On Violence and Vengeance: *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* and the Horrific History of Canada’s Indian Residential Schools

by Sean Carleton

**Keywords:** Indigenous Peoples; education; Canadian history; Residential Schools

Written and directed by Mi’gmaq filmmaker Jeff Barnaby, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* offers an unflinching fictional account of Indigenous agency in the face of the horrors of Canada’s Indian Residential Schools. Set in the 1970s on the Mi’gmaq Red Crow reserve, known as the Kingdom of the Crow, the film stars Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs as Aila, a tough teenage girl with artistic aspirations and a deep-seated hatred for the sadistic Indian Agent, Popper (Mark Antony Krupa). Popper runs the St. Dymphna’s Residential School and the Red Crow reserve with an iron fist and his heavy-handed tactics mobilize a group of Indigenous youth led by Aila to exact revenge. In the end, Aila’s courageous actions free her consciousness and disrupt the colonial order of Red Crow society. In many ways, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* dramatizes the process of decolonization that anti-colonial thinker Frantz Fanon outlines in his chapter “On Violence” in *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Indeed, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* is less about reconciliation, *per se*, and more about vengeance as a means to deal with colonial trauma; its Fanonian “the last shall be first” energy offers a unique perspective.1 Barnaby’s film is a kind of revenge fantasy that taps into the wide-spread outrage by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples over continuing reports of the abuse children experienced in residential schools. In fact, only a few weeks before the film’s limited release in Canada in January 2014, news broke of an Ontario judge ordering...
the Government of Canada to hand over documents related to an investigation into extreme forms of abuse at the St. Anne’s Indian Residential School. The abuse Indigenous students were subjected to in St. Anne’s—ranging from harsh beatings and sexual attacks by teachers to children being forced to eat their own vomit and shocking students in a homemade electric chair—makes the abuse depicted at the fictional St. Dymphna’s school in the film seem all the more real and disturbing to watch.

Rhymes for Young Ghouls is a heavy and profoundly troubling film, but one that deserves a wide audience. In Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada, political theorist Paulette Regan argues that Canadians must learn to confront the hidden and horrific history of Indian Residential Schools as a starting point to build greater awareness of, and meaningful relations with, Indigenous peoples today. She claims that such a strategy of unlearning national myths and narratives that ignore Canadian colonialism or portray it as peaceful or benevolent, which she calls a process of “unsettling,” can contribute to the larger project of decolonization. Thus, Rhymes for Young Ghouls is a timely film about violence and vengeance with “unsettling” potential; it will undoubtedly shock audiences as well as raise greater awareness about the horrors of residential schools. As such, Rhymes for Young Ghouls is not only exceptional but is arguably one of the most important films to be released in Canada in recent memory.

Colonialism & the Kingdom of the Crow

Rhymes for Young Ghouls begins with five year-old Aila and her younger brother Tyler attending a party with their parents. Aila’s parents, like many Red Crow residents, engage in drugs and alcohol as part of “the art of forgetfulness” in an attempt to block out their experiences of abuse in St. Dymphna’s residential school. On the way home from the party, Tyler is mistakenly killed by Anna (Aila’s mother played by Rosanne Supernault) in a drinking-and-driving accident. The next morning, Aila awakes to find her mother dead hanging from a rope on their porch and her father, Joseph (Glen Gould), being arrested. Alone, Aila is left in the custody of her uncle Burner (Brandon Oakes) who, as the film quickly fast forwards ten years, successfully recruits her into a life of drug slinging in the reserve’s underground economy.

Selling drugs is a means to an end for Aila. The film explains that, by law (quoting the Indian Act), every Indigenous child between the ages of 5 and 16 who is physically fit must attend an Indian Residential School. The opening credits clarify: “Her Majesty’s attendants, to be called truant officers, will take into custody a child whom they believe to be absent from school using as much force as the circumstance requires. A person caring for an Indian child who fails to cause such a child to attend school shall immediately be imprisoned,
and such person arrested without warrant and
said child conveyed to school by the truant
officer.” Historically, truancy—the intentional
absence from compulsory education—posed a
direct threat to the assimilationist aims of
Canada’s Indian Residential School project and
was thus heavily monitored, often by Indian
Agents. On the fictitious Red Crow reserve,
however, the Indian Agent Popper is so corrupt
that he will accept a “truancy tax” to exempt
those able to pay, and Aila manages to earn
enough money selling drugs with her uncle to
keep her temporarily out of St. Dymphna’s. But
one day Aila’s drug money is stolen and her
father suddenly returns from jail. All at once,
Aila’s freedom from life inside “St. D’s” is
jeopardized.

