

STAGING CIRCULAR SUFFERING:
ABORIGINAL REPERTOIRES AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN CANADA

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis begins with the claim that gendered violence continues to plague First Nations women and Aboriginal communities across Canada, despite national statistics that suggest improvement. Contemporary Native theatre attempts to counter systemic violence that oppresses the Aboriginal peoples. Violence against women is especially prevalent when exploring First Nations realities, and the dramatic works examined illustrate how the rampancy of gendered violence both hinders and defines the lived realities of First Nations women in Canada.

Through the careful reading of Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*, Yvette Nolan's *Annie Mae's Movement*, and Marie Clements's *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* this thesis contends that Native theatre is an affective tool for promoting social change. Through witnessing and testifying, seeking spiritual and cultural fulfillment, and exploring the potentialities of what I call the Aboriginal repertoire, First Nations women and Canada as a nation may take the next steps toward individual and communal wellness.

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CHAPTER ONE:

Introduction

When Augusto Boal suggests that “The theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it” (122) he paints an image of a dramatic space transformed into a weapon of mass [cultural] production. But this concept of a theatrical weapon is problematic. Often the theatre is viewed as an elicitor of affect¹ and perhaps even a vehicle for measurable social change, but should those who “wield” the tools of theatre do so violently? After all, when a weapon fulfills its design, the result is always violence. If the aim of the theatrical pieces under study is to provoke affect, is it possible for the representation of violence to become an active agent, or does violence always beget further violence? Jill Dolan claims that theatrical representations create “meanings that have very specific, material consequences” (2) and, with various potential results in mind, the theatre must strive to be a medium of exhibition, transference, and exposure. Certain plays strive to reveal the nature of human suffering, and when it comes to the theatrical treatment of violence against women, the desired result is the re-creation or re-mediation of violent realities.

Contemporary North American media allow for both realistic and highly sensationalized versions of violence to dominate headlines and, perhaps contrarily, various impressions of violence are artistically represented by those who strive to make sense of and mediate the chaos. Violence largely defines existence for the people that it is forced upon and often the most vulnerable are unable to speak out against violence or

¹ When speaking of affect, I subscribe to George Pierce Baker’s notion that theatre guides its audience “from emotion to emotion” (qtd in Seldon 97). Samuel Seldon suggests that the theatre must evoke three layers of response: emotions, feelings, and sensations (97). When I use the term affect, I refer to feelings of discomfort or distress (sympathy, empathy, sadness, loss) which may cause an audience to react against the forces that create similar emotions in the real world. I also refer to feelings of joy, relief, and happiness that the audience feels when characters overcome adversity and alter their staged violent realities. The aim of theatrical affect that I am discussing here is for the audience to see similar instances of suffering outside of the walls of the theatre, so that the audience is then “moved” to influence change in the real world.

change their circumstances. In Canada, a body of the population that is notably impacted by violence due to destitution, isolation, addiction, and social distress is the First Nations peoples and the existence and impact of violence against First Nations women is explored and expressed through contemporary Native drama.² Native theatre, as this thesis will argue, acts as an artistic and expressive medium and strives to generate discourse about violent realities. Native theatre has the potential to speak for/of and defend those who are most vulnerable to violence.

Violence against First Nations women is a prevalent issue in Canada and is at the thematic forefront of First Nations drama. In October of 2011, Amnesty International, along with several other non-profit organizations, outlined a detailed action plan for the nation designed to dramatically counter the rampancy of violence against First Nations women. Nine months later, the Federal Minister responded with "I believe that the call for action on this [issue] that has happened in the last few years truly has been answered by the federal and provincial orders of government" (Kilpatrick n.pag.). This comment is troubling, especially in the wake of a Native Women's Association of Canada report stating that there are currently 520 unsolved murder and disappearance cases involving First Nations women (a number that is outlandishly high, considering First Nations women make up only 2% of the Canadian population) (n.pag.). Furthermore, according to Statistics Canada, First Nations women are still three times likelier than non-Aboriginal women to be victims of abuse and/or violent crimes (*Family Violence* n.pag.). While the government and the mainstream media argue about the relevance, impact, and severity of violence against Aboriginal women in Canada, Native theatre attempts to counter the

² There has already been much discussion about appropriate nomenclature regarding the First Nations peoples of Canada. A consensus has not been reached about the usage of words including Native, Aboriginal, Indigenous, FNMI (First Nations, Metis, Inuit), and Indian. When I employ various terms, I do so respectfully and conscientiously.

violence and alter the realities of First Nations women. Their struggles are largely unseen, and the violence committed against them is typically disregarded or downplayed (both within and outside of First Nations communities). But the theatre explores First Nations women's experiences and causes them to "be rendered visible" (Taylor 205). Although the impacts of theatrical performances on society are difficult (if not impossible) to measure, I argue that the theatre is an effective vehicle for social movement and change (even if the change occurs slowly and immeasurably, beginning with the affective response of a single audience member).

The theatre attempts to create affect in order to counter gendered violence. Gendered violence is not a new phenomenon, but while some parts of the country seem to be making gains in the battle against violence (Statistics Canada *Measuring* n.pag.), the suffering of many First Nations women and communities continues to be disregarded. Native women are statistically more vulnerable to the various facets of abuse (including physical, sexual, emotional/verbal, financial, and spiritual), and yet the institutions put in place to prevent such violence often fail to protect these women (Canadian Women's Foundation n.pag.). In Native communities, arguably more than any other communities in Canada, women are the victims of violence, and although this fact is well-documented, the needs and rights of First Nations women remain under-represented, while their lives and identities are largely misrepresented. This thesis will ask how the identities of women are impacted by violence and how those identities may be represented by the theatre. What are the challenges associated with staging violent events (especially those which reflect real-life occurrences) and how can such events be represented in a manner that respects the subjects as women and as First Nations peoples? While exploring Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* (1988), Yvette Nolan's *Annie Mae's Movement* (1999), and Marie Clements's *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* (2006), I will argue that the

knowledge transmitted by Native theatre (stemming from what I will call the “Aboriginal repertoire”) reflects First Nations culture, and that Native theatre represents this cultural and spiritual body in a manner that assures the most affective impact. Native theatre is an agent of affect when representing violence committed against First Nations women, and the theatre sets the stage for the necessary changes that must take place in order to counter the violence that exists in the real world.

Native theatre existed long before it was given any mainstream attention; after all, hundreds of contemporary Aboriginal playwrights do not materialize out of thin air. George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967) is one of the first plays produced in North America that deals specifically with issues pertaining to Aboriginal peoples. A number of works followed suit,³ but prior to the mid 1980s, plays published in Canada about First Nations peoples were written primarily by non-Native playwrights (including Ryga, Pollock, and Ringwood) (Charlebois & Nothof n.pag.).⁴ This trend, however, was quickly altered after the 1982 opening of Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto. Since its inauguration, NEPA has been home to some of Canada’s most successful and well-known First Nations playwrights and performers.⁵ Although conventional theatre stemming from Western European culture is not part of Native tradition, First Nation artists have clearly adapted their craft and means of expression to fit a medium typically

³ Such works include Sharon Pollock’s *Walsh* (1973) and Gwen Pharis Ringwood’s trilogy *Drum Song* (1982) (Charlebois & Nothof n.pag.).

⁴ The same cannot be said for plays produced in the United States prior to the mid 1980s. In 1976, Spiderwoman Theatre was founded in Brooklyn, NY and that same year they produced and performed a collective work entitled *Women in Violence* which boasted an impressive 70 performances. Founders Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel, and Muriel Miguel have each received numerous awards and accolades for their years of service to the theatre and Native communities. *Women in Violence II* is being developed for the 2012 season (Spiderwoman Theatre n.pag.). Gloria Miguel and Muriel Miguel played Pelajia Patchnose and Philomena Moosetail in the first Toronto production of *The Rez Sisters* with Act IV Theatre Company in 1986.

⁵ NEPA is of specific interest because all three of the playwrights I examine in this thesis have been involved with this theatre company and have had their works produced and performed by it.⁵ The existence of NEPA, along with other First Nation theatre initiatives,⁶ clearly plays a vital role in the development and implementation of First Nations drama in Canada and offers a biographical, cultural, and artistic link between Highway, Nolan, and Clements.

associated with EuroCanadian culture. As NEPA gained prominence, First Nations artists were better able to speak out and to dramatically represent urban and residential realities impacting Native peoples. Part of their success is due to their engagement of the theatre as a communicative medium.

The introduction of Aboriginal playwrights to the mainstream stage brought about a shift in the Canadian literary canon. Highway notes that these playwrights' "emergence on a national scale" results in a changed reality where "Native voices are being heard" (qtd in Petrone 170). In response to a boom in the creation of First Nations written and performed drama, criticism focusing on Aboriginal theatre has also dramatically shifted over the past thirty years. Much of the early criticism in Indigenous studies focuses on post-colonialism. Penny Petrone (1990) offers a clear roadmap of the literature written about and by First Nations peoples, dating back as far as the late 19th century. Petrone's *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* offers "intimate glimpses into suffering and protest, aspirations and visions – universalities that have been particularized within a native consciousness" (vii). Christopher Innes's "Dreams of Violence: Moving Beyond Colonialism in Canadian & West Indian Drama" (1998) explores how Aboriginal work has challenged Canadian national identity by highlighting the marginalization of Native culture and addressing the violent realities of First Nations living in Canada. Laura Smyth Groeing's *Listening to Old Women Speak* (2004) examines early colonial narratives and explores how writings and receptions of history influence contemporary interpretations of authenticity versus hybridity. Much important work has been produced about the impacts of colonization on First Nations culture in Canada. A relatively recent shift has allowed for the creation of criticism that focuses on First Nations women and the role that Aboriginal feminism plays in current events and contemporary artistic expression.

There is a substantial body of academic criticism pertaining to the lives and struggles of First Nations women. *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism* (1996) by Lee Maracle is a gritty and refreshingly honest resource that uses poetic explication to explore the roots of Native shame and anti-feminist violence. Enakshi Dua and Angela Robertson's *Scratching the Surface: Canadian Anti-Racist Feminist Thought* (1999) moves from post-colonial history to the present state of gender relations and explores the marginalization and violence that First Nations women experience in Canada. Cheryl Suzack's work on Indigenous feminism (2010) explores the trials and tribulations of the transnational Aboriginal feminist movement. Aboriginal feminism as a movement questions the nature of a society that allows women to suffer violent exploitation and abuse. It also strives to discover steps that can be taken to alter the current realities that oppress Native women. Notably, much of the above criticism did not gain prominence until several years after the production and publication of First Nations artistic works featuring the violent struggles of First Nations women. Native theatre continues to head an often cutting-edge movement that fights for the rights of women. With the hopes of positively influencing lived realities, Aboriginal playwrights are drawn to represent the struggles of First Nations women who live in a country that officially outlaws but implicitly permits and systemically reinforces gendered violence.

Recent work has been done on the motivation behind and the devastating results of violence against women as it occurs in a Canadian context. Some of these works (and their numbers are increasing) examine the impacts of violence and suffering on First Nations women. Zoey Élouard Michele (2006), Amber Dean (2008), and Anna Stone (2009) all deal with the representation of missing and/or murdered women and all of their works touch on Aboriginal feminist issues. Susan Lord and Annette Burfoot's book entitled *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence* (2006) discusses the

role of visual art and memorials while representing violence against women (especially Aboriginal women). In *Women Witnessing Terror: Testimony and the Cultural Politics of Human Rights* (2005), Anne Cubilié explores marginalized women's testimony as performative and generative. Highway, Nolan, and Clements's works also show that the theatre can be generative, as their stories counter violence, reinforce First Nations women's collective and individual experiences, sufferings, and identities, and pave the way for new artistic creation and, correspondingly, new academic criticism.

Employing EuroCanadian conventions of theatre is a pragmatic decision on the part of Aboriginal artists, because the theatre may be open and accessible to a more diverse audience than is familiar with more traditional Native methods of cultural sharing, such as drum circles or sweat lodges (although it is undeterminable which medium of storytelling has the most efficacy, and the various techniques and styles of communication utilized by Natives and EuroCanadians tend to overlap). First Nations theatre shows the adaptability of artists, and the capacity for culture to change, grow, and transcend boundaries in order to communicate a widely accessible and comprehensible message. *The Rez Sisters*, *Annie Mae's Movement*, and *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* deal specifically with different forms of violence committed against Native women, and draw upon real-life violent events that have impacted the lives of real First Nations women in Canada. The individual backgrounds and experiences of the artists show the diverse influences that make up First Nations identity, and the different perspectives that need to be considered when discussing issues that pertain to Aboriginal peoples and Canada as a nation.

A prominent criticism of Native theatre has to do with the reliability of this new creative space and its ability to represent and communicate Native culture while countering gendered violence. Focusing on First Nations drama may seem misplaced

because Native theatre is relatively new to the mainstream Canadian arts scene. Conversely, some feel that EuroCanadian theatre has infiltrated and polluted Aboriginal storytelling with foreign techniques, conventions, and linearities. But First Nations culture has always included what Taylor defines as “embodied performance” (xviii) or a performative repertoire (xvii). Furthermore, Gaetan Charlebois and Anne Nothof note that “dramatic ritual” in Native culture pre-dates colonization (n.pag.). Historically, storytelling has been a prominent medium for communicating the cultural body of knowledge and experience to audiences, but before First Nations drama can share and communicate beyond Aboriginal communities, First Nations playwrights need to gain access to and recognition in a nation-wide context. Breaking into the artistic EuroCanadian mainstream, of course, continues to be difficult. As Drew Hayden Taylor states, “Western theatre has been driving people to exotic places for over 2,500 years, and we’ve [First Nations playwrights] been riding in that car for only two decades” (*Native Theatre’s* n.pag.). Although Native theatre has grown exponentially since its mainstream debut during the 1980s, the capacity for First Nations plays to reach wider audiences is still heavily influenced by EuroCanadian mainstream preconceptions of art and convention.

