philosophical moral imperative or forgiveness narrative, and its similar refusal to articulate the boundary between imagined and real violence, in its depiction of Indigenous women avenging the assaults of their bodies and land, *Tailfeathers* presents a utopic counterreality of resistance.¹⁴ The film is an imagined portrayal of the ongoing resistance against colonial sexualized violence, powerful in its depiction of relationships built through this resistance. When Delia apologizes for scaring Nelly in the alleyway, when Nelly offers tobacco for Delia's work, when the bartender and Delia work together with secret smiles to drug Brian—these women build relationships through their revenge, showing solidarity between Indigenous women, a community of care, and the direction of their “Indigenous love *inward*” (Flowers 40). This aspect of the film is not a counterreality but an already-present reality, exemplifying resistance movements built on collective strength, and prompting settlers to consider “the living histories of resistance in the communities where we work and live” (Hargreaves, “*A Red Girl's Reasoning*” 184).

Such relationships and resistance depicting violence and the direction of Indigenous love inward are important to consider with nuance in the face of the ongoing violence of colonialism (Flowers 40). *A Red Girl's Reasoning* illustrates a counterreality/futurity that is politically productive, a space of violence that challenges both the white male rapist and the colonial white heteropatriarchal state that protects him. In forcing us to consider the complexities of violent resistance and the boundaries of fiction and reality, *Tailfeathers* creates a compelling narrative that refuses simple responses.

In the final scenes of the film, Brian tells Delia, “You’ll never get away with this.” In Cree, she responds: “Just watch me,” and drives away (*Tailfeathers*). She does not stay to watch his ultimate injury or demise; she holds the power; she has the luxury of not caring. She tells him, and us, to watch her leave without consequence, “and as viewers, we do” (Hargreaves, “*A Red Girl's Reasoning*” 180). Although she is just a story, Delia reveals the potentiality of resistance, subverting the script of colonial sexualized violence, and allowing others, perhaps, to acknowledge both their rage and their love (Flowers 40).

¹⁴ Although *Tailfeathers* had to articulate this boundary in her interview, I argue that the film itself leaves this open for interpretation.

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