

Igniting Conciliation and Counting Coup as Redress: Red Reasoning in Tailfeathers, Johnson, and Lindberg

RENAE WATCHMAN

Why should I recognize the rites of your nation when you do not acknowledge the rites of mine? . . . How do I know when another nation will come and conquer you as you white men conquered us? And they will . . . tell us another truth, that you are not my husband, that you are but disgracing and dishonoring me, that you are keeping me here, not as your wife, but as your — your — *squaw*.
(Johnson 117-18)

THIS RICH EXCERPT IS DRAWN from Mohawk author and performer E. Pauline Johnson's 1893 short story "A Red Girl's Reasoning." The speaker is the protagonist Christine (Christie) McDonald (born Robinson) and her words clearly illustrate a broken relationship that is both literal and metaphorical. Christie, born of "red and white parentage" (Johnson 104), is refuting her white settler husband Charlie's illogical interpretation of law and truth, rooted in violent dehumanization. In this excerpt, there is no room for restoration or reconciliation. Over a century later, Elle-Máíja Tailfeathers, an award-winning Blackfoot/Sámi filmmaker and actor, wrote and directed a short film by the same name, *A Red Girl's Reasoning* (2012), one that invites a critique of some of the issues brought to light in Johnson's short story. In 2015, Tracey Lindberg's novel *Birdie* introduced Bernice Meetoos, a survivor of sexual violence and kinship neglect. In this essay, I centre Indigenous women and their truths, as they count coup and use "Red Reasoning" as a response to oppressive and violent colonial structures and relationships.

The opening epigraph by Johnson grounds my analysis of Tailfeathers' film. In tandem with traditional Indigenous epistemes, legal traditions, and practices, I offer a close analysis of key scenes from the short film that are direct responses to violence against Indigenous women. I begin with a brief overview of the filmic aspects of *A Red*

Girl's Reasoning, which includes holding (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) men accountable for their violent actions before reconciliation and restoring good relations within Indigenous communities is possible. I then focus on counting coup, which results in igniting conciliation and which Indigenous women have taken up on behalf of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.¹ I include a discussion of Lindberg's *Birdie*, a beautiful homage to survivors that holds a mirror up to state-sanctioned policies that have emboldened community violence and kinship rupture. Lastly, I conclude with community-led conciliatory action as a model for redress. I offer a reading of community-led actions as igniting Indigenous justice systems as a way toward settler conciliation and communal reconciliation, which fills the gap of redress and is ultimately restorative. I agree with David B. MacDonald, whose book *The Sleeping Giant Awakens: Genocide, Indian Residential Schools, and the Challenge of Conciliation* (2019) is a sharp reminder that the term reconciliation is not without problems, as it assumes a return to "an original 'golden era' of conciliation between Indigenous peoples and settlers" (182). As highlighted in the epigraph, Johnson reflects a nineteenth-century reality not premised on conciliatory relations between settlers and Indigenous peoples and that precedes this era. Conciliation, MacDonald explains, creat[es] positive relationships that have not existed before, relationships whose contours are difficult to trace because they will evolve and change with time" (183). In fact, Delia, the main character in Tailfeathers' *A Red Girl's Reasoning*, narrates the disgraceful and dishonourable relations between "white boys [who] have been having their way with Indian girls since contact" (01:03-01:07). Delia, played by Métis/Cree actor Jessica Matten, effectively produces catharsis for centuries of nonconsensual contact by landing a kick to a perpetrator's crotch at the very same time that her voiceover narration utters the word "contact" (01:07).

Tailfeathers' mother is from the Blood (or Kainai) Reserve, where Blackfoot language, songs, knowledge, and stories remain intact, despite generations of governmental interference to assimilate. The Blood Reserve is also home to many women whose lives are now lost, disappeared, or were stolen. In 2021, The Kainai Wellness Centre and the Blood Tribe Department of Health Wellness Program hosted events in support of families and survivors of the unknown number of MMIWG, men, boys, and LGBTQ2SI (Sugai). One such event was the well-attended REDress awareness campaign, where more than forty

dresses were displayed alongside photos and stories educating viewers about the community members of the Blood tribe who have not been found.² The 2017 interim report of The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) confirms that “Indigenous women are physically assaulted, sexually assaulted, or robbed almost three times as often as non-Indigenous women” (“Interim Report” 9). Tailfeathers originally (and angrily) wrote an iteration of *A Red Girl’s Reasoning* as a short story in response to the increasing public awareness of MMIWG in what is currently Canada. “I really wanted to see a strong native woman taking justice into her own hands,” she wrote. “The state continues to ignore [violence against indigenous women] all together. We’re second-rate citizens in this country” (qtd. in Verstraten).³ Indigenous women continue to take justice into their own hands, and their tireless labour has culminated in various community gatherings, films, installations, campaigns, marches, teach-ins, and publications. The 2018 anthology *Keetsahnak: Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters*, edited by Kim Anderson, Maria Campbell, and Christi Belcourt, includes the stories and histories of keetsahnak, a Cree word meaning “our sisters.” Anderson says it is “intended to show our kinship with the woman whose lives” are at the heart of the work (xxix). Kinship relations are foundational to these initiatives. Reciprocity in action gives survivors hope and love and paves the way to restoration. Tailfeathers’ commitment to restoring justice for women and families of the missing and murdered is through film, an accessible means of reaching a large audience. Like Indigenous literary arts, visual media “can help us think critically about violence, representation, and resistance” (Hargreaves 18). Tailfeathers also plays the lead character in the 2016 feature *On the Farm*, directed by Rachel Talalay, which exposes the corrupt criminal justice system that took five years to convict serial killer Robert Pickton in 2007, whose pig farm held the remains of many women, including several Indigenous women who had vanished from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Her most recent film, *The Body Remembers* (2019), queries violence against Indigenous women and focuses squarely on intimate Indigenous partner violence.