Spanning from the West Coast to Eastern Canada, the work of Highway, Nolan, and Clements reflects at least a portion of the issues that impact First Nations women. Highway, a Cree writer, was born in the prairie province of Manitoba and attended the University of Western Ontario. Nolan was born in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan to an Algonquin mother and Irish father. A Métis writer, Clements was born, raised, and educated in Vancouver, British Columbia. All three playwrights have traveled, worked, and lived in various provinces/territories and communities in Canada. Although they write from distinct individual backgrounds, the three playwrights are thematically united

by the content of their plays. The aim of Native theatre is to effectively communicate the Aboriginal cultural body of knowledge to various audiences and to influence the transference of knowledge beyond the walls of the theatre. All three artists use drama as their chosen genre to present and counter the violent realities of First Nations women. By engaging the Aboriginal repertoire, and adding cultural performances to it, these playwrights add their individual knowledge and experiences to the collective body of memory and experiences that makes up the repertoire.

Within the repertoire, which is made up of oral traditions, song, dance, performance, storytelling, drama and any other form cultural communication (Taylor xvii), the knowledge, memories, and traditions that make up Native culture are stored and fostered. The repertoire occurs when cultural knowledge, experience, and memory merge with cultural performance. As previously mentioned, I will argue that Native theatre allows for the expression and transference of the Aboriginal repertoire, and the Aboriginal repertoire impacts the representation of violence committed against First Nations women, infusing the representations with affect. Native theatre, which stems from the Aboriginal repertoire, strives to represent violence in a manner that does not condone violent acts, but that actualizes them and forces an audience to bear witness to cultural testimonies of violence, suffering, memory, and identity as they exist and are presented on stage. Native theatre is a means of representation that enacts and reveals the circular nature of violence with the hopes of affecting audiences, creating provocation in order to stimulate change, and fostering individual and communal healing within both EuroCanadian and Aboriginal cultures.

In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor claims that performance is much more than something that is objectively effective or analyzable: instead, performance challenges hegemonic perspectives (xvi). For Taylor, performance is not necessarily

about a measurable impact, but about the transmission of cultural values and experiences that challenge hegemonic ways of knowing (xvii). Taylor suggests that the transmission of knowledge and collective memory is historically embodied through performative practices which differ from culture to culture (4). These practices create what Taylor refers to repeatedly throughout her book as the repertoire. According to Taylor, the repertoire is designed to transmit knowledge that cannot be transmitted by written words or collections of texts (20). Conversely, texts that are canonical, essentially logocentric, or that store “supposedly enduring materials” are typically associated with the archive (19). Because drama involves both written and performative elements, Native theatre becomes a pragmatic and aesthetic segue between the archive, which in Canada is primarily controlled by EuroCanadian influences, and the Aboriginal repertoire.⁶

For Taylor, a fundamental difference between the archive and the repertoire is that the repertoire requires a “presence” (20). This presence, she argues, allows for the “repertoire to transmit” the “embodied knowledge and memory” through performance (193; 191). The works of First Nations playwrights engage personal and cultural knowledge and experience, memories of past suffering, and reflections of present violent events. This cultural body of information is not only communicated from person to person or from performer to audience member: Taylor claims that transmission can also move from generation to generation (193). The presence of a physical body is vital to the communication of violent events because the impact of violence must be understood corporeally, as opposed to “temporally or spatially” (Taylor 203). Presence allows for theatrical performances to “call into question the very contours of the body, challenging traditional notions of embodiment” (Taylor 4).

⁶ Improvisational performances would be fully part of the repertoire because they do not require a script. Taylor considers theatre to be fully a part of the repertoire because it hinges upon dramatic performance (8).

When a body is present on stage, it creates a representational vessel to transmit the cultural body of knowledge, experience, and suffering. But for presence to reach its full potential, embodied communication must trespass into written and spoken words, the unseen must fill spaces originally inhabited by the highly visible, the victims must become the storytellers, and passive spectators must become actively engaged. Highway, Nolan, and Clements utilize the Aboriginal repertoire to represent the gendered violence that is a dark element of Canadian reality. Through the repertoire, the playwrights are able to represent violence while creating identities and stories for the women who have suffered and perished beneath it. *The Rez Sisters*, *Annie Mae's Movement*, and *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* offer these women an opportunity to have their stories retold in a manner that represents them as people, and not merely as victims of violence. As the cultural body of knowledge that lives within these plays becomes embodied by the physicality of the performance, the violent experiences depicted on stage become a part of reality as they are lived by physically present entities.

The presence of the body may lead to a fundamental transformation in the way that violence is represented. In order to effectively counter violence, the nature of violence (or rather, the nature of the transformation required to eradicate violence) must be understood. In his discussion of Aristotle, Boal addresses dramatic transformations and states that

on the one hand, art is affirmed to be pure contemplation, and on the other hand, it is considered to present always a vision of the world in transformation and therefore is inevitably political insofar as it shows the means of carrying out that transformation or delaying it. (xxii)

Clearly playwrights, theatre-goers, and critics hope that the theatre has the capacity to transform the world in which it operates. But while Native theatre actively represents the

violent reality faced by First Nations women, the theatre's capacity to influence reality remains uncertain. Cultural transmission and cultural transformation must be explored if a message about violence is to be presented and received. An examination of violence itself and the difficulties, incapacities, failures, and successes that are associated with countering violence against women is necessary. As violence and representation collide head-on in the theatrical space, this thesis will attempt to argue that theatrical embodied performance, above all other forms of artistic representation, affects an audience and influences social and political change when attempting to counter violence against Aboriginal women in a Canadian context.

Native theatre strives to communicate cultural knowledge of violence and suffering, and to express how such negative influences impact First Nations women. Slavoj Žižek's *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* is a helpful resource in understanding the nature of violence within a complex society. Žižek separates various types of violence into two categories: subjective and objective (*Violence 1*). Subjective violence refers to the highly visible violence that is typically exploited by media because it is easily recognizable and creates an immediate and visceral response from audiences (*Violence 1*). Acts of violence that are highly visible are not isolated instances involving only the perpetrator and the victim; what Žižek refers to as subjective violence is the result of less visible violent practices that create an atmosphere where subjective violence flourishes (*Violence 2*). Subjective violence includes the abuse, rape, and murder of First Nations women that is intensely prevalent and visible in Canada, although it remains largely underrepresented. Examining violence from a much broader perspective, Žižek explains that objective violence has two sub-categories: symbolic (which primarily examines the violent nature of language) and systemic (which includes economics and politics) (*Violence 1*). Žižek claims that focusing on and attempting to remedy subjective violence

disallows the recognition of objective violence as the underlying cause of all visible violent encounters (*Violence 2*).

The causation of violence is often difficult to decipher, but even more problematic is possible rationale behind it. In his “Critique of Violence,” Walter Benjamin struggles to find the role of violence in the battle between “means” and “ends” (278). He concludes that “the most visible outburst of violence ... is not related as a means to a preconceived end. It is not a means but a manifestation” (294). Violent manifestations are examples of Žižek’s subjective violence as they are visible and easily identifiable. In attempting to justify or comprehend subjective violence, one attempts to locate the rationale that motivates the violence. No matter how irrational it may seem, Žižek suggests, violence is always rationalized by the system (*Violence 2*). The visible (subjective) violence is not irrational, but a logical manifestation or a symptom of greater social and cultural disease. Native theatre is a social manifestation that reflects the reality surrounding it. In the case of drama that deals with violence, the performances are begotten by unmitigated suffering, while the responses to violence manifest themselves peacefully through artistic expression and performance. By staging violence, the theatre aims to shed light on the motivation and causation behind violent events. A role of Native theatre is to make the causes of systematic violence more visible so that audiences can see beyond the subjective violence and identify actively violent agents.

Within *The Rez Sisters*, *Annie Mae’s Movement*, and *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* the female characters experience subjective violence, although not all of it is represented directly on stage. However, simmering beneath the surface of the visible representations and audible discussions of violence is a notable critique of systemic violence and how the various bodies of control perpetuate gendered violence in Canada. As a response to the visible violence experienced by First Nations people,

Maracle examines gendered violence and its application to First Nations women. Maracle suggests that patriarchy, fear, racism, and sexism all contribute to the abuse and destitution of Native women. In a move reminiscent of Žižek, Maracle claims that self-destruction cannot be the cause of Native suffering, because all acts of self-violence are expressions of “systemic rage” (12). In order for Native women to reclaim their identities and to “recover the broken threads of their lives,” Maracle says that women must reclaim their voices and rediscover “Native womanhood” (10, 17). Native theatre becomes a feminized space when Native women (as playwrights, actors, or characters) are able to take the to stage and speak out against the violence that oppresses them. The hope, of course, is that their words will reach someone who is willing to listen.

The impact of the theatre relies heavily on the receptiveness of the audience.⁷ Arguably, native theatre represents violence so that the audience may be compelled to reject (be it politically, socially, or emotionally) similar violence encountered in the real world, but the impact that art has on viewers is difficult to discern (Rancière 3).⁸ There is a fundamental difference, however, between viewing violence and witnessing it. Witnessing is active. It requires physical and emotional presence, and results in first-hand experience or knowledge of the witnessed event. When one enters the theatre, one accepts the “invitation to engage in performative relationships of witnessing” (Cubilié 17). Viewing, conversely, is passive; it requires no commitment or active engagement and the viewer takes on no personal responsibility for what is viewed. A violent event cannot be witnessed without the physical presence of a body, and the body (as victim,

⁷ Boal suggests that the theatre should strive to take spectators as “passive beings” and turn them into active agents within the “theatrical phenomenon”(122). Although he admits that theatre and performance do not guarantee radical political and social change, he concludes that theatre is “surely a rehearsal for the revolution” (122).

⁸ Although Rancière further argues that art does not create movement that is “calculable” or effective (23), the discussion of theatre and performance as affective tends to question whether this lack of concrete or empirical calculability is even a relevant criticism.

testifier, or witness) becomes responsible for responding to the violence. Laura Rice-Sayre claims that testimony “break[s] through the barrier of anonymity” (68). Staged violence gives First Nations women an identity (beyond victimization) that the audience can recognize. But it is possible that the audience will not fulfill its role. A witness must agree to be a witness, while a viewer is no more than a passerby, or, at best, a spectator hoping for a spectacle.⁹ Viewers have no vested interest in the transmission the cultural body. For First Nations theatre, especially theatre that represents violence against women, to be affective, each performance requires an active witness or collective witnesses.

Witnessing and testimonial often challenge the trusted information that is stored within the archive. Through the creation of embodied performance, First Nations playwrights bear witness to the violence that is constantly experienced by First Nations women, and their plays offer testimony in defense of Native women. The three plays I discuss here allow audiences to bear witness to the violence that First Nations women experience, while the stage gives the women’s voices a chance to be heard. Playwrights are continually challenged to ensure that the message they intend to transfer is received by the audience, and it is difficult to ensure their own affective impact. But Taylor states that “performance distills a ‘truer’ true than real life itself” (4), and it is the combined responsibility of witnesses to recognize and react to truth when it is represented in front of them, and for the work to represent the truth in a manner that is accessible and affective.

A quality of the three plays examined that helps to ensure their affective impact, is the fact that each play references real-life violent events. Highway, who was abused

⁹ Giorgio Agamben would disagree with this assertion. He claims that, “The ‘true’ witnesses, the ‘complete witnesses,’ are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness” (34). Although I believe there is much truth in what he states, I also believe that the transference of cultural knowledge is done most effectively when it is done on purpose. True, a viewer may access some of the same information and accidentally transmit it, but this viewer is not affected in the same manner that a witness is, and for this reason, Native theatre calls for witnesses who agree to bear witness.

sexually and psychologically at a residential school, is intimately linked to his characters. Much of the violence that Highway depicts in *The Rez Sisters* references events that shaped and defined the community where Highway was raised.¹⁰ Nolan's protagonist is based on the real Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, a Mi'kmaq woman from Nova Scotia whose murdered body was found in 1976 outside of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation (Pierre n.pag.). Clements's tells of Aunt Shadie and other spectral women as Shadie's daughter searches for an explanation of her mother's unsolved disappearance from Vancouver's notorious Skid Row. Her characters are based on a series of murdered women from Vancouver who were underrepresented by the media and typically depicted as addicts and prostitutes destined for self-annihilation. Barbara Godard criticizes the tendency of art within a system to reaffirm itself by reproducing slightly altered copies of the same, instead of subverting or countering convention (185). She calls for a "dis/placement of conventional representational practices" (201), and for a "representation as re-presentation [wherein]...the subjects of the oppressed speak for themselves" (200). The works of Highway, Nolan, and Clements respond to this call when they reference real-life events and actively engage the Aboriginal repertoire to tell Aboriginal stories.

These works show real-life events translated through a dramatic lens; this combination of the factual and the theatrical creates an affective representation that engages the audience. Not only does the violence represented highlight the political and social realities that exist in Canada, it connects this violence to a body's corporeal experience through "embodied performance" (Taylor xviii). By examining Taylor's concept of the repertoire, and relating it to traditional techniques of Aboriginal

¹⁰ Highway states that Zhaboonigan's rape in *The Rez Sisters* is based on the rape of a young woman who was dragged from Highway's reserve and raped with a screwdriver (Innes 89), although Zhaboonigan could very well represent any of the number of women from Highway's community whose murders he vividly recalls (Richler n.pag.).

storytelling and interpersonal and transgenerational communication, I will explore the impact of performance as it relays visceral and cultural experiences of suffering to an audience. Furthermore, I will argue that Native theatre, as an extension of the Aboriginal repertoire, takes the logocentric convention of EuroCanadian writing, and infuses the message with somatic presence. Although, arguably, the archive disregards “embodied knowledge” (Taylor 191), the three plays illustrate the potential of a union between the archive and the repertoire. This union allows Native artisans to communicate the Aboriginal cultural body and to represent collective experiences and memories of violence to diverse audiences.