With the help of three friends, Aila
decides to break into the school and steal the
required money from the Indian Agent. However, the plan is quickly discovered by
Popper, who cracks down on Joseph and takes
Aila to St. Dymphna’s. The conditions at the
school are abusive and coercive. Popper and a
priest are portrayed intimidating new
students to the school. Popper, in particular, is
aggressive and antagonistic and he
barks orders under threat of violence:
“From here on in, it’s the Queen’s fucking
English. Relish it!” Upon arrival at the school,
Aila is taken into custody and stripped of her
clothes by two nuns who cut off her braids and
roughly wash her before giving her European
clothes and shoving her into a dark cell.

Before the reality of being locked away
in the residential school breaks her spirit, Aila is
sprung loose by a local boy who has discovered
a secret entrance. With her temporary freedom,
Aila resolves to carry out her revenge. Popper
must pay. Dressed in Halloween costumes, Aila
and her friends break into the school at night.
After attacking one of Popper’s guards and
managing to release Aila’s father, whom Popper
had taken into custody, the gang descend on
Popper’s office and steal $20,000. With their
new riches, the group decides to flee the school.
However, it is not long before Popper tracks
down Joseph and Aila. In the middle of a heart-
to-heart conversation between father and
daughter, in which Joseph opens up to Aila and
confides in her that she is not responsible for the
intergenerational effects of residential schools,
Popper abruptly breaks onto the scene and
knocks Joseph unconscious with a rifle. Popper
then beats Aila extensively before trying to rape
her. Popper’s assault is stopped, however, when
the young boy that sprung Aila from St. Dymphna’s
confronts him and shoots Popper in the face, killing
the Indian Agent with his
own rifle. In the end,
Joseph takes the fall to
protect Aila and the boy
from persecution,
symbolically giving
the new Mi’gmaq generation
a chance at freedom.

Towards an “Unsettling” Pedagogy

*Rhymes for Young Ghouls* augments existing
films on Canada’s Indian Residential Schools
such as *We Were Children* (2012) and *Muffins for Granny* (2008), but adds a different
perspective. *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* aims to shock audiences not just with the violence of the schools but with the ability for Indigenous peoples to violently resist and fight back. Filmmaker Jeff Barnaby has said that his goal in making the film was to push the envelope with a kind of “bare knuckles cinema,” and he certainly pulled no punches. The film is drenched in a kind of violence that emphasizes Indigenous agency. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that: “Decolonization is always a violent event. In its bare reality, decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives. For the last can be first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists.” Indeed, for Fanon decolonization occurs as a result of a colonized person’s realization that the “deployment of violence,” in different forms, is often crucial for liberation. In *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, Aila exacts vengeance with the violent killing of Popper which, indeed, opens a space for Aila and others on the Red Crow reserve to step outside the shadows of colonialism. *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, then, contributes to an “unsettling” pedagogy by directly confronting Canadian colonialism and the horrors of Indian Residential Schools. Pursuing such a pedagogy is important because, as Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred has suggested, “Canadians are in denial, *in extremis*” about the history and ongoing legacies of colonialism. It is hard to argue with Alfred. Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, speaking at the 2009 G20 summit in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, proudly proclaimed to the world that Canada has “no history of colonialism.” In challenging people to learn more about the damaging effects of colonialism in Canada and about the horrific history of residential schools, films like *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* create opportunities for what Regan deems necessary for decolonization: for “all Canadians to fundamentally rethink our past and its implications for our present and future relations.”

*Rhymes for Young Ghouls* will prove invaluable to the many efforts to educate Canadians about the history of residential schools already happening across the country. In terms of integrating the film into classrooms, however, caution should be taken to fully flesh out the contours of Canada’s history of colonialism and education. It is perhaps easy to be outraged by the oppressive and inexcusable actions of one individual such as Popper, but it is important to emphasize the overall violence of the Indian Residential School system which, for over one hundred years, generally sought to “kill the Indian in the child.” It is also important to develop a historical consciousness about the ways in which residential schools in Canada were but one part of Canada’s larger strategy of dispossessing Indigenous peoples from their lands to create a capitalist settler society.

Overall, films like *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* are significant because they can used by
historians, teachers, and activists as accessible methods in which to confront Canada’s horrific history of colonialism and to create decolonizing dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples about how to establish more positive relations in the present and future.

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i Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 2. For more on how Fanon’s ideas might be applied to the Canadian context see Glen Sean Clouthard’s new book, Red Skins, White Masks Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). On violence and the colonial history of the Americas see, for example, Ned Blackhawk, Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006) and Gord Hill, The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010).

ii Regan, Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2010), 13.

iii Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 2004 [1963]), 1 and 3.

iv Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 21.

v Alfred, Forward, ix.

vi Paulette Regan, Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 4.