Scholars have recently grappled with Tailfeathers’ form of retributive justice as “imagined violence [that] flips the narrative of colonial sexualized violence” (Barrie 109); as reimagining “the revenge plot as a space for victims of abuse to find support and kinship with each other” (Killebrew 134); and as “envisioning an alternative path to jus-

tice” (Hargreaves 171). I will engage with their arguments, as they are indeed insightful and make astute contributions to Indigenous film studies. However, what each of these recent works lacks is a reading of Indigenous film through an Indigenous epistemic framework, as put forth by Seneca scholar Michelle Raheja. Her book *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (2010) advocates a critique of Indigenous visual media “through the lens of a particular epistemic knowledge” (148). Raheja’s words demonstrate a path toward redress and (re-)conciliation. Although she was an early advocate of uplifting and privileging Indigenous epistemes and worldviews in film scholarship, Raheja’s challenge has not been taken up, which this essay attempts to do.⁴

During the opening credits of *A Red Girl’s Reasoning*, the steady drumbeats from the song “Electric Pow Wow Drum” (2012) by *A Tribe Called Red* (ATCR) lead us in. The establishing shot is filmed in black and white and is captured from behind a chain link fence. Peering through the fence, the camera is watching a foot chase: a white man wearing jeans, a leather jacket over a hoodie, and a toque is being pursued by a police officer. The next jump cut divides the frame into three juxtaposed panels, mimicking a comic or graphic novel. The foot chase continues as both runners dash in and out of abandoned urban spaces, while the frames jump from two to three to four panels per scene. In an offset side-by-side frame, the camera sits at the right footrest of a motorcycle in one shot, while another camera looks up to a tightly framed, black-helmeted rider. The positioning of the cameras indicates where the rider is going, where the rider is, and where the rider was: the rider was watching behind the chain link fence at the beginning of the film. At 0:15 seconds into the film, the frame is a tri-split shot, where the rider is in pursuit of both the police officer and the criminal running from the cop. They run down back-alley stairs and overturn garbage cans in a frenzy as the motorcycle, a modern war pony, maintains a steady speed in pursuit. The next frame, a low-angle close-up of the helmeted rider, is a small shot squarely situated in the middle of the screen. The shot enlarges three times with every drum beat, syncopated with the sounds of bells, akin to what a men’s northern traditional dancer would wear on his ankles, and mixed with a unique rhythmic scratch from ATCR’s “Electric Pow Wow Drum.” The build-up of both chases creates an action-packed opening in perfect harmony and on beat with the song, prior to any vocables. When the lead singer finally belts out the lead,

at 0:24 seconds, the criminal falls to the ground, scrambles to his feet, and continues running. Meanwhile, the frame splits into two balanced panels, indicating simultaneous action in this sequence. As the criminal pauses to take a breath next to a wall of iconic posters, the side-by-side frame captures the cop rounding the corner where the criminal just was. They are in close proximity to each other but appear to diverge in two different directions. The next shot is of the rider, who is hot on their heels, as indicated by the torn poster on the wall, which the two men had run past, that includes the words “BROADWAY BULLIES JAPANESE GIRLS.” At this point, the rider dismounts and removes their helmet to reveal the protagonist Delia, who has cornered her prey. The criminal scrambles to climb the chain link fence, while the police officer appears to have nowhere to go. The powwow mash-up song continues, synchronized with each punch, kick, glare, snarl, and block. Both the criminal and the cop are intercut and lose their weapons, a knife and a gun, as Delia manages to dodge their attacks while landing her punches. At the end of the film’s first minute, the leather-clad, lipstick-wearing Delia narrates, “I’ve been on this warpath for six long, lonely years.” One year prior to going on her warpath, Delia had been a victim of a violent sexual assault and beating, prompting her current actions. As the voiceover narration continues, the non-diegetic song slowly fades. Viewers are hearing why Delia has accepted the responsibility of finding predators for clients who have been victimized (since contact), while at the very same time seeing the criminal succumb to Delia’s beating. While he is down, she takes out a pack of cigarettes and lights one. Delia’s voiceover explains: “My clients come to me with their requests for justice” (01:26-01:29); all at once the narration pauses and the camera adopts the point-of-view of the rapist, who is staring at the end of a lit cigarette between Delia’s fingers. Delia burns his forehead with her cigarette — marking a “request for justice” — and Tailfeathers’ emphasis on syncing the word ‘justice’ with an image of disfiguring revenge is palpable. His permanent burn mark, fused with sacred medicine, will publicly shame him and identify him as a rapist.