The active employment of what I am calling the Aboriginal repertoire allows the playwrights to challenge the patriarchal and EuroCanadian modes of knowing that are entrusted with the responsibility of transmitting cultural knowledge. Native theatre as repertoire challenges and questions these modes because they are saturated with hegemonic influences that typically disregard Aboriginal peoples and knowledge. Native theatre further counters many prevalent (patriarchal, misogynistic, conservative) understandings, because such perspectives ignore the rights and needs of women. The repertoire in the form of theatrical performances allows for the stories of women to be told and explored through embodied testimony and for the audience to transform from passive spectators into active witnesses. Highway’s *The Rez Sisters*, Nolan’s *Annie Mae’s Movement*, and Clements’s *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* focus not only on the subjective violence that impacts the lives of Native women, but on the politically, economically, and socially violent realities that beget their suffering. Native theatre represents women who are victims of violence in a manner that reasserts the women’s identities, honours their stories and experiences, confronts the flaws in the violent system, and gives a voice to women who have been silenced by violence. Even more accurately,

Native theatre creates a space for women who, until recently, have lacked a platform from which they could shout and be heard.

CHAPTER TWO:

“a little the worse for wear and tear”:

Witnessing and Testifying Against Gendered Violence in Tomson Highway’s *The Rez Sisters*

First Nations playwrights in Canada face the complex challenge of translating experience, ethnicity, and history through a medium largely controlled by the EuroCanadian colonizer. Renate Usmiani suggests that the most prominent theatrical works created by Aboriginal artists are the ones that involve an amalgamation of “postmodern theatre” and the “traditional matrix of ritual and storytelling” (126). Tomson Highway’s work has achieved success and notoriety within the Canadian drama circuit largely due to Highway’s masterful weaving of Aboriginal storytelling techniques with EuroCanadian theatrical convention. When Highway’s *The Rez Sisters* premiered in 1986 at the Act IV Theatre in Toronto, under the direction of NEPA, it was met with descriptions such as “lightweight,” “coarse,” and “rough-edge” (Mietkiewicz n.pag). Such reviews perhaps indicate that the play was not received in the manner intended. After its inauguration, the play made its way into the Canadian theatrical mainstream and quickly received prestigious recognition.¹¹ But when the show was produced in Peterborough, Ontario in 2009, critic Bea Quarrie noted that “Eurocentric theatre is not a medium that is natural to Native cultures. Theirs is a storytelling culture” (n.pag.). Even after over twenty years in circulation, and having been granted archival accreditation, it is difficult to pinpoint how the non-Native population relates to and experiences the play.¹²

¹¹ The play received the Dora Mavor Moore Award for Best New Play in 1988 and was nominated for the Governor General’s Award that same year

¹² *The Rez Sisters* has been canonized in Canadian theatre studies to such an extent that Highway has become a metonymic representation of all Native drama, and his work is often (narrowly) understood to represent a “whole” culture. In the same way that Bea Quarrie’s comments do not fully encompass the views of the EuroCanadian mainstream, Highway does not represent the views of all Native artists.

Responding to the false “us and them” dichotomy that still influences mainstream reception of Aboriginal works, fellow Native playwright Drew Hayden Taylor fiercely countered Quarrie’s above claim, ironically stating that “Classical piano is also something that is not a medium natural to Native cultures. Evidently, I suppose ours is a drum-beating culture. Yet Tomson is exceedingly good at tickling the ivories, though I have no knowledge of his drumbeating capabilities” (n.pag.).¹³ Hayden Taylor takes offense to the notion that modern Native culture is separate from the EuroCanadian conventions that outline the requirements for “good” theatre, or that First Nations artists should shy away from theatre as a medium because it is historically “unnatural.” Quarrie’s comment highlights the prevalent opinion that mainstream theatre is best defined as European and archival (because it typically begins with a written script), while storytelling is more adequately categorized as a part of the Aboriginal repertoire. This separation highlights the flawed binary that attempts to fully disconnect the archive and the repertoire.

A common belief reinforced by hegemonic and logocentric influences is that art stemming from an oral storytelling culture does not accurately document cultural knowledge as effectively as information that is collected and stored in the archive (even though the archive stores innumerable stories). When Quarrie (who unwittingly betrays her myopia) suggests that storytelling techniques do not translate naturally into EuroCanadian theatre, she fails to recognize that both oral storytelling and theatre are facets of embodied performance. The fact that theatre performances typically begin with a script (archive) and end in performance (repertoire) allows for the theatre to bridge the gap between the various sectors of artistic communication. As Taylor suggests, the archive and the repertoire are not “opposite poles of a binary” (22), but as long as they

¹³ Highway was trained as a classical pianist before he decided to pursue a career as a writer.

are understood as such in the wider culture, the archive will continue to be privileged and storytelling cultures will continue to be excluded from mainstream appreciation. Native culture is traditionally transmitted through storytelling, song, and dance, and theatre is a natural extension of the Aboriginal cultural body. Theatre attempts to unite the archive and the repertoire, while placing essential meaning and experience (through embodied performance) on an even platform with language and written texts (which may become archival documents). Transmitting cultural information through the repertoire does not take away from accuracy and potency; the repertoire embodies the knowledge and makes it accessible to a present audience.

Highway himself represents an amalgamation of influences from archive and repertoire. *The Rez Sisters* is the work of a Cree Canadian artist who was born on a reserve and then educated and trained in the performing arts in Toronto. Highway translated his own play into English; it is designed for multi-ethnic audiences, was originally performed on a Canadian stage, and is published by a Canadian company called Fifth House LTD. His play (in script form) has become a part of the Canadian contemporary archive, but in order to fulfill its intended function the script must become embodied and performed. Each individual performance of his play qualifies as repertoire and it is not the script but the performance of *The Rez Sisters* that challenges dominant EuroCanadian perceptions of transmission. Highway is both a writer and a performer, and his desire to transmit cultural knowledge, experience, and suffering through theatre is an attempt to disrupt the assumed binary that separates the EuroCanadian archive and the Aboriginal repertoire.¹⁴ His purpose is to use both the archive and the repertoire to communicate the Aboriginal cultural body of knowledge, experience, and suffering.

¹⁴ By employing these terms, I am not suggesting that there is no EuroCanadian repertoire and Aboriginal archive. I do not mean to reinforce the binary that I am attempting to unpack. However, the EuroCanadian

The fact that the play has been commercially successful (Highway is certainly one of Canada's most recognized playwrights) and accepted into the Canadian archive through professional publication, however, is not sufficient evidence that the embodied performances that accompany the script are successful in transmitting the desired cultural body. Like all traditional performances, *The Rez Sisters* requires an audience. Once present, the audience is asked to bear witness to the violence that Highway depicts and to receive the cultural knowledge that Highway's embodied performance intends to transmit. But attempting cultural transference through the theatre is not without challenges or limitations. After all, people "do not simply or unproblematically understand each other" (Taylor 15). It cannot be forgotten that many First Nations peoples continue to be isolated from, and ignored (or, conversely, appropriated) by EuroCanadian culture and art, and it is possible that the overbearing presence of EuroCanadian influence may complicate the transference of knowledge that is intended during Native embodied performances. The hope remains, however, that the theatre may help to forge a connection between First Nations cultural knowledge, experience, and suffering and what EuroCanadian culture understands to be the current reality of the nation.

Highway recognizes that First Nations women are largely missing from political and social discourses. The suffering of First Nations people extends to hinder the lives of men and women alike. Highway is attuned to the plight of First Nations peoples (and specifically of women) and states that Canada, as one of the world's most affluent nations, has long ignored the dire circumstances within which First Nations peoples exist.

archive (which houses many mainstream modes of knowing) remains largely inaccessible to a large portion of the First Nations population, in a similar way that many EuroCanadians do not have access to the Aboriginal repertoire. The purpose of the theatre, as I have suggested earlier, is to bridge this gap and to invite people into both the archive and the repertoire and to recognize the similarities and differences that make them both important.

He says that the suffering of Natives “is inexcusable and... something obviously has to be done about it” (qtd in Crew n.pag.). *The Rez Sisters* focuses on many of the problems faced by women in First Nations communities. It offers a glimpse into the daily lives of seven Native women living on an Ontario Indian reservation. The women face isolation, physical and sexual violence, poverty, and illness; they have limited access to jobs and healthcare, and are constantly challenged by the lack of opportunity within the community. Although the fictional women are able to create their own unique community, hinged upon the potentialities of the repertoire, Highway’s work still depicts the undeniable suffering of First Nations women, and highlights the underlying objective violence that exists, principally uncontested, in Canada. By failing to recognize the objective violence that begets subjective violence, Canada fails to support and protect its most vulnerable citizens. To help tell the stories of First Nations women and to make visible the complex systems of violence that impact them, Highway makes use of the repertoire through embodied performance.

Highway opens *The Rez Sisters* with social and political commentary from the perspectives of First Nations women. The first Act begins with Pelajia Patchnose and Philomena Moosetail¹⁵ sitting on a shabby rooftop, making repairs, and socially deconstructing the community on the Wasaychigan “Wasy” Hill Indian reservation. Both Pelajia and Philomena are concerned with the state of their community and the inescapable violence that influences the lives of its members. The sisters are attuned to “the ongoing cultural, spiritual, physical, sexual, and economic crises facing Aboriginal women” (Johnson 12). The houses are crumbling, the women’s spouses are nowhere in sight, their children are largely unsupervised, and there does not appear to be much

¹⁵ These character names reference Highway’s mother’s name: Pelagie Philomene Highway. In his dedication, Highway refers to her as “a Rez Sister from way back” (Highway v).

potential for change or hope for the future. In the midst of this depressing scene, what embodied cultural knowledge or experience longs to be transmitted? The cultural body contains an entire history of experience and suffering, and through his representation, Highway hopes not only to disrupt the violent system that oppresses Native women, but to reconnect First Nations peoples with their own cultural repertoire.

Pelajia has an acute social awareness about the current state of life for the Wasy people that she has acquired from a lifetime of observation and living on the reserve. She is also familiar with certain elements of the Aboriginal cultural and spiritual body, but she worries that this embodied knowledge may vanish from her people as a result of their suffering: “And the old stories, the old language. Almost all gone...” (Highway 5). Pelajia recognizes that the movement away from repertoire has negative repercussions on the community and Native people within it. The result is a community full of members who “drink and screw each other’s wives and husbands and forget about our Nanabush” (Highway 6). Nanabush is a central spiritual figure to Ojibway culture. In Highway’s description of Nanabush, he states “We believe that he is still here among us – albeit a little the worse for wear and tear– having assumed other guises. Without him – and without the spiritual health of this figure – the core of Indian culture would be gone forever” (xii). Nanabush is a Trickster figure, an improviser, and an elicitor of effect. The Trickster is a figure who pushes against the linear and logic typically reinforced by the archive. Within the play, Nanabush becomes a figure for the repertoire. This role calls for a dancer (Highway xiii), and dance is a facet of Taylor’s conception of embodied performance. Nanabush communicates through movement and physical expression. Like the repertoire, Nanabush is not logocentric and does not privilege logic over “embodied knowledge” (Taylor 191) or experience. Pelajia recognizes that the health of her

community is hinged upon the return of Nanabush, and, similarly, on a return to the Aboriginal repertoire.

Nanabush is crucial to the spiritual success of the community and represents a balance between masculine and feminine influences.¹⁶ In the play, Nanabush does not have spoken lines, and his purpose and meaning must be explored through dance. Nanabush embodies performance in a tangible and literal fashion in Highway's *The Rez Sisters* and in the opening scene, Highway tackles some major issues surrounding First Nations life in Canada. Though violence and substance abuse are the most visible issues, they stem from the deeper social problems of unemployment, poverty, and lack of opportunity within the community. Helen Gilbert claims that "one of Nanabush's functions is to absorb and transform the pain resulting from atrocities associated with the colonization of Native lands and cultures" (391) and *The Rez Sisters* shows the effectiveness of the repertoire and embodied performance when representing and attempting to transmit the suffering experienced by First Nations women.

The systemic violence that Pelajia points out not only forces people away from the reserve and splits up the community, but it also separates the First Nations from each other and from Nanabush (Highway 5-6). Nanabush is an active agent in what Neal McLeod calls the "oral consciousness" of Aboriginal culture (73). McLeod points out that certain written artifacts associated with the archive are limited in their capacity to inspire "metaphorical thinking" and this way of understanding the world is vital to the Native experience (72). Oral consciousness and metaphorical thinking are encapsulated by the embodied performances of the repertoire. In *The Rez Sisters*, Highway depicts a bleak image of the reservation to highlight the flaws in the system that guarantees failure,

¹⁶ In *The Rez Sisters*, Nanabush is male, but in Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Nanabush is female. Helen Gilbert suggests that "This shape-shifting trickster also transcends gender binaries, adopting male or female form" (391).

isolation, and separation by separating First Nations peoples from their repertoire. His play reveals the concept of systemic violence that Native peoples have long experienced; the same system that enforces a hierarchy of knowledge (separating the archive and placing it above the repertoire) disallows the coexistence of opportunity and production with storytelling and community. The clash between EuroCanadian and Native cultures perpetuates an environment of dysfunction and violence. Highway's work embodies the needs of First Nations people to return to the repertoire, and as the violence in the play intensifies, the call for a witness becomes more pronounced.

In many ways, theatre is a manifestation of social realities and the audience is called upon to witness the violence that the women on stage experience. In order for an audience to effectively take on the role of the witness, the audience must first recognize this "ethical call to witnessing" and understand the "responsibility that they [the audience] enact" (Cubilié 5). For audience members to witness a theatrical event, they must willingly enter into "a 'tripartite' relationship between self, performer and the rest of the audience" (Reid qtd in Harris 32). Geraldine Harris claims that audiences member must be conscious of the "memetic event" that they are witnessing (32) and Anne Cubilié similarly notes that "the witness cannot be alone in the testimonial act" (10).¹⁷ The audience must be conscious of the act of witnessing, and must become responsible for truly seeing and understanding the implications of the events that are portrayed on stage. Without this conscious consent and recognition of responsibility, the transmission of the cultural body cannot occur. Theatre asks audiences to "witness...the ongoing, unacknowledged drama of atrocity" (Taylor 211) and as Highway's play unfolds, the systemic violence that impacts the Rez sisters manifests itself plainly and visibly as

¹⁷ Here, Cubilié is referring to the performer-as-witness, but the statement is equally applicable to the audience-as-witness.

subjective violence. In *The Rez Sisters*, however, the most prominent instances of subjective violence are not acted out on stage.

Although the events are not reenacted, the women on Highway's stage offer testimony for the crimes that were committed against them and this testimony requires the women to witness their own violent experiences. The audience becomes a witness to the characters's witnessing (Cubilié 16) and this dual witnessing allows for the audience members to be more open to receiving cultural knowledge. Alan Filewod states that "In [Highway's plays] the surface comedy is disrupted by images and memories of horrifying abuse of women... in *The Rez Sisters* past abuse forms the structure of the present" (364). Due to the ability of violence to influence the past, present, and future lives and experiences of its victims, witnesses to violence must accept a constant necessity for witnessing and to accept that even when violence is not current, it is still present. As Cubilié explains, witnessing "becomes an ongoing process rather than a narrative and demands from us, the audience to the witnessing, an equally ongoing, often failing fraught witnessing to the witnessing" (15-16). Although the violence discussed in *The Rez Sisters* is not present or physically enacted on stage, this does not mean that the violence that has been committed against the women is "over" because the violence is "recreated every time that the narratives are told" (McLeod 73). Systemic violence is omnipresent and its influence extends beyond time in the same way that First Nations collective memory exists beyond temporality and simultaneously encompasses the past, present, and future. By representing omnipresent violence on stage through the embodied performance of the repertoire, First Nations women are able to bear witness to their own suffering, and to express this suffering to an audience that extends beyond the Aboriginal community.

The repertoire is a means of expressing collective memory and transmitting it from generation to generation (Taylor 193). The omnipresence of violence impacts the Aboriginal collective memory, but because archival knowledge tends to be concrete and linear in nature, transmitting cultural memory to EuroCanadian audiences is problematic. After all, EuroCanadian audiences largely subscribe to the archive's "linear world view" (McLeod 73). McLeod explores the concept of collective memory in his discussion of Treaty 6, and he notes that "Oral consciousness is a *heard and spoken* memory forming a multitude of connection through the history of the 'conversation'" (73, McLeod's emphasis). When it comes to transmitting a violent memory interpersonally or intergenerationally, temporality does not determine the potency of events. EuroCanadian cultures, however, suggest that witnessing can only lead to truth when a witness is present at an immediate event. It is assumed that the more time separates a violent event and the witnessing of this event, the less trust-worthy or accurate the witnesses's accounts become.¹⁸ The importance of temporal presence in EuroCanadian cultures is countered by *The Rez Sisters*, because although the subjective violence committed against the women is a relic of the past, it continues to visibly impact them in the present. The consequences of the violence are evident in the characters's behaviors and interactions, regardless of the fact that the actual violent events are never depicted on stage. Although the audience cannot witness the events "first-hand,"¹⁹ the embodied performances combined with the testimony offered by the women lead to a transference of cultural knowledge across the theatrical space.

¹⁸ This fact can be seen in the Canadian court system, where witnesses are drilled on fact and details (which often do become less clear with the passage of time) instead of their overall experience or impression of the event. I am not suggesting that facts and details are unimportant, but they are not the only factors of a story that can lead to the truth.

¹⁹ Rancière suggests that even if violence is physically presented, the first-hand witnessing of this violence does not guarantee that witnesses will be further moved to respond to the violence or to act out against violence that they witness off off stage (5).

Testimonies have the potential to elicit “a range of affective responses” (Emberley 82) and, testimony may have a greater effect on witnesses than the corporeal brutality of the actual event. Cubilié claims that when suffering is enacted through embodied performance, the performance is more likely to break through the audience’s practiced layer of apathy founded upon the “undifferentiated appearance” that is typical of violent representations (17). In the theatre, the violence becomes real and the victims become human as their stories of individual and cultural suffering are transmitted through performance. The transmission of the First Nations cultural body (which carries experiences of violent suffering) does not require the same level of corroboration that archivists deem necessary. If Indigenous “hearts are like paper” (Weinrib qtd in McLeod 74), an idea that many who are well-versed in oral culture attest to, then cultural knowledge and experience are internalized and transmitted without the necessity of physical or temporal presence.

Instead of presenting the violence in a linear and temporal fashion, Highway instead allows his characters to offer personal testimonies and to account for what happened to them in their own words. Cheryl Suzack asserts that Indigenous women should be able to define themselves as they see fit and, when it comes to violence that is inflicted upon them, be given the opportunity to tell their own stories (189). Similarly, Maracle notes that few forums exist that allow Native women to express their ideas or to testify to their own experiences. Maracle says

How often have we stood in a circle, the only female Native, and our contributions to the goings-on are not acknowledged? – as though we were invisible.... It is not for want of our ability to articulate our goals or lead folks, either. We have been erased from the blackboard of our own lives. (21)

Many First Nations women, it seems, are powerless and voiceless even within their own cultures and communities. In EuroCanadian culture and on the reservations they are oppressed by patriarchy and excluded from the decision-making processes that directly influence their lives. This fact is illustrated in *The Rez Sisters* when the women are unable to achieve their goals because the reserve is controlled by “that old chief” who makes promises (like new paved roads) and then fails to follow through (7-8). To add to the overarching influence of the patriarchy, violence committed against women (as is evident in Highway’s play) is largely sexual in nature, and this type of violence and abuse is rooted in “shame” and reinforced by “cultural norms related to women’s gender roles” (Cubilié 13). Because of the nature of sexual violence, many women who have had rape and sexual abuse inflicted upon them are unable to testify and become voiceless when given the opportunity to speak out against the violence that oppresses them (Cubilié 13). In Highway’s play, Emily Dictionary is, to a certain extent, willing to testify to the violence that she has experienced.

Emily Dictionary initially comes across as a self-destructive figure. Emily is rough-around-the-edges, aggressive, and hyper-sexual. The other sisters describe her as a “sick pervert” and “a truck,” with a “voice like a fog horn” (45).²⁰ She enters the stage with a black eye that she recently received from Big Joey (50). While her violent behavior does not directly show the audience the systemic motivations that beget these visible outbursts (in her case, fistfights with just about anyone who crosses her path), Benjamin notes that violent manifestations are never completely disconnected from their origins (294). For Žižek, all violence originates from within the system, and because of this, violence cannot be purely self-destructive. Žižek suggests that recognizable subjective violent events are not as widely destructive as the objective violence that fails

²⁰ Arguably, Emily Dictionary is berated by her sisters for her hyper-masculine tendencies.

to be seen. The presence of negative (seemingly) self-destructive behavior is an indication of a complex network of objective violence existing just beneath the surface (or at the surface, hiding in plain sight) of social and political systems. Emily Dictionary is a manifested embodiment of the various violent facets that influence her. Her character illustrates Highway's innate understanding of the nature of violence and Emily Dictionary's struggle to bear witness to her own experience and to testify in her own defense illustrates the complexity of suffering.

The violence transmitted by the cultural body, for Emily Dictionary, is amplified by the fact that she has left the reserve for an extended period of time and then returned to it. She experienced a childhood growing up in Wasy, and she has knowledge of EuroCanadian and EuroAmerican cultures because she spent over a decade away from the reserve (Highway 43). After several years of being abused on a daily basis by her former husband named Henry Dadzinaanare, she left him (abandoning her children in the process) when she began to fear for her life (Highway 50). Through Emily Dictionary, Highway speaks to the nature of systemic violence and to the cyclicity of violence. She leaves one abusive and dysfunctional relationship in Yellowknife and, upon returning to the Rez, enters into a similarly destructive and violent relationship. Other characters in the play recognize her mistakes: "Henry Dadzinaanare, Big Joey. They're all the same, Emily. Use your brains" (51). Emily's life has been impacted by poverty, abuse, and desperation, which result in her violent and self-destructive behaviors. She struggles to face and overcome the underlying violence that haunts her, but until the systemic violence that rules her life is recognized and thwarted, Emily Dictionary seems doomed to make the same mistakes time and time again. It is only through testimony that Emily Dictionary's reality may be altered.

This alteration may begin with the recognition that the violence against women presented in the play is committed by both Native and non-Native men. Within *The Rez Sisters*, Native women are not safe within or without their own culture. Much of the violence committed against Emily Dictionary is sexual in nature. This type of violence relates specifically (although not exclusively) to women and is closely related to the First Nations cultural body of knowledge. Through the women's experiences, Highway demonstrates that, because of their gender, First Nations women are at risk because their lives are fundamentally controlled by men. In *The Rez Sisters*, the Aboriginal repertoire becomes highly feminized as the stage fills with women. The theatre becomes a space where Native women self-represent their needs and suffering. Maracle's claims that the gendered exploitation of women degrades all First Nations peoples "to a sub-human level" (17) and that "Sexuality is promoted as the end-all and be-all of womanhood" (24). As explored by the play and demonstrated by the real world, women are viewed primarily as objects of sexual pleasure, and this single-minded classification makes women vulnerable to sexual exploitation by men. Emily Dictionary represents the consequences that occur when women's autonomy over their bodies is stolen from them. The most effective way that they can regain control over their bodies is to exert control over their voices.

Interestingly, much of the violence the women inflict on each other deals with sexual slurs. The sisters use terms against each other including "Fucking self-righteous old bitch" (44), "You slippery little slut" (44), and "Fat-assed floozy" (47). It is true that Emily Dictionary is having dysfunctional sexual relations with Big Joey, Annie Cook

may have had an affair with her ex-lover and brother-in-law Eugene (120),²¹ and Philomena became pregnant with her married boss' child (81). The results of the women's suffering manifest themselves in sexually violent slurs used against one another. Highway's female characters experience systemic and subjective violence so frequently that violence becomes part of their normative behavior. Furthermore, the verbal abuse that they inflict upon each other may be a result of an underlying stress that they will "dry up, get all puckered up and pass into ancient history" (Highway 57). The sexually explicit verbal violence that the women use against each other is a type of inverted testimony that reflects their underlying anxiety about becoming sexually irrelevant.

The act of testifying does not come easily to Emily Dictionary. She initially lies to her sisters about her return to the reserve and states that she originally only intended on a quick visit, but then fell into bed with Big Joey and was "hooked" (Highway 52). The reality is that Emily lost her lesbian lover, Rosabella "Rose" Baez, when Rose's motorcycle collides with a truck on the freeway (97). For Maracle, one way that women can reclaim control over their sexuality is to explore the natural love that exists between women (21-25). The role of two-spiritedness²² and the love that exists between women offers Emily Dictionary a sanctuary from the sexual abuses of men. She struggles to come to terms with the abuse that she has experienced, and part of her inability to bear witness to her own suffering manifests in her seemingly untouchable and unfeeling persona. Emily Dictionary's most profound moment of testimony occurs when she discusses the death of Rose. Emily Dictionary laments, "When I got to Chicago, that's

²¹ Veronique mentions this to Marie-Adele amongst the chaos of the store fight when she states "Hasn't that slimy little reptile [Referring to Annie] ever told you that sweet little Ellen of hers is really Eugene's daughter?" (Highway 45).

²² "Two-spirited" is a term given to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, or Transgendered First Nations people. "Two-spirited" reflects the traditional respect that pre-colonized Native cultures had for both the masculine and feminine identities that exist within each person (NAHO 2).

when I got up the nerve to wash my lover's dried blood from off my neck. I loved that woman, Marie-Adele, I loved her like no man's ever loved a woman. But she's gone" (97). The comment that Emily loved Rose differently than a man loves a woman allows for multiple interpretations: Emily could mean that the love between two women is different than the love between a man and a woman, or the focus could be put onto the latter part of the statement to show that "no man's ever loved a woman" (97). Maracle suggests that lesbian love is threatening to those who buy into the patriarchal heterosexual binaries because "men may be challenged to love women too" (25). Highway presents one of his seven female characters as two-spirited to show that patriarchy, like hegemonic control over the archive, can be countered when women take control over their bodies and the spaces surrounding them.

When Emily embraces her two-spiritedness she finds a sense of love and security, and when she becomes more open to testimony, she takes steps toward personal healing. I am not, however, suggesting that her homosexual relationship solves all of Emily's problems (the text certainly does not support such a claim), nor does her two-spiritedness put an end to the violence that defines her. Emily admits that much of her relationship with Rose involved bar fights and "knuckle magic" (51), and mentions that Rose "was always thinkin' real deep. And talkin' about being a woman. An Indian woman. And suicide. And alcohol and despair and how fuckin' hard it is to be an Indian in this country" (97). The love and intimacy that the women share is not enough to erase the damage that the previous violence has inflicted, and because of violence's omnipresence, time alone cannot heal Emily Dictionary. As for Rose, her suicide is a manifestation of her violent life experiences and the inevitable end of uncontested systemic and subjective

violence.²³ As Maracle so astutely notes: “self-hatred is not real. It is a cover for systemic rage” (12), so even Rose’s suicide cannot be viewed as self-destruction. Despite the happiness she found with Rose, Emily Dictionary returns to Wasay more damaged than when she left. It is only through testifying to her own suffering and bearing witness to the suffering of her sisters that Emily Dictionary can redefine her life in Wasaychigan. In order to interrupt the cyclical violence that defines her own suffering, Emily Dictionary and her sisters must testify to the violent realities that define Wasaychigan as a community. Wasaychigan, the Ojibway word for “windows” (Highway xiii), is clearly broken. Fittingly, to break the cycle of violence, broken windows must be slowly and painstakingly pieced back together.