Following this significant moment, Delia’s voiceover narration resumes: “when the justice system fails them.” Delia then rides off on her war pony and the “Electric Pow Wow Drum” halts abruptly. The song is featured on ATCR’s first self-titled album, which “responds to years of continued mistreatment and racial injustice” (Shuvera 144). The tragic irony is glaring, as one of the founders of the group, Ian

Campeau, publicly acknowledged his own monstrosity towards women after years of mistreating them and upholding toxic Indigenous masculinity. Campeau's revelation came in October 2020, three years after he had left ATCR to focus on his family, his health, and to advocate for Indigenous issues, including speaking out against sexual violence (Campeau). Campeau is from the Nipissing First Nation, an Anishinaabe community in northern Ontario. Hadley Friedland writes:

The *wetiko* (or windigo) concept has existed within Cree and Anishinabek societies for centuries. It has often been translated into English as “cannibal,” but it clearly encompasses more than literal flesh-eating. Beyond the ancient stories of cannibal giants who roamed the land, the concept is used to describe human beings who do monstrous things. (xvi)

Friedland's invaluable study on the monstrosity of unspeakable acts that target children from within Indigenous communities offers a framework for Indigenous law and redress that is applicable to adult victims of ravenous violence. While the focus of this special issue, *Indigenous Literary Arts of Truth and Redress*, aims to complicate reconciliation's “troubling rhetorics of closure and settler innocence,” we cannot overlook how generations of genocidal policy have resulted in normalized blame for communal rupture. In 2015, as moves toward holding the Canadian state accountable for the overwhelming number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, fingers began pointing inward. Robert Alexander Innes and Kim Anderson refer to those who have done monstrous things as “the ‘moose in the room’ as a means of taking on violence within our communities and building healthier families and futures” (176). They convincingly argue that published data cannot definitively determine that violence against Indigenous people is caused disproportionately by Indigenous men. “What is certain,” they write, “is that there are multiple risk factors within many Indigenous communities and families, such as poverty, substance abuse, and dysfunctional parenting skills — caused by racism and colonial interventions” (180-81). These truths are at the heart of this chapter on seeking redress and restoration through conciliation. As MacDonald observes,

reconciliation implies the need to revisit some point in time when relationships between Indigenous peoples and settlers were productive, respectful, and healthy. Where the term *reconciliation*

works better may be among Indigenous peoples, where various aspects of colonialism severely weakened some families and communities, introducing forms of lateral violence and inter-generational trauma, while also disrupting several millennia of inter-dependent relations with animals, plants, waters, and lands. (7)

Indeed, seeking restoration within our communities qualifies as reconciliation. Only time will tell if Campeau's actions will lead to healing. While he initially turned to creating music as an avenue for advocacy, over time, fame and power fueled his wetiko ego. His status as a successful Indigenous man deflected attention from (and thus enabled) his violent behaviour against Indigenous women. *A Tribe Called Red* included the hit song "Electric Pow Wow Drum," which opens and closes *A Red Girl's Reasoning*, and Tailfeathers had no way of predicting that one of the original artists behind that song would emerge as someone from an Indigenous community that would need to be called in, blanketed, smudged, and held accountable for hurting Indigenous women.

Authors and auteurs are using their creative energy to draw upon Indigenous epistemologies to theorize conciliatory relations. E. Pauline Johnson's Indigenous heroine, Christie, asks her husband, Charlie, a "'new' m[a]n of Canada"⁵ (Goeman 43), "why should I recognize the rites of your nation when you do not acknowledge the rites of mine?" (Johnson 117). The question continues to resonate over a century later, and Tailfeathers' answer is to shift the focus from the colonial legislation of the Indian Act to centre Indigenous laws and principles.⁶

Delia Counts Coup

After the opening, action-packed scene, when "Electric Pow Wow Drum" abruptly stops, the scene changes to reveal a close-up of a whiskey glass, placed on a cardboard coaster, that has the words "Goldman Industries" written on it. In the background a newscaster reports: "The victim has been identified as an Aboriginal female. Foul play is suspected, but police have yet to name any suspects" (01:44-01:52). Delia ponders this news, which is a recurring tragedy outside what Raheja calls the "virtual reservation" (43, 147, 149). In *Reservation Reelism*, Raheja says the virtual reservation is the imagined and imaginative sites produced by the cinema. As an imaginative site of critical engagement, the virtual reservation serves as a space in which to counter such stereotypes, while also articulating new models of Indigenous knowledge

through visual culture. “The space in which Native Americans create and contest self-images and where these images collide with mass-mediated representations of Indians [sic] by the dominant culture. . . .” (43); “a space where Native American filmmakers put the long, vexed history of Indigenous representations into dialogue with epistemic Indigenous knowledges” (147); “Indigenous people recuperate, regenerate, and begin to heal on the virtual reservation . . . it is a decolonizing space” (149).