Interrupting the circle of violence requires more than the acknowledgment that the circle exists and reinforces itself, especially for a character like Emily Dictionary who attempts to solve all of her problems by running away. She first runs away from the Rez, then runs away from her husband, then runs away from San Francisco, and after all of that running, she finds herself right back where she started on the Rez. Highway suggests that simple changes and minor alterations will not change the state of Native women’s suffering, and this message is part of the cultural body of knowledge that Highway’s play attempts to impart to the audience. Instead of running, Emily Dictionary must bear witness to the traumatic events that have shaped her life, and she must testify against the violence that she has experienced. It is this act of recognition that potentially brings about change. When Emily admits to her abuse, trauma, and loss, the audience witnesses her witnessing, and from this conscious act of witnessing from both the embodied performer and the audience comes the transference of Aboriginal cultural knowledge.

²³ Her death is likely a suicide because she made no attempt to avoid the oncoming 18-wheeler that struck her motorcycle and, as previously mentioned, Rose was interested in the concept of suicide before her death (Highway 97).

Emily does not bear witness in a traditional or official sense. She spends most of the play hiding her suffering and pretending that she is fully in control. It is only in a private conversation with Zhaboonigan that Emily can admit to the sexual abuse that she has suffered when she states, “Aw geez, Zha, that man treated me real bad. Ever been tied to a bed post with your arms up like this?” (Highway 99). Although Zhaboonigan is cognitively disabled, she may be the only one of the sisters who can fully understand Emily’s suffering because Zhaboonigan has also experienced rape and loss. Zhaboonigan is haunted by the violent *protopragmata* that precedes the on stage events: Zhaboonigan recalls a time when she is stripped naked by two white boys and raped with a screwdriver after being driven far away from the reserve (Highway 47-48).²⁴ Zhaboonigan was not alone when this violent attack took place; we learn throughout *The Rez Sisters* that Nanabush witnesses the attack and is with her during her past and present torments (47).

In her child-like state, Zhaboonigan is able to recognize Nanabush through his disguised form as a sea-gull, and she remembers his presence when she recalls the rape(47). Zhaboonigan witnesses her own rape because she is physically present when it occurs and Nanabush, who is an embodied representative of the Aboriginal repertoire, also acts as a witness. Nanabush is the only character who is able to hear Zhaboonigan as she testifies to her experiences and he further embodies cultural experience and knowledge. When Zhaboonigan offers testimony about the events, Nanabush witnesses this testimony. The audience, all the while, witnesses both of the characters’s witnessing, and it becomes clear that Nanabush is the only character who can fully appreciate Zhaboonigan’s suffering. As he hears her testimony, the stage directions read “During

²⁴ Highway states in interview that Zhaboonigan’s rape references a crime that he remembers from his childhood on the reservation. He claims that a young Native girl was driven away from the reserve and raped by a group of white boys who then gauged out her eyes with a screwdriver to prevent her from identifying them. The girl later died from exposure (Innes 89). The brutal rape was not covered by the media.

this last speech, Nanabush goes through agonizing contortions” (48). The witnessing of testimony creates physical and emotional affect for Nanabush, and, as Pelajia suggests in Act 1, a return to Nanabush is a vital movement toward the healing and regeneration of First Nations women. Of course, as Nanabush is a figure of the repertoire, a return to Nanabush also means a return to the repertoire for Aboriginal peoples.

Zhaboonigan’s testimony demands witnesses and during her recollection of the rape, she says, “Don’t fly away. Don’t go” and thrice asks Nanabush to “Remember” (47-48). The same requests are put on an audience when they are required to fulfill the role of witness. Witnessing *The Rez Sisters* is difficult because the violence in the play cannot be witnessed first-hand. It has already happened and what remains is the embodied memory of the event. Perhaps some memories are too intimate and fragile to bear witness to. As Derrida claims, “Violence appears only at the moment when the intimacy [of identity] can be opened to forced entry. And that is possible only at the moment when the space is shaped and reoriented by the glance of the foreigner ” (113).²⁵ This “forced entry” insinuates a sexual and gendered violation (rape) that is potentially related to the process of witnessing. When applied to a theatrical space, Derrida’s foreigner becomes the audience. But the audience-as-observer is invited into the space of embodied performance

²⁵ Here, Derrida is specifically referring to Levi-Strauss’s observation of and invasion into the proper names cherished by the Nambikwara. Derrida’s theory is equally applicable to the concept of witnessing. The community members rename Zhaboonigan with the intention of referencing the violence that she has endured. Marie-Adele Peterson is dubbed “needle” by the Rez community and Zhaboonigan herself recognizes that this name is supposed to reflect her (enforced) identity; she is given an identity that is largely defined by violence. Zhaboonigan states “It means needle. Zhaboonigan. Going-through-thing. Needle Peterson. Going-through-thing Peterson. That’s me” (Highway 48). As Zhaboonigan notes, the needle is known for its movement through space. A needle pierces, punctures, and penetrates. The needle may also be considered a phallic symbol. But regardless of the meaning behind the name Zhaboonigan (which is certainly not meant to be flattering and may even refer to the needle-like screwdriver used to rape her), Derrida insists that language is “penetration” (107) and the process of erasing Marie-Adele and giving her an arguably improper name is a linguistically violent act with sexually violent undertones. The same can be said for Emily Dictionary (whose last name is actually Dadzinanare). The irony in Emily’s misinterpreted surname is obvious: dictionaries offer specific and correct definitions and description of words, which is the opposite of what Emily’s acquired last name accomplishes. On the Rez, the women are unable to create and define their identities as they see fit and the names that they acquire do not reflect the women who they long to be.

and hence their relationship to the spectacle does not perforce have to be one of violation and intrusion. The repertoire cannot function without an audience, just as testimony cannot function without witnesses. Accessing the cultural body of knowledge and the intimacy that this knowledge entails is the purpose of the repertoire. For Highway's characters, life on the Rez creates a sense of helplessness, and the political and systemic voicelessness that plagues the women is a part of the collective violent experiences that define their realities. Although they are able to voice their frustrations to each other, if no one else is listening, then the cultural knowledge cannot move beyond the sisters and impact the world through testimony.

In many ways, the repertoire is testimony. When concrete evidence in the form of the archive cannot adequately capture the essence of a story, embodied memory, witnessing, and testimony can transmit knowledge and experience in order to fill in the gaps. Jerry Wasserman observes that

Out of this newly broken silence, [Highway's plays] speak eloquently; but hesitations, elisions, and their own silences mark the difficulty of finding appropriate forms and protocols with which to articulate what in some ways, at the time, remained unutterable....I was struck by their wrenching power and pain, and by how much the playwrights do not say in their attempts to negotiate trauma.

(25)

Here, Wasserman touches on the complexity of breaking silence, breaking violent circles, and un-breaking communities. By insisting upon a relationship between embodied performance and witnessing, Highway allows his characters to deal with their personal and collective traumas in a manner that protects the individual and affects the audience.

Highway characters must relive and embody their "personal and cultural trauma"

(Wasserman 26) in order to interrupt the circle of suffering that will otherwise direct their

future behavior and experiences. The sisters witness and testify against the violence that they have experienced with the hopes that they will discover the inner peace “which allows one to begin again” (LaCapra qtd in Wasserman 26). For Highway and his Rez sisters, circular suffering is interrupted through the acts of witnessing and testimonial. It is through witnessing that mere spectators recognize the connection between that which is visibly violent, and that which silently and invisibly reinforces the circle of violence (Scheper-Hughes 10). The theatre creates a space where witnesses and testifiers can transmit their knowledge far beyond sisters, lovers, and communities. Staging violent realities allows for stories to be told via a medium that is accessible on a nationwide scale.

During the final scene of *The Rez Sisters*, it seems that little productive change has occurred in the lives of the women. Although the ending is not wholly tragic, it is far from ideal. The sisters return from Toronto only \$600 richer (which does not cover their \$1400 expenses). The plan to win the jackpot and rejuvenate their community fails miserably and they return home without Marie-Adele who succumbs to cancer while in Toronto. But Usmiani is correct in asserting that the play ends with hope: “Philomena has the coveted new toilet; Annie gets to sing backup with the band of Fritz the Cat; Emily is carrying a child; Veronique cooks for the widowed Eugene and his 14 children” (137). Furthermore, Marie-Adele experiences death as a dance with Nanabush, implying that even her untimely end is met with a return to the spirit world and, in this sense, a reunion with the repertoire. Though the sisters have suffered, the play ends with an image of new life (the baby) and rejuvenation.²⁶ The play, which circulates around the violent exploitation of Native women, finds hope in a child. Although *The Rez Sisters* shows that

²⁶ *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* also ends with the image of a child, only the child is not within his mother’s womb, but in the arms of his father (134).

childrearing is not immune to violence and suffering,²⁷ it is important to note that out of the violence and suffering that defines Emily Dictionary, a child is conceived and this child brings her happiness and hope for the future (Highway 110).²⁸

For women who are victims of sexual violence, a child becomes a mixed symbol. Maracle says that First Nations women “are a conquered people” and further says: “it is because we have been raped. Our men know that we have been raped. They watched it happen. Some of the rape we have been subjected to was inflicted by them. Some of them were our fathers and our brothers” (56). After suffering sexual, psychological, and physical abuse, Emily Dictionary emotionally closes herself off from the world, but she still finds new life growing within her. Here the cultural body that longs to be transmitted takes on a tangible corporeality. The child growing in Emily Dictionary’s womb is a living testimonial to her experiences. The baby is a way for Emily Dictionary to live her experiences and to tell her story in a manner that is embodied. Her child becomes an embodied performance of the sexual abuse that she has experienced, but is reconceptualized by Emily Dictionary as a symbol for hope, healing, and rejuvenation. The repertoire creates a space for embodied performance with the hopes of transmitting the cultural body through testimony, and Emily’s pregnancy, though begotten through violence, further allows Emily to bear witness to her suffering and to tell her own story through the rearing of a child.

In *The Rez Sisters*, the women and their stories take center-stage. Innes asserts that Highway’s plays “implicitly demonstrate the complexity of the human situation that

²⁷ Marie-Adele leaves behind fourteen motherless children, Philomena does not reconnect with the child she was forced to give up to her boss’s wife in Toronto, and Veronique still feels judged by the entire community for being unable to bear children.

²⁸ Big Joey did not rape Emily Dictionary. She has consensual intercourse with him. But their union is surrounded by violence because of Big Joey’s other lover, Gazelle Nataways, and because Big Joey is a misogynist. Their sexual encounters are not based upon common respect and affection, but power dynamics and female subjugation.

is otherwise overlooked (at least by the urban population) as too basic or socially reduced to warrant attention” (87). Highway depicts the suffering that surrounding his sisters and forces the audience to come face-to-face with a previously unrecognized violent reality. Highway allows for the women to self-witness the violence that is inflicted upon them, and gives them a place to offer testimony against violence. The repertoire requires an audience, and an active audience must bear witness to the embodied performances acted out before them. Whether or not the Aboriginal cultural body is transmitted depends entirely on the effectiveness of the theatrical medium and the openness and willingness of the witnesses. The final image of *The Rez Sisters* is that of Nanabush on the rooftop, where the plot began (Highway 133). He, like the sisters, may be “a little the worse for wear and tear” (Highway xii), but he remains. Despite the apparent failure of the trip to Toronto, the embodied figure of the repertoire celebrates jubilantly. He is a Native spirit attuned with the cycles of life, death, birth, violence, healing, witnessing, and testifying. Highway’s work attempts to transmit his cultural knowledge of the suffering of First Nations women and the necessity of the repertoire to aid in their healing. His success is gauged by the final image of the play. Before the curtains close, the last thing the audience witnesses is the figure of Aboriginal cultural body of knowledge, experience, and suffering. In the spirit of embodied performance, Nanabush moves around the rooftop, dancing “triumphantly” (133).

CHAPTER THREE:

“making the audience her circle”:

Un-silencing the Feminine Voice in Yvette Nolan’s *Annie Mae’s Movement*

The acts of bearing witness to violence and testifying against violent events are vital to personal healing and the transmission of the cultural body of knowledge and experience. A return to the Aboriginal repertoire (in Highway’s case, through the figure of Nanabush) further supports the transmission of testimonial. But in order to testify, one must exercise autonomy over one’s own voice. Native plays are fraught with acts of silencing. An example of this silencing is executed by Big Joey, a character who links Yvette Nolan’s *Annie Mae’s Movement* to Highway’s *The Rez Sisters*. In Highway’s sequel to *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Big Joey is further developed as a character. In *Dry Lips*, Big Joey witnesses his illegitimate son (who was born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome) rape a pregnant Nanabush/Patsy with a crucifix, causing her to miscarry (*Dry Lips* 98-102). When Big Joey is asked why he did not stop the rape or speak out against it, he says “Because I hate them! I hate them fuckin’ bitches. Because they – our own women– took the fuckin’ power away from us faster than the FBI ever did” (*Dry Lips* 120). Big Joey blames the failure of the Aboriginal movement on the events that occurred at Wounded Knee from February 27th to May 5th, 1973. First Nations radical activist Anna Mae Pictou Aquash was largely scapegoated for the collapse of this movement. For Highway and his characters, the gendered hatred and condemnation forced upon Aquash extends to include and impact the lives of all Aboriginal women.²⁹ In her play, Nolan challenges conventional representations of

²⁹ During the several years following her murder, Aquash, who was the highest ranking women in the American Indian Movement (AIM), was framed as an informant and was vilified by many for her alleged cooperation with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

violence through the self-[re]presentation of Annie Mae.³⁰ Nolan achieves this through Annie Mae's blunt attitude toward violent realities, her unrelenting determination to access and unite the archive and the repertoire for the good of Aboriginal peoples, and, in the end, through her sacrifice.

As Yvette Nolan explores through her play, there is much more to Anna Mae Pictou Aquash's story, her life experiences, her suffering, her voice, and the acts of silencing that contributed to her murder than is typically represented by the media. Nolan's play begins with a long monologue spoken by the female protagonist. Annie Mae speaks of the violence that her people have endured and offers examples of times when Native women have been ready to speak-out and fight for a cause and have been excluded and silenced because of their gender (Nolan 4-5). After the opening speech, Annie follows her student, Lawrence (who has heard rumors of the return of the "Rugaru" and takes the alleged presence of the spiritual beast as a sign of things to come) to the AIM, which is based out of the historically prominent and politically charged location of Wounded Knee.³¹ She busies herself by rallying the women, fundraising, and befriending Dennis, the leader of the movement. Shortly after, Dennis and Annie (both married to other people) begin a love affair. When newcomer Doug becomes the chief of security for AIM, Annie Mae is immediately suspicious of his character, but Dennis ensures her that Doug's presence is a necessary precaution and brushes off her concerns (16-17). Frustrated by her lack of clout, Annie Mae expresses her opinions about the way that the women are treated and disregarded within the AIM movement. She is also discontented about many aspects of reservation life and she suspects that there is

³⁰ When I am discussing Nolan's character, I will refer to her as Annie Mae or just Annie (as Nolan does in the play). When I am discussing the historical figure, I will use the legal name Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, or just the surname Aquash.

³¹ Like Nanabush, Rugaru is a Native spiritual figure and is emblematic of Aboriginal spiritual identity.

something in the earth and water on the reserve (probably uranium) that is making the people sick and causing the women to miscarry (22).

When Annie Mae discovers evidence to back her suspicions, the acts of silencing committed against her intensify. When Dennis transfers Annie Mae and Doug to the Los Angeles AIM office, she soon finds evidence that Doug is redirecting funds and spying on the movement (26). By the time Dennis recognizes that Doug is an FBI informant, suspicion has also fallen upon Annie Mae as she has been repeatedly arrested by the FBI for interrogation, occasionally indicted for ambiguous charges, and then immediately released. Soon, she is captured and interrogated by Lawrence (her former student) and other AIM members who believe that she is a traitor and an informant (39-40). The play ends with the image of the Rugaru appearing, for a brief moment, before Annie Mae testifies to the audience in a final attempt to clear her name. During her testimony, an FBI agent enters the scene and rapes her, but he is unable to silence her completely. Her final words before a gunshot is heard are “You can kill me, but you cannot kill us all. You can kill me” (42). In her final lines, Annie Mae speaks of the collectivity of the Aboriginal feminine spirit and the inability of external powers to mute women so long as they remain united in the fight against silencing.

Not unlike Highway’s sisters, Annie Mae expresses dissatisfaction about the racism and patriarchal oppression that impacts her life in the opening commentary about Aboriginal existence. In her opening lines, Annie Mae discusses the modern-day techniques that are used to slowly and systematically “disappear” Aboriginal peoples in North America (Nolan 4). She recognizes that the Native peoples must fight for their right to be safe, to be heard, and to live freely, but she (like most women) is largely excluded from influential political discourse. In her opening monologue, she speaks of the AIM, and mentions an instance at an AIM meeting when a woman named Myrtle

waited all morning for her turn to speak. When Myrtle was able to reach the microphone “they called for lunch... And she stood there and she started to talk anyway, and our leaders took the mike away from her, covered it up with their hands so she couldn’t be heard” (4). In this first scene, Annie Mae speaks of “they” who oppress the women. This vague reference may be initially interpreted as the *wasicu* (white) body of control that oppresses Native peoples by controlling the basic supplies that are available on the reserve, encouraging poverty, and allowing for living conditions that beget malnutrition and disease (Nolan 4). But in the same speech, Annie speaks of the men who silence Myrtle at the AIM meeting; in this instance, “they” are the male leadership who dominate the movement and control the national discourse. Early on in the play, Nolan sheds light on the patriarchal structures that subjugate the lives of women both on and off the reservation. She feels that the only way a woman can be heard amongst men, and a Native can be heard amongst whites, is for the underprivileged body to gain access to the dominant modes of knowing presumably stored in Taylor’s archive. Annie Mae believes that her voice will be un-silenced if she can tap into the archive’s ability to transmit knowledge.

As a teacher, Annie Mae recognizes the necessity of accessing the white archive if Native people are to escape the silencing effects of oppression. Annie Mae encourages her student Lawrence to fight for change through the use of “libraries and law books,” to which he responds: “Books and white words! This is how we are going to change?...Trying to change me into *wasicu*” (7). This dialogue highlights the complexity of accessing the archive. Taylor challenges the validity of the archive because she feels that what is included in the archive is primarily dictated by the political body that controls it (18), and the above lines spoken by Highway’s Lawrence echo this criticism. Taylor suggests that it is easier to control, alter, and editorialize the archive than it is to

do the same to the repertoire (17). When the archive fails to adequately document and store the stories of peoples, it becomes the responsibility of the repertoire to transmit these stories (193). Annie Mae does not have unwavering faith in the archive because the “history” she was taught in school told the tale of “the poor explorers risking their lives to bring God to the ungrateful savages” (Nolan 8). But because Annie has accessed both the *wasicu* archive and the Aboriginal repertoire, she is able to view the archive with a critical gaze and to scrutinize the information that so many accept as truth. She recognizes that the archive mostly fails to accurately and authentically transmit cultural knowledge and that it is easily adapted to suit the needs of those who control it, but she still believes that gaining access to the archive is the best way for Aboriginals have their voices heard and to “survive in the white world” (Nolan 7).

A fundamental survival technique for Annie is to use the archive (however flawed) to access information about her culture and history that would otherwise be unknown to her. Although the archive is largely determined by *wasicu* culture, Annie believes that there is still pertinent and authentic Aboriginal history and knowledge stored within it. When Dennis accuses Annie Mae of inventing details and stories about MicMac³² tradition, she replies with “This is the real history of my tribe, it’s all there in the libraries, if you just take the time” (15). However, as AIM’s situation becomes more precarious and the leadership of the movement begins to crumble, the archive’s limitations are a driving force behind the movement’s annihilation. A failure of archival information to adequately transmit knowledge occurs when a letter that confirms that Doug has been redirecting funds does not reach Annie in time to undo that damage that Doug has done to the movement (Nolan 26). Although she knows, somewhat intuitively,

³² This is how the band name is spelled in *Annie Mae’s Movement*. Mi’kmaq is a different spelling variation (Poliandri 241).

from the beginning that Doug is a spy, this emotional “embodied knowledge” (Taylor 119) is not sufficient to prove her case to Dennis, who does not value embodied knowledge. The archive is further detrimental to Annie’s personal life when she writes Dennis a love letter. He returns it to her, suggesting that written letters are not a safe form of communication because “someone is always opening your mail” (Nolan 29).

Just because something is written does not necessarily guarantee that it is archival, but Taylor states that “what makes an object archival is the process whereby it is selected, classified, and presented for analysis” (19). By this definition, the letters, newspaper articles, and public documents that Annie Mae attempts to use to substantiate her insights and further her cause are part of the archive. As *Annie Mae’s Movement* demonstrates, when information is written in hardcopy, it often does not transmit the cultural body in the manner desired. Annie Mae, however, views the written word as an artifact representing enduring fact and evidence, just as she views press releases and public documents as less disputable than information that she intuitively (or even logically) knows to be true. For Annie, the letter incriminating Doug is hard evidence, and her love letter to Dennis makes their relationship concrete. Simply voicing her opinion about Doug or verbally professing her commitment to Dennis are not sufficient; Doug’s guilt and her love for Dennis exist because they are documented within the archive. But in neither instance does Annie’s interpretation of the archive benefit her and the letters do not have the impact that Annie believes they should. Simply knowing the truth is not sufficient; the truth needs to be recognized and utilized by more powerful figures. Regardless of her knowledge of the archive and her attempts to utilize it, Annie Mae’s voice is not heard.

Annie Mae recognizes that the archive has limitations, but she argues that refusing to engage with it does little to help move Aboriginal people away from the dire

realities that cause them to suffer. Ironically, it is Annie Mae's intimate knowledge of the archive and the political bodies that feed it that casts a shadow of suspicion on her character. Her downfall shows the risks associated with separating and compartmentalizing the archive from the repertoire and assuming that one must choose a side. Annie's life is put into danger because she understands how to access the information in the archive and she is highly in-tune with the events surrounding her. The FBI agent who interrogates Annie challenges her knowledge of the archive and asks her how she could possibly know intimate details about the investigation. She replies, "I know because there was a reporter there by the name of McKiernan. There were witnesses. Look, you can go and get this information yourself, your superiors know, they know, it's just easier to keep you guys all revved up—" (35). But the fact that Annie Mae is well versed in the archive does not change the fact that she is not supposed to have access to it and is not welcome to interpret the archive as she sees fit. She may be fluent in the dominant modes of knowing, but she is unable to be heard by or influence the dominant modes of power (both in her own Aboriginal community and in EuroCanadian culture). In the end, relying on the archive cannot save Annie Mae from the violence and hatred that silence her and, arguably, that result in her murder.

Although she misguidedly puts her faith in the power and influence of the archive, Annie Mae is also deeply connected to the Aboriginal cultural body of knowledge. In *Annie Mae's Movement*, truth and reality are transmitted via the cultural body when the body is accessed through intuition. I argue that intuition is a facet of the repertoire because it is a form of embodied knowledge and a culturally feminized mode of understandings. As Taylor has suggested, the repertoire is primarily "a way of knowing" (xvi), and intuition is one way that highly spiritual women can access and understand the world around them. In the play, intuition is primarily possessed and expressed by women.

Cultural feminist Alison Jagger claims that women's intuition is a "special source of knowledge" that brings women together and gives them the empathetical capacity to relate with the world around them in a way that men cannot (qtd in Dolan 7). Annie Mae's intuition is depicted through the concept of "vision" (Nolan 10). Annie Mae even calls upon a seer named "old Annie" who reiterates Annie Mae's intuitive understanding of her own impending death (23).

Regardless of her visions or intuition, Dennis does not believe that Annie's insights are of any value. When Annie presents the knowledge that she accesses intuitively (and then reinforces through grinding archival investigation), he downplays her embodied knowledge when he (ironically) states "We can't run a political movement on women's intuition" (Nolan 31). It does not matter that Annie's embodied intuitive insights prove to be accurate. When she attempts to transmit her intuition to others as a part of the Aboriginal repertoire, her voice remains undervalued and ignored. When Annie Mae retorts "We can't run a political movement totally ignoring 75% of it's members because they are women" (31), she speaks to the constant acts of silencing that prevent Native women from exercising autonomy over their own voices. So while the men who control the movement do not believe that the archive can be used to further Native interests, the patriarchal system of control disallows investment in the embodied intuition of the women who surround and support the movement.

Despite her ability to access and find value in both the archive and the repertoire, Annie Mae cannot pass on her knowledge to the more powerful people around her because of her gender. Throughout *Annie Mae's Movement*, the transmission of the cultural body falls entirely upon the shoulders of women, yet, paradoxically, the women are constantly silenced and ignored by Native and *wasicu* men. Maracle, who is interested in the many ways that patriarchal systems (both Native and non-Native)

prevent Native women's voices from being heard, calls out to all Native women and says "Let Wounded Knee be the last time they erase us [women] from the world of the living" (19). This historical erasure of Native women's voices is seen in Nolan's play, and her work illustrates how prevalent the silencing of women was during the second incident at Wounded Knee. Furthermore, the play explores the violent repercussions that can occur when women's voices are constantly silenced or simply ignored. In *Annie Mae's Movement* it is the women who must see reality for what it truly is and since Annie Mae is the only woman in the play, she takes on the voices of all Native women. When she sits "on the edge of the stage, making the audience her circle" (Nolan 13), Annie Mae engages the audience as her fellow women and brings them into the conversation. Christy Stanlake says that Annie Mae's voice offers "an extended perspective that links the issues of Anna Mae's life to issues faced by contemporary Native American women" (145) and the audience is invited to become a part of Annie Mae's inner circle of sisters and listen in as she describes the issues that Aboriginal peoples face. In this moment, Nolan uses the Aboriginal repertoire to transmit the cultural body from the stage into the world of the audience.

Annie speaks as a representative for all Native women to the audience-as-women about the food shortages, alcoholism, and poor health of the reserve communities (14) as well as the miscarriages that plague their women and the *wasicu* who are stealing from their land (22). These major concerns should be at the forefront of the AIM, but are completely disregarded by its male leadership. For Annie, speaking out about the issues that are ignored by the men who control the lives of the women is not just a matter of pride or a grab for power because, as Rice-Sayre elucidates, "telling is a form of survival" (52). If Annie Mae does not speak, if she does not bear witness and testify to the atrocities that she sees (and that the men, both Native and *wasicu* are seemingly

unable or unwilling to see) then she and the women she represents face potential annihilation. Often, however, the people who are closest to violence are unable to speak out and bear witness against it (Cubilié 2). Although the real-life Anna Mae Pictou Aquash was murdered and her voice is permanently silenced, Nolan continues to tell her story (which reflects the suffering and oppression experienced by all First Nations women) by staging Aquash's experiences and portraying the events leading to her death in a manner that un-silences her.