After Delia reads the words on the coaster, she then ignites it with her lighter. She uses the enflamed coaster to light her cigarette. The next scene captures the clandestine meeting between Delia and a new client named Nelly (played by Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers). Nelly gives Delia a manila envelope containing a photo of a serial rapist, whom Delia recognizes. Delia accepts Nelly’s offer of tobacco with a handshake as she holds Nellie’s gaze of gratitude, silently acknowledging their sisterhood. As Nelly is recounting Delia’s storied legacy of unbelievability that “urban Indians wished was true” (03:13), Delia vanishes as mysteriously as she appeared “in the flesh.” In the background, the engine of her war pony revs away.

To count coup, one must not only be quiet and undetectable, but, most importantly, one must be brave: “Counting coup, or striking an enemy, was the highest honour earned by warriors. . . . This was best accomplished by risking one’s life in charging the enemy on foot or horseback to get close enough to touch or strike him with the hand, a weapon, or a ‘coupstick.’ Humiliating the enemy also played a part” (McGinnes). Counting coup is attributed to the traditional acts of warriors, usually men. Laura Klein and Lillian Ackerman have confirmed that Blackfoot women led war parties during the nineteenth century: “A woman who wanted to go to war, and there were many such, was judged as a man would be by her success in counting coup or seizing enemy weapons” (122). Delia is a warrior woman, as she describes the past “six, long, lonely years” on her warpath of revenge. Delia is “an epithet for Artemis, [the] Greek Goddess of the hunt” (Hargreaves 170), and, as a huntress, she does more than simply reverse the trope of male predator hunting female prey; she counts coup on Brian, the targeted predator of this short film.

The next scene opens with a wide shot showing a dapper young white man seated alone at the bar. The bartender, played by Blackfoot (Siksika) creative Rose Stiffarm, returns to her detail twirling a wooden baseball bat, which she sets beside the register. She is an

Indigenous woman who exudes confidence. Suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere, Delia appears and places her order for a “whiskey; neat” (03:32). The man is surprised both by her presence and by her whiskey order. He says to her, “Wouldn’t take a pretty girl like you to be a whiskey drinker. You from around here?” (03:37-03:42). While I agree with Hargreaves’s reading of this scene as Delia’s inherent and hereditary right to Indigenous spaces and places, and as embodying a timeless Indigenous presence as put forth by Secwepemc chief Bev Sellars (Hargreaves 176), I read this as an act of counting coup. The predator’s question, “You from around here?”, reveals she is not a regular. To count coup, one must go straight into enemy territory undetected and leave one’s mark, which Delia did. When his empty small talk fails to elicit a response, Brian gets up for a washroom break. The camera zooms in for an extreme close-up to frame his words: “Don’t disappear.” Hargreaves misses the mark when she analyzes this scene as embodying the tired Hollywood trope of the “vanishing Indian.” Hargreaves exclaims that “there’s no risk of her disappearing” (175), because Delia is ostensibly from there. Yet, the fact remains, she is a visibly Indigenous woman in dangerous territory, a paracolonial reality where racist white perpetrators face no consequences due to, as Delia surmises, “this country’s pathetic excuse for a justice system.”

While the smooth talker is in the “little boys’ room” (03:54), Delia has the bartender refill Brian’s empty glass with a double shot of whiskey, and Delia quickly and secretly pours powdered drugs into it. The bartender adds the final touch by stirring the mix with her finger. This act epitomizes a modern coup counting and is not simply eye-for-an-eye retaliation or, as Killebrew writes, retribution: “Drugging Brian’s drink in the same way he drugged his victims beforehand completes the act of symbolic retribution” (155). Delia held her own glass close to her the entire time the predator talked to her, as she knew his *modus operandi*. She had good reason to watch and observe and secure her own safety. Meanwhile, returning to the scene, Brian is unaware that he is the prey; as Barrie states, “we know that Delia will not disappear — instead, Brian might” (109). After he guzzles the doctored drink, there is a jump cut to the climactic and final scene. Delia rode, quite literally, into enemy territory, got close enough but did not touch the enemy, and seized his weapons: she seized Brian, who embodies weaponry that has repeatedly harmed, violated, and perhaps also killed Indigenous women. Tailfeathers wrote a script that put Brian in a powerless position

and, through Delia, ended his monstrosity so that he could not further victimize Indigenous women. Tailfeathers reverses the trope so that Indigenous women work together as sisters, as collaborators, as conspirators, and as kin to enact redress. Killebrew's thoughtful synthesis of *A Red Girl's Reasoning* notes that the film "offers a hard-hitting but heartfelt exploration of the culture of racist and misogynistic violence facing Indigenous women in urban environments in Canada and the alternative systems of kinship and community through which they can support, protect, and honour each other" (134).