Although the American Indian Movement is designed with the hopes of giving Native peoples a voice, moving communities forward and creating space for political and economic developments, the play suggests that the movement only succeeds in further disconnecting its Native participants from their cultural knowledge, identity, and voice. Annie says that within the movement "You lose all sense of who you are except in context of the Movement... It's insatiable" (Nolan 18). Conversely, Dennis suggests that personal sacrifices are indicative of people who are dedicated to the cause. But the women are forced to sacrifice much more than the men (a fact that is demonstrated when Annie Mae is forced to choose between being a mother and being a warrior). Although she admits that she is better suited and has certainly found greater success as an activist than as a mother, Annie Mae is still devastated by the loss of her children (Nolan 21).³³ It is possible that when acting as a mother, Annie Mae feels that her voice is softened as she succumbs to the ultimate role of femininity, and she is not necessarily wrong in this assumption. Suzack recognizes that Native women are typically asked to choose between fighting for issues that impact women and fighting for more general Native causes (184). The irony, it seems, is that a Native woman cannot be a feminist activist and a mother. Suggesting that the women must split their identities prohibits feminist Native issues

³³ Her ex-husband Jake and his new white wife have been granted full custody (Nolan 21).

from being included in the discussion of issues that impact all Native people. Not only does the movement disregard embodied cultural knowledge in the form of vision and women's intuition, it also disregards the importance of motherhood and childrearing. Dennis states, "We are warriors. We leave the kid raising to others" (Nolan 21). Annie Mae is forced to give up her identity as an intuitive woman (who is innately connected to the repertoire) and as a mother in exchange for a status as warrior. However, she is never able to fully attain this status, nor is she permitted to access the vocal privileges associated with it.

Being a woman warrior does not make Annie Mae's voice any more important or valued than it was before. Even as an active member within the AIM, Annie watches as Myrtle is cut off in Wisconsin. Annie describes this moment as a further instance demonstrating how "our women [are] silenced" (4-5). The desire to silence Native women (and indeed all women) is engrained in the patriarchal ideology. Silencing is a violent act that disregards identity and crushes the soft spoken beneath the aggressively loud. Native women are told that they "shouldn't try to become something they aren't" by speaking out, by bearing witness, and by testifying because "there's a natural balance that should be respected" (Nolan 18). But if this natural balance were in equilibrium, then the lives, identities, and voices of women would be protected and cherished. Jean Becker notes that men who commit violence against women desire not only that the women experience physical suffering, but seek "to obliterate their very identity" (qtd in *The Cultural Memory Group* 208). Unfortunately for Native women, the battle against being silenced must be fought on multiple fronts.

Throughout the play, there are many forces that attempt to silence Annie Mae. There are also instances when this silencing seemingly achieves its goal, because at times, although Annie has much to say, she is silent. As Himani Bannerji notes, "silence

is highly telling – it can mean anything from complicity to resistance” (262). In *Annie Mae’s Movement*, the protagonist is silenced by her own Native brethren, and by the *wasicu* who only want to hear her story if it reinforces what they already know. She spends the majority of the play fighting being silenced, but there are a few moments when she truly succumbs to silence. When Annie tries to speak during her interrogation, the FBI agent silences her by shouting, “Will you shut up? Christ you’re a mouthy woman” and this aggressive and patriarchal muzzling is followed by the stage note “*Annie is silent*” (Nolan 35). As she is the only woman present on stage (which is indicative of the silencing that Native women experience) Annie must attempt to be the voice of all Native women. But Annie cannot exercise the right to speak and be heard, regardless of the ethnicity or motivation of her male audiences. In moments when speaking will not result in the transference of the cultural body, Annie does not speak.

Without testimonial and witnesses the violent event can be denied. Furthermore, the witnesses must be more than spectators, and must actively participate in the ethical act of witnessing. For all this to occur, it is not enough for a woman to be permitted to speak and for her words to be simply vocalized. A second time when the stage directions read “*Annie is silent*” occurs when Annie is raped at the end of the play (Nolan 41). It is clear that none of the male characters within the play (Native or *wasicu*) are willing to listen to Annie Mae or to legitimize Annie Mae’s embodied cultural knowledge as she experiences it through women’s intuition. Annie Mae’s words may have more impact on female characters, but throughout *Annie Mae’s Movement* she is the only woman present. When Annie Mae’s testimony falls to transmit the cultural body, she looks elsewhere for an active and receptive audience. Annie Mae’s only option is to call, once again, upon the theatre audience. After the audience has witnessed the events of the story, Nolan gives Annie Mae a chance to address the theatre audience directly and to reiterate her

perspective on the events in her own words. Nolan recognizes how important it is that a woman be able to tell her own story to an audience that is willing to listen.

Annie Mae desires the transmission of her testimony to an audience of witnesses because she wants to add her knowledge and experience to the cultural “collective memory” (Taylor 211) in order to build a history (as defined by those who experience it) through the repertoire. Annie Mae recognizes the role of “cultural work of memory-making in producing social change” (The Cultural Memory Group 22) and attempts, time and time again throughout the play, to communicate her knowledge in a manner that will allow it to be preserved and transmitted to broader audiences. Nolan engages with the social production of memory in an article entitled “A Hopeful Present”:

When we come to the room to work, we bring with us all of those who came before, and all of those yet to come, arms outstretched, right arm behind, left arm forward, representing our place in the continuum. But if we are working with this idea of continuum, how does memory fit in? Are we indeed talking about memory, or do we have to reframe to think of all times as existing in the same moment? Memory implies a past, a completion of an act. (31)

Just as violence is omnipresent in its ability to influence the past, present, and future, so too is collective memory complex in its relationship to temporality. Taylor suggests that “when the performance ends, so does the shared understanding of social life and collective memory” (211), but if the events presented during the embodied performance are transmitted to a consciously responsible audience, then the collective memory moves beyond the theatrical events and continues to influence present existence off stage. Peggy Phelan claims that although theatrical performances are problematized by the incalculability of their impact on the “transmission of bodily knowledge,” the influence that embodied performance has on witnessing creates “an ongoing history”; the audience

members may even become active agents by responding to this history as collective memory (10). Nolan gives her protagonist a space where she can voice her intuitive knowledge of the repertoire and the cultural body and potentially transmit this to an open and receptive audience. When her story is presented on stage, the patriarchy, misogyny, and Native and *wasicu* men cannot silence her.

When a conscious audience witnesses the final scene of *Annie Mae's Movement*, they experience it as a collective body. The audience takes on a vital role when witnessing the violent events that lead to the end of Annie Mae's life. For this reason, Nolan takes extra steps at this point to ensure that the audience is invested in the play and in Annie Mae as a person. It is important that the audience recognize the violence that is committed against Annie Mae in the final scene is a present violence and not merely a representation of past events. To prepare the audience for witnessing, Christy Stanlake explains, Nolan employs subtle theatrical techniques to transform the audience from mere spectators to active participants in the praxis (143). Annie Mae speaks her opening and closing words directly to the audience. When the Rugaru first appears on stage, it "*scans the audience*" and it is later reported by Lawrence that "Forty people saw it" (Nolan 5). Stanlake argues that Lawrence's forty people may be the audience members who witness the appearance of the Rugaru first-hand (144-145). It is as if the action that occurs in the middle of the play has superimposed itself upon Annie Mae's opening monologue without her knowledge and she continues to speak in the "End" scene as if no break in time has occurred. Stanlake refers to this kind of blurred temporality as "blended time" and she claims that because temporal linearity is interrupted, the audience is able to experience the violence committed against Annie Mae as a present event and not simply as a re-presentation of past violence (144-145). Stanlake's theory relates to Nolan's image of "arms outstretched" to both past and future and to the Aboriginal belief that

time, like violence, is circular and cyclical and does not only impact people by moving in a linear direction.

Annie Mae's final monologue is a continuation of the ideas presented in her opening monologue. Her speech and the events of the play are presented simultaneously, and the lessons that she has learned from her experiences are available to her at the same time as the experiences occur. Stanlake's "flashbacks" or "blended time" do not interrupt the chronology of the events, but superimpose a layer of temporality that bleeds together the past and the present. By the final scene in the play, Annie Mae has abandoned the archive entirely and relies on her voice, an agent of embodied performance, to communicate her message. Annie Mae's speech is interrupted, however, by the unwelcome, unsolicited presence of a man. This interruption is another act of silencing. Annie Mae breaks her train of thought when she notices his presence and her fluid, clear sentences become a panicked monosyllabic utterance: "Don't" (Nolan 41). The fear and pain that Annie Mae experiences disallows her to adequately communicate her ideas, but it does not silence her completely. She is still able to list the names of the important women in her life (she lists a total of 33 names, including her own) and to repeat the line "you cannot kill us all" (Nolan 41-42). But after the sound of a gunshot, Annie Mae is successfully silenced (42). The desire to silence Annie Mae seems a clear motivation for pulling the trigger, but the question of who pulled the trigger is more difficult to discern.

In the first staged reading and the first official performance of *Annie Mae's Movement*, the male roles (Rugaru, Lawrence, Dennis, Doug, FBI Guy, and Law) were all played by one actor (Nolan 3).³⁴ Stanlake suggests that having only one male body on stage shows the similarities between the FBI and AIM players and helps to center the

³⁴ The first staged reading was held at NEPA(1988); the first official performance was at Hardly Art (1998).

play around the theme of “men in high places fearing women” (145-146). During the “End” scene, when Annie’s monologue is interrupted, the stage directions note that “*FBI Guy has entered*” (Nolan 41) and although there is only one man present throughout the stage, the FBI Guy’s physical appearance is differentiated from that of his other male personas. Regardless of the costume change, the audience sees the same man who has been on stage throughout. This man is all of the men with whom Annie Mae has interacted throughout the play. When FBI Guy rapes Annie Mae, he embodies the sexist, misogynistic, accusatorial, and patriarchal influences that have negatively impacted Annie Mae during her involvement with the AIM. Literally speaking, Annie Mae is raped by an FBI agent, but on a more profound level, she is also raped and silenced by *wasicu* culture, by the AIM, and by all men who devalue and disrespect the identities and individualities of Native women. Rape as it relates to Žižek’s theory of systemic violence is presented on stage, in front of an audience who is asked to bear witness.

Unlike the rapes that are discussed in *The Rez Sisters*, the rape of Annie Mae occurs center-stage and in plain sight. While “blended time” is used to depict the majority of the events that impact her life, Annie Mae does not retrospectively visit the rape, or recall the events in her own words. Because her monologues represent present time, and the rape appears during one of these monologues, it is clear that Nolan wants the audience to watch as misogynistic violence is taken out on Annie Mae’s body in present time. Kalí Tal claims that testimony often fails because words can never adequately express or transfer emotions, pain, or suffering (2). But presenting the violence that is committed against her protagonist and forcing the audience to watch and bear witness to it allows Nolan to transform testimonial from a verbal account into an embodied experience. This embodiment gives the testimony a physicality that is both brutal and affective. Annie Mae testifies to her experiences not only through language, but by re-

living the excruciating and demeaning experience in front of a group of present witnesses. In the moments before her death, Annie Mae calls upon the repertoire to transmit her experience. Her embodied testimony through performance is an affective way to encourage the transmission of knowledge and suffering which transcends the limited capacities of the archive. The embodied performance requires the physical presence of the female body, because, in *Annie Mae's Movement*, it is women who understand and transmit the cultural body of the repertoire.

Taylor says that “Only through performance can disappearance be rendered visible” (205). The violence that begets Aquash’s disappearance is highly visible on Nolan’s stage. There are, of course, risks associated with staging violence against the female body. The violence may be fetishized, while the body may be sexualized. Putting a woman in a physically submissive position in a play that is supposed to reinforce feminine power and identity is also problematic. But Nolan’s re-presentation of violence actually counters conventional techniques that reinforce violence and responds to Emberley’s call for a “fundamental transformation” in the ways in which violence against First Nation women is depicted (66). Primarily, Emberley asks that the women be given not only names, but full identities and life stories so that the violence committed against them is not only deemed as tragic, but is taken personally (65). In the full development of her protagonist (and only female character), Nolan succeeds in this goal. Annie Mae’s embodied performance of the violence that she experiences allows for a combination of re-presenting, witnessing, “enacting, and, to some extent, working over and through trauma whether personally experienced, transmitted from intimates, or sensed in one’s larger social and cultural setting” (LaCapra 105). The sexual violence committed against Annie Mae must appear on stage, because when all other elements of the repertoire, including cultural transmission, communication, and testimony have been stripped from

her, Annie Mae is left with her corporeality and uses it as her final tool to tell her story. It is only through the use of the cultural body to create affect that the violent circle that constantly reinforces itself upon Aboriginal existence may be broken.

The rape of Annie Mae is the final attempt of the patriarchy to silence her as a woman, an activist, and a whistleblower. As Elaine Scarry suggests in interview, physical pain causes the breakdown of language and forbids the person experiencing pain to articulate her or his experience in a manner that, in any way, accurately communicates or transmits the experience to the listener (qtd in Smith 225). According to Scarry, physical pain is the ultimate silencer. For a moment during the rape, Annie Mae's pain prevents her from communicating her suffering to the audience in words, and again, the stage directions read "Annie Mae is silent" (Nolan 41). When words fail her, just as the archive failed her, she communicates her message through embodied performance. As Taylor states, "performances function as vital acts of transfer" (2). The audiences, which has been drawn into the play and invited to join Annie's inner circle, cannot feel her pain, but they can witness it as it is presented directly in front of them. Pain alone is not enough to quiet Annie Mae's voice; it is only in death that she is rendered silent.