Igniting Conciliation

The mise-en-scène of the final act is a long shot that shows a patient Delia sitting on a folding chair, facing the misogynist predator who is out cold and crucified, naked except for underwear, with his arms securely strapped to a structure that resembles an upright weaving loom. The diegetic sound of a train's whistle blows in the distance as she waits for him to regain consciousness. They are on an open-air landing above the ground floor. As Brian awakens, the first words out of Delia's mouth are "Old habits die hard" (04:55). This double entendre refers to his serial predatory behaviour as well as to her likely having repeated this scene for the past six years on her warpath of redress. Not posed as a question, but more to acknowledge their acquaintance, she addresses him by his first name for the first time, "Hey, Brian" (04:57), and shows him photographs of a battered Nelly. Hargreaves offers an excellent summary of their exchange, during which he fluctuates between confusion, feigned forgetting, forced apologies, denial, and, finally, reluctant avowal. He lies about Nelly being "the only one" who "wanted" to be abused. To jog this lowlife's memory of their first meeting, Delia punches Brian in the face and holds him in a crotch clench as she gently strokes his neck. These intimate acts, at once violent and gentle, reflect how Delia experienced the "dirty things [he is] capable of" (06:42). Delia and Nelly, as well as countless Indigenous peoples, have "been screwed over by this country's pathetic excuse for a justice system" (06:44-06:47), a statement that connotes another level of systemic and cultural rape. Although Brian cries dry white tears, Delia does not fall for his blubbering lies; furthermore, she repeatedly calls Brian by his first name, which is "naming and historicizing white male violence [and] exposing the systemic violence of the justice system" (Hargreaves 167).

Tailfeathers endows Delia with agency and judicial power, not only for personal revenge, but to show how systemic, gendered, colonial violence continues to be upheld by the Canadian judicial system, and in response, Delia enacts justice. Recent scholarship on the film falls short in interpreting Delia's actions. Barrie, for example, concludes that this "short film depicts a counter reality — an imagined reality that exists solely in the realm of representation, where violence is avenged with violence" (110). Delia's form of justice has its roots in Indigenous realities, not just in the "realm of representation" or on the virtual reservation. Delia's actions and justice align with the teachings of Niitsitapi Elders as narrated to Annabel Crop Eared Wolf in 2006. When Blackfoot men dishonoured women, there were public consequences:⁷

Men who dishonored (raped) women were restrained, placed in a conspicuous place and in a humiliating situation and made a public spectacle. This is an extreme form of public shaming. Such a person may subsequently choose to leave the Tribe. If he should stay, he has totally lost face and the trust of the community and living in the community would be difficult. (104)

Tailfeathers indeed restrains Brian and places him in a prominent place, not only outside, on the second-floor landing, but also in shots that range from full-frontal to extreme close-ups for potentially thousands of viewers to look down and heap scorn upon him. Humiliated, he is stripped to his underwear. Moreover, if Brian were Niitsitapi, he would have been given a choice: to leave or to stay — neither appealing choices.

At 07:25, as Brian realizes that Delia will not have mercy on him, he yells for help at the same moment as "Electric Pow Wow Drum" kicks in with the lead of the vocables. As he frantically screams and struggles in vain, Delia calmly walks over to where she was sitting to reveal a red gasoline canister, upon which Brian's sightline is squarely focused. He is seemingly harmonizing with the non-diegetic song by ATCR because his yells for help are in sync with the vocables. Meanwhile, Delia douses Brian with gas, soaking him from head to toe. As she momentarily steps away, Brian's face contorts: slobber, drool, and gasoline drip from his chin as he scowls, "You dirty fuckin' squaw!" (07:50-07:52). His monstrosity is on full display as he tries to intimidate her with racist language.

Let me reiterate here Christie's words from Johnson's story, cited at the outset of this article, whereby her husband Charlie has just begged

for reconciliation and for her return to their relationship. She calmly asks:

How do I know when another nation will come and conquer you as you white men conquered us? And they will . . . tell us another truth, that you are not my husband, that you are but disgracing and dishonoring me, that you are keeping me here, not as your wife, but as your — your — *squaw*. (Johnson 117-18)

Brian's hateful hurling of the s-word at Delia is a desperate act of self-preservation, whereas Christie utters the s-word emphatically before her husband can use it against her. Through this act, she legislates her agency while highlighting society's racist and inhumane judgements toward Indigenous women. Christie's emphasis on the s-word ignites Charlie's irrationality, and he reacts abusively and violently, nearly breaking her arm. The s-word was and continues to be weaponized against Indigenous women, but because Delia had endured Brian's abuse seven years earlier — and, by extension, we have all endured and survived white, male violence — the allegorical Delia is unphased by his threats. Poised, she lights a cigarette while Brian exclaims that she'll never get away with her actions. Delia calmly walks up to him with her cigarette, blows the sacred smoke into his wet face, says "Just watch me" in an unknown tongue,⁸ and places the lit cigarette between his lips. Just like in the Blackfoot example of justice and redress, shared by Crop Eared Wolf, Brian is given a choice. Killebrew mistakenly interprets Brian being set on fire as "the film's alternative system of justice that doles out death penalties to rapists" (150). That Delia gives Brian a choice is the crux of this film. Does he choose to stay, which would mean he might swallow the cigarette, or does he choose to leave, by dropping it onto his gasoline-soaked body to potentially burn to death? *Tailfeathers* has enacted Blackfoot peacemaking through her protagonist, Delia. She embodies Blackfoot cultural and political identities and employs Blackfoot epistemologies while reflecting her power in an Indigenous language, igniting conciliation.

Tailfeathers states that "Some people ask how violence solves violence. . . . But it's metaphorical violence. Indigenous women, particularly in Canada on the Downtown Eastside — these women live violence on a daily basis" (Hargreaves 183, note 56). She put a privileged white male in a position of vulnerability and fear, and shamed him, as in counting coup and as Blackfoot teachings — reasoned, empower-

ing, and transformative — dictate. In restoring justice for Indigenous women who have been violently abused, have gone missing, and who continue to be murdered, Tailfeathers' and Delia's creative work is decolonial and resurgent.

Tailfeathers used Johnson's title to magnify literary and filmic restorative justice for women who survived physical and emotional abuse by white, male perpetrators. E. Pauline Johnson performed a fifteen-minute rendition of "A Red Girl's Reasoning" onstage in 1892, prior to its publication in 1893 (Kovacs 106). The published version begins with Christine's lawful marriage. She "looked much the same as her sisters, all Canada through, who are the offspring of red and white parentage — olive-complexioned, gray-eyed, black-haired, with figure slight and delicate" (104). In attendance is the bridegroom Charlie McDonald, her parents, and an "assembled tribe" to whom Christine demonstrates loyalty and accountability. That they witness her union establishes them as her kin relations, each bearing a reciprocal responsibility to one another; because they are, in Christie's words, "my people." Johnson's piece critiques the Canadian colonial state's prohibition of matriarchy. The 1876 Indian Act in Canada legislated marriage, among other things, and Beth Piatote asserts that it "attacked indigenous [sic] kinship and family structures" ("Domestic Trials" 98) because, according to the Act, only "male person[s] of Indian blood," their children, and any woman who lawfully married to that Indian man were considered Indians. Upon her marriage to Charlie, therefore, Christie would not be recognized as a "Red Girl" under Canadian Law. Johnson establishes at the outset that Christie has kinship relations with her "sisters all Canada through" by matrilineal descent, for whom she takes a stand in her actions at the end of the story. Christie's self-imposed exile and disappearance from her non-Indigenous husband is a result of injustices that he, and by extension the national heteropatriarchal law, forcefully and violently imposed upon her. After Charlie overhears Christie's defense of her parents' "marriage . . . performed by Indian rites" (110), he verbally attacks her and, ultimately, also physically. Reasoning that their own marriage is not legal, according to her peoples' worldview, she decides to nullify their union and then disappears. Her decision to leave is a refusal to be defined and confined by the Indian Act, which ultimately preserves her matriarchal Indigeneity and that of her "sisters."

Unfortunately, colonial law, the Indian Act, and anti-Indigenous racism have supported a legacy of violence and trauma that generations

of Indigenous families have endured. In response, some literary works have culminated in resistance, demonstrating Indigenous resilience and opposing reconciliatory plots and motifs.

Birdie's Resurgent Restoration

The release of Tracey Lindberg's *Birdie* coincided with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 "Calls to Action" in 2015. *Birdie* is a Cree story about the healing journey of Bernice Meetoos, "a big, beautiful Cree woman with a dark secret in her past. [*Birdie* is] about the universal experience of recovering from tragedy" ("Birdie"). She ultimately seeks pimatisewin, the good life, through ceremony that involves her relations: the matriarchs of her family, the tree of life, medicines, and feast food.

Lindberg has stated that *Birdie* explores the well-known Cree natural law called wahkotowin. Brenda Macdougall describes wahkotowin in some detail, cautioning that reducing it to mean relationship or kinship "belies much of the meaning and sentiment that the term and its derivatives actually express" (433). Macdougall writes:

Wahkootowin is the Cree cultural concept that best represents how family, place, and economic realities were historically interconnected, the expression of a world view that laid out a system of social obligation and mutual responsibility between related individuals — between members of a family — as the foundational relationship within communities. (Macdougall 432-33)

The mutual responsibility and interconnectedness that Macdougall identifies align with Lindberg's queries regarding *Birdie's* narrative: "What do reciprocal obligations look like? What happens when they're broken, and how do you rebuild?" (Keeler). Lindberg further illustrates the prominence of kinship relations by combining English words to convey and illuminate Cree relational concepts. *Birdie* is thus a littlebig-womandaughter, sistercousin, and daughterniece to her littlemother.

In *Birdie* three women go missing: the protagonist, Bernice, her littlemother, Auntie Val, and Bernice's mother, Maggie. Maggie leaves her Alberta community for Vancouver and as the novel closes has not been heard from. Lindberg, an attorney by training and a survivor of sexual abuse, says the novel-writing process helped her own process of "tiny healings" ("Darkness").