While the audience witnesses her suffering, Annie Mae continues to speak. Elizabeth Irene Smith writes that when in pain "we are least able to express ourselves and share ourselves with others" (236). Although this is certainly true of Nolan's protagonist, when Annie Mae experiences the most acute physical pain that she endures during the play she remains capable of articulating important ideas at their most basic level. She cannot communicate her pain, but she is able to articulate the ramifications of it. The audience does not need to know her pain, but Annie Mae does require them to witness it, and to anticipate the potential results of her suffering. As Stanlake states: "The audience becomes an immediate witness to the rape and murder of Anna Mae, and Anna Mae's

murder becomes personal and, therefore, relevant to the members of the audience” (148). It is not enough that the audience see Annie Mae. They must recognize and accept that they are witnessing live events, and that their failure to respond to real world violence once the scene has ended may somehow perpetuate the real world violence that they witness on stage.

Nolan’s staged event likely challenges the audience’s prior knowledge of Aquash’s real-life murder. In the historical story of Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, four Native Americans were charged with her murder and convicted between 2004 and 2010.³⁵ After 35 years of waiting, Denise Pictou (Aquash’s daughter) stated that she was glad justice was finally being served, but felt that other members of the AIM were getting away with murder. She stated: “[My mother’s] questioning of the movement’s treatment of women and humans in general... provid[ed] an opportunity for those in the movement to snitch jacket and silence her” (qtd in Poliandri 246). Many still believe that Anna Mae Pictou Aquash was murdered by FBI agents (Pierre n.pag.). Nolan’s work reflects much of the uncertainty that surrounds the case.³⁶ She does not draw conclusions as to who killed Annie Mae (the play ends with the sound of a gun shot, but the identity of the person who fired is never revealed), nor does she allow her play to get tangled up in the controversy. Instead, Nolan forces the audience to focus on the victim of the violent crime, and the woman’s voice that is silenced. In the theatre, above all of the media noise, social static, and mumbling of rumors, Annie Mae’s voice and story can still be heard.

Annie Mae desires the transmission of embodied cultural knowledge and memory (what she calls “Indian-ness” [Nolan 41]) to the next generation of Native people and she

³⁵ In 2004, Arlo Looking Cloud was sentenced to life in prison (Poliandri 244). In 2010, Thelma Rios plead guilty as an “accessory to kidnapping” and was sentenced to five years, though she served only ninety days(245). In 2010, John Graham was sentenced to life in prison for felony murder and kidnapping (245).

³⁶ *Annie Mae’s Movement* was published in 1999, before any of the convictions.

first attempts this transmission by utilizing the archive. But the transmission of embodied Native knowledge requires a movement toward the Aboriginal repertoire and away from the Eurocentric archive. Nolan's play becomes what Tim Etchells refers to as "a writing of cultural biography in neglected physicality" (18) and shows that when language fails to communicate a message, the body becomes the ultimate means of communication and transmission. *Annie Mae's Movement* explores the suffering experienced by Native women as is written through embodied performance and transmitted as collective cultural knowledge and collective memory. The play explores how Native women are silenced by men, patriarchal systems, and social ideologies and suggests that this silencing is only countered by ethical witnessing. In her final moments, Annie Mae calls on her sisters as witnesses and names a list of women, many of whom are contemporary Native artists (Stanlake 148). In naming her "sisters," Nolan again blends past and present time in a manner that encourages witnessing. The play demonstrates that embodied performance, including theatrical performance, as an element of the Aboriginal repertoire delivers Native women's voices and, when it is deemed necessary, offers a medium for Native women to communicate cultural knowledge and intuition through their words and their bodies.

CHAPTER FOUR

“--a connection between the here and there--”:

Reclaiming Memory in Marie Clements’s *The Accidental and Unnatural Women*

The Aboriginal repertoire aims not only to transmit cultural knowledge to individuals and generations, but to add this knowledge to the collective memory of Native peoples. When playwrights attempt to reclaim memories of gendered violence, there are many notable similarities between presenting fictional crimes and re-presenting a famous historical murder. Marie Clements, however, faces many unique challenges when she attempts to depict the murders of real women whose personal histories and experiences are virtually unknown. Marie Clements’s *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* is conceptualized around the murders of First Nations women from Vancouver’s lower Eastside. Her play responds specifically to the crimes committed by Gilbert Paul Jordan between 1965 and 1987 (Rabillard 197). While Nolan’s play represents the murder of an activist that has drawn a significant amount of media attention and has become largely publicized in a Canadian context (although Anna Mae Pictou Aquash certainly is not a household name), the identities, lives, and experiences of Native women murdered in Vancouver have been largely left out of the archive. Certain sectors of the archive permit a serial killer like Jordan to become immortalized for his crimes, while the memories of his victims exist only in association with the man who murdered them. For Clements, this inequity of representation is unacceptable, and she attempts to counter it through her play.

The belief that memories can be passed down from generation to generation in the form of storytelling is central to Aboriginal oral tradition. As memories are collected and

transmitted from person to person and group to group, individual memories and experiences are added and become part of a collective memory of the cultural body (Taylor xvii). But when individual memories become inaccessible because they have been lost to violence, what happens to the memories and what is to become of the role of the storyteller? Are the memories lost forever? Can the stories still be told? Clements cannot know for certain what the memories of the murdered women contain, and since memory is fundamental to identity,³⁷ Clements can never fully know the women whose memories are seemingly erased by violence. Yet, by employing the Aboriginal repertoire and calling upon her knowledge of the cultural body, Clements is able to tell a story that represents the suffering experienced by the murdered women, because their suffering bespeaks the suffering of all Native women and this collective suffering is still transmitted by the cultural body. The memories transmitted through *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* may not be specific to the nine women murdered by Gilbert Paul Jordan, but they are specific to First Nations women and to the systemically violent realities that impede their lives in Canada.

For more than twenty years, Jordan successfully executed his crimes without detection by law enforcement. By luring women who were struggling beneath the weight of poverty and alcoholism, he was able to trap them in remote hotel rooms in Vancouver's poorest neighborhood. Jordan exploited the women's addictions and needs by providing copious amounts of alcohol and offering to pay for each ounce of liquor

³⁷ I feel very strongly about this point. At age 7, I injured my brain after a fall at a playground and experienced Transient Global Amnesia. I'm told that for several days I did not remember any information about my family or myself. Interestingly, when my brain healed and I regained access to my memories, I had no recall of anything that happened between the injury and "waking up" from Amnesia. As far as I am concerned, my identity hibernated while I was disconnected from my memories. Had I experienced the misfortune of living the rest of my life with Amnesia, I believe that the person who continued to live would not have been me.

consumed (Rose et al n.pag.).³⁸ Once the women he was “drinking with” became debilitatingly inebriated or unconscious, Jordan sexually assaulted them. In some instances, Jordan allegedly funneled alcohol into the women’s bodies until the women died from alcohol poisoning.³⁹ Jordan is suspected in the murders of nine women (seven of the victims come from First Nations backgrounds), but was only convicted of manslaughter after the death of Vanessa Lee Buckner (a Caucasian woman) and served only 6 years of his 15 year sentence (Larue n.pag.). Digging through various news-based archives, one can locate an excess of information about the life and times of Gilbert Paul Jordan. “The Boozing Barber” (as he was dubbed by Canadian media) was the protagonist of many headlines, articles, and even television programs.⁴⁰ Specific information about the women he allegedly killed is much more difficult to find. The identities of the women (beyond their names and dates of death) and details of their lives prior to taking up residence in Skid Row remain virtually unknown.

Out of respect for their identities and memories, the murdered women’s names deserve to be printed in full, although this was not common practice in the media coverage surrounding Jordan’s eventual arrest and trial. Ivy Doreen Rose Oswald (killed 27 January 1965), Mary Laurentia Johnson (killed 30 November 1980), Barbara Anne Paul (killed 11 September 1981), Mary Dorris Johns (killed 30 July 1982), Patricia

³⁸ During a police operation, a recording of was made Jordan as he made comments like “Down the hatch baby. Twenty bucks if you drink it right down” and “ You want another drink? I’ll give you 50 bucks if you can take it” (Rose et al n.p.).

³⁹ This was difficult for law enforcement to prove because Jordan never denied being present when the women overdosed on alcohol. All evidence against him is largely circumstantial. Despite his MO and circumstantial relationship to the deaths, Jordan was never convicted of premeditated murder. It is possible that his crime was assisted suicide, since the women chose to consume the alcohol that he procured for them. Since he took advantage of the women’s poverty by offering to pay them to continue drinking even after they were visibly and dangerously intoxicated, I would suggest that the assisted suicide argument is moot.

⁴⁰ “Dead Drunk” Exhibit A: Secrets of Forensic Science (2001) outlined Jordan’s murders and conviction. It focused on the science used by investigators to “crack the case.” The first three episodes of “Da Vinci’s Inquest” (2002) were based on Jordan’s crimes.

Thomas (killed 15 December 1984), Patricia Josephine Andrew (killed 28 June 1985), Vera Harry (killed 19 November 1986), Vanessa Lee Buckner (killed 12 October 1987), and Edna Marie Shade (killed 9 November 1987) are all women who were last seen in Jordan's company, or whose bodies were found in his hotel room or barbershop (Harper n.pag.). The murdered women's identities are rarely discussed in the news, while a virtual biography of Jordan's life and experiences is spelled out in black and white.⁴¹ One reporter states that Jordan's manslaughter conviction is "a travesty some blamed on racial attitudes held by the police and the courts" and then astutely mentions that Clements's play aims to "give voice to victims she felt had been overshadowed by the news media's unseemly interest in the killer's grotesque modus operandi" (Hawthorn n.pag.). Unfortunately, this reporter only prints the names of Buckner and Oswald (both Caucasian) and (somewhat ironically, having previously mentioned the racist system and the media's displaced fascination with the killer) fails to name any of the First Nations women who were murdered. The identities of the Aboriginal women, it seems, continue to be overlooked and ignored, even when the crimes committed against them are making national headlines.

Clements, a born-and-raised Vancouverite, was outraged by the quality of the archival attention (or lack-there-of) dedicated to the murdered women. The lack of background information presented by the media led Clements to create her play. In response to a Vancouver Sun article she states, "there were three pages dedicated to this

⁴¹ Tim Harper (Toronto Sun) presents a complete list of the nine victims. Chris Ross (Vancouver Sun) mentions Edna Marie Shade. Tom Hawthorn (The Globe and Mail) mentions Ivy Rose Doreen Oswald and Vanessa Buckner and states that "three women died of alcohol poisoning in his barber shop," but he does not list their names and does not mention the other women. Frank Larue (FirstNationsDrum.com) mentions Buckner, Oswald, and Shade and states that Jordan is suspected in the deaths of eight women, but the actual number is nine.

loser murderer but only a paragraph and a picture describing each woman he had victimized...They had no story as far as the world was concerned other than what Jordan had done to them” (“In the End” 329). Major Canadian newspaper archives, as literal extensions of Taylor’s conceptual archive, are primarily controlled by the white hegemonic body that decides what information should be received by the nation. In this way, the media archive dictates what knowledge is valuable and memorable as versus stories and events that are not newsworthy. As has been argued in the two earlier chapters, the majority of the EuroCanadian archive does not typically reflect knowledge pertaining to Indigenous experiences. Printed media surrounding the Jordan case offers telling examples of how archival documentation fails to adequately represent the experiences and suffering of First Nations women. Recognizing this lack of cultural transmission, Clements decides to bridge the disconnect through embodied performance. The personal stories of Vancouver’s murdered Aboriginal women are missing from the archive, and instead of attempting to break into this space, Clements utilizes the Aboriginal repertoire to transmit the women’s lost stories. Clements’s *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* reclaims the experiences of the women and showcases the events leading to their murders from the women’s perspectives. With the cultural body of knowledge and suffering presented through the theatrical repertoire, the audience is given an opportunity to rethink what information is important and directly to compare it to that which is archived.

The Unnatural and Accidental Women begins with a montage of sound effects, multimedia slides, visual images, and spoken words as Aunt Shadie wakes up in a forest surrounded by the sounds of falling trees. As she inspects her surroundings, a slide that

describes the coroner's findings from the murder of Rita Louise James is projected onto the stage (Clements 3). When Aunt Shadie speaks the name "Rebecca," it is as if she is remembering someone from long ago. Next, Rebecca is seen on stage, drinking beer and writing about how Vancouver's downtown Eastside was once a forest, but the forest was slowly and deliberately logged until nothing was left but a "skid mark. A row. Skid Row" (3). Rebecca mentions that she is looking for her mother. When Aunt Shadie's voice from the forest becomes intertwined with Rebecca's at the bar, it is clear that the two women are connected in some strange, possibly cosmic way that exists beyond physical and temporal boundaries.

From here, it is difficult to summarize the plot because Clements employs layered temporality to tell the story. The Woman, Mavis, Valerie, Verna, and Violent are located at various hotels, and although their experiences seem to overlap, the dates of their stays are spread out across nearly a decade. Rose is at the switchboard; Marilyn, Penny, and Patsy are all at the Barbershop (at different times, although they are able to watch and interact with each other through the mirror); Aunt Shadie moves effortlessly between these living memories. The set shifts as time shifts, piling images, words, and scenes on top of each other to tell a nonlinear story involving several interrelated female characters. In non-chronological order, the slides projected on stage show the coroner's evaluation of each woman's death, uniting the characters as victims and as inter-wordly spirits. Each death involves alcohol, an unidentified male figure or voice, and the theft of a long black braid. Near the end of the Act, the Women all converge in the bar where they see Rebecca accidentally leave her wallet behind. It is collected by the Barber, an entity who is the target of all of the Women's projected animosity and despair (Clements 49).

It is clear by Act 2 that the ten women's experiences and essences are interrelated because they were all murdered by the Barber, but the women do not blur together because of this commonality. Instead, they form a community that reasserts their individual identities and unites them in their suffering. As for the Barber, he is not always presented in human form, and often shifts to become inanimate objects that are intimately related to the women's suffering (he may be a pillow, or a chair, or a set of drawers). As Rebecca searches for her mother Rita, whose disappearance has never been solved, the audience becomes aware that Aunt Shadie is Rita's spirit persona in