Bernice, Maggie, and Auntie Val are survivors of sexual assault and gendered violence, and Bernice's primary perpetrator is her uncle, the wolf. Friedland asks, "How do we protect those we love from those we love?" (xv). The uncles in Bernice's family are all broken, victimizing their own sisters and nieces, violently dismantling kinship. *Birdie* also hints that the wolf possibly fathered Skinny Freda, Bernice's cousin-sister. Instead of experiencing loving, trusting, and supportive kinship relations, Bernice endures years of non-consensual, incestuous sexual violence, which she abruptly brings to a stop.

In the climactic scene, one that is triggering for sexual assault survivors, Bernice intervenes as the monstrous wolf is trying to rape Freda. He pounces at BirdBernice, which causes his heart attack. Rather than save this serial rapist, she sets the house on fire, with him in it, and leaves. Satisfied with her own justice, yet also deeply affected by it, Birdie goes missing like the women before her. *Birdie* traces the origins of the violence and familial dysfunction to the Indian Act and to Indian Residential Schools, and her healing cannot come from western medicine: she must restore wahkotohwin through ceremony. And in her dreams/sleep state, her kohkum (grandmother) revealed stories and teachings that prompted Bernice to act and lead her women relatives in ceremony, culminating in pimatisewin.

Aubrey Hanson's "Reading for Reconciliation? Indigenous Literatures in a Post-TRC Canada" considers resurgence to be "a flourishing of the Indigenous inside," as put forth by Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Simpson (16). Hanson argues that reconciliation is another colonial tool that can only be dismantled by reading through the lens of resurgence, because it is useful to understand "the significance of Indigenous literary arts to the communities that create and celebrate them. [Resurgence] is about people in their own communities nourishing their own traditions, languages, worldviews, stories, knowledges, and ways of being" (74-75). Lindberg's story of love is a roadmap of how colonization, systemic injustice, poverty, and sexual violence impacted an Indigenous family, rupturing relations in dire need of restoration.

As individual creatives, Johnson, Tailfeathers, and Lindberg are recognized within networks of kin and family, their communal works a continuum of Indigenous presence. Indigenous creatives have turned epidemics of violence against Indigenous women into stories of resilience, reclamation, resurgence, and restoration. All of the protagonists restore kinship and relationship obligations — Indigenous systems of

justice — in their journeys to find balance, beauty, harmony, and peace. Macdougall asserts that because “actions and reactions to internal community relationships were expressed intergenerationally through the extended family,” kinship not only establishes relations, but also “permits an interpretation of . . . sociocultural and economic activity as a part of a larger cultural world view” (434).

Conclusion: Community-led Redress

The TRC’s 94 “Calls to Action” are “an appeal to mobilize all levels of government, organizations, as well as individuals to make concrete changes in society. [The TRC] lists specific actions to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation” (*Truth & Reconciliation*). Unlike these calls to action, the Indigenous creatives’ works turn inward and to their own communities, modelling resurgence and redress. They are also calls to action.

Stolen Indigenous lives remain a Canadian epidemic. Awareness-raising initiatives about MMIWG2S have taken place thanks to community-led actions for redress. Every year in October, Stephanie English, from the Piikani nation (a Blackfoot reserve), walks northward to Mohkinstis, the Blackfoot name for Calgary, a distance of about 200 kilometres. She organized this walk in 2018 to raise awareness for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Her two daughters had talked about making this walk with her, prior to their own deaths. Her daughter Alison’s death in 2015 was deemed a suicide, which Stephanie questions, and one year later, the dismembered remains of her daughter Joey were found scattered around Calgary. Stephanie did not allow the vicious October snowstorm of 2018, with its near-white-out conditions, to discourage her. She began the walk with only her mom driving behind her. Along the way, busloads of students laid roses in her path and, toward the end, local Calgary members of Walking With Our Sisters and Awo Taan joined her. She concluded her non-stop, forty-four-hour walk on 4 October 2018 in step with the annual Sisters in Spirit vigil in downtown Calgary. Stephanie was sponsored in part by the Awo Taan Healing Lodge Society, Calgary’s only shelter for Indigenous women at risk, which is grounded in Indigenous frameworks and led by Indigenous women. Awo Taan organizes the Calgary Sisters in Spirit walk, a national campaign under the purview of the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC). NWAC has “worked for

more than four decades to document the systemic violence impacting Indigenous women, girls, their families, and communities. From 2005 to 2010, NWAC's Sisters in Spirit (SiS) initiative confirmed 582 cases of missing and/or murdered Indigenous women and girls over a span of twenty years" ("Sisters in Spirit Handout"). Christie Belcourt reminds us that the 2012 RCMP report that found 1,181 cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls remains "highly problematic" (xvi), for how did they validate Indigenous identity? What of the suspicious deaths not reported as homicides? What of the two-spirit and transgender lives lost? Lastly, Belcourt notes that the RCMP report only went back thirty years. She recognizes that "since 2012, the numbers have been climbing. All of this is such cold talk about 'numbers,' when we should really be saying 'lives'" (xvi).

In May 2018, my former employer, Mount Royal University (MRU), hosted the Walking With our Sisters moccasin vamp commemoration, an initiative dreamed and brought to life by Belcourt to honour those very lives that remain missing and murdered. She asserts that despite all of the hate, normalized heteropatriarchy, and gender violence against MMIWG2S, she has been "taught . . . to hope. [She has] seen thousands . . . of volunteers, both Native and non-Native, working side by side" (xvii). Their coming together to support the families is kinship restored.

My daughter and I volunteered to set up the vamps and we participated in the opening ceremony at MRU. As a Diné relative, I honour local teachings and was humbled to witness and partake. The universal language of healing and seeking restoration is directly related to the Diné philosophy and epistemology of hózhó. Hózhó is commonly translated as reaching "a state of peace and harmony. [Of living and developing] respect and/or reverence for self, his or her relatives, and the natural world" (Werito 27). I define hózhó and challenge my students to demonstrate hózhó through acts of resistance and advocacy in everyday contexts. One student excelled in one of my final project assignments and collaborated with Elders and community members to come up with an awareness initiative that involved tea. She initially called her project Solidariteas (it is now renamed Sarjesa, Inc.), demonstrating her commitment to listen to Elders who taught her the proper ways to pick and identify local plants. The tea is packaged in boxes that educate about missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and each package is imprinted with a land acknowledgement. The tea bags and boxes feature Jonathan Labillois's (Listuguj Mi'gmaq First Nation) "Still Dancing," a

“painting that honours the missing women and girls, and hangs in the Native Women’s Shelter in Montreal” (Daignault). Two dollars of every box of her hand-picked tea, originally packed in hand-sewn tea bags, went to the Awo Taan Healing Lodge and “in the first 4-month pilot for the tea, [Solidariteas] donated over \$1500” (Daignault).

Together, Indigenous women’s creative work and taking action encourage thinking critically about gendered violence and resurgent ways of restoration. I was humbled to walk behind Stephanie English at the Sisters in Spirit walk in 2018. She continues the annual walk, she continues to confront the police and fire chiefs in attendance, and she continues to demand justice for Joey, whose remains are scattered in a landfill. She simply cannot bring her daughter home. Bringing sisters home and holding perpetrators and colonial structures accountable is how the literary and filmic protagonists have stepped up and taken action. Taking action to redress violence and injustice against Indigenous peoples is critical for reconciliation, aptly called *reconciliAction* by many.

Just as The Kizhaay Anishniaabe Niin — I am a Kind Man program — holds Indigenous men accountable by upholding the values that “violence against Indigenous women is not a women’s issue, but rather an issue where men must assume responsibility through their words and actions to stop the violence” (Innes and Anderson 185), so must society in order to enact redress.

Indigenous knowledges have traditionally been transmitted through ceremony and storytelling. Bringing attention to “Red Girls” gone missing and murdered through Indigenous literary arts and filmic texts promotes restorative calls to action through resurgent means that centre Indigenous languages, cultures, communities, and kinship obligations.

NOTES

¹ While beyond the scope of this essay, I acknowledge several AuntieAuthors and AuntieAuteurs — an acknowledgement of Tracey Lindberg’s compound neologisms in *Birdie* — who address violence against Indigenous women, girls, and LGBTQ2SIA in their fiction and filmic storytelling, including but not limited to the following AuntieAuthors: Maria Campbell, Louise Halfe, Lee Maracle, Jeannette Armstrong, and Eden Robinson. The nieces who deal with violence, resilience, resistance, and restoration in their contemporary works include Tracey Lindberg, Cherie Dimaline, Katherena Vermette, Leanne Simpson, and Tanya Tagaq. Filmic works by Indigenous AuntieAuteurs include documen-

tarians Alanis Obomsawin and Christine Welsh, while other filmmakers are Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers, Georgina Lightning, Lisa Jackson, and Alethea Arnaquq-Baril.

² Stories by family members relate a long history of community members who are missing or who have been found murdered (Therien).

³ The lower-case “i” is Verstraten’s.

⁴ My recent essay, “Reel Restoration in *Drunktown’s Finest*,” is an attempt to do so.

⁵ Might Johnson have written Charlie McDonald as an homage to Canada’s first prime minister, John A. Macdonald?

⁶ For more on the Indian Act’s influence on Johnson’s work, see the works listed by Beth Piatote, Mishuana Goeman, and Alexandra Kovacs.

⁷ Klein and Ackerman also note that “public humiliation and banishment of rapist” were the consequences for Indigenous people of the Plateau regions: northwest coast of the US and southern BC. (87, 89).

⁸ Hargreaves says this is the Cree language (180), but Cree poet Dr. Louise Bernice Halfe could not verify this after repeated screenings of this scene. I also asked Elder Roy Bear Chief, a Blackfoot speaker, for his opinion and have concluded that what Delia utters is not in the Blackfoot language.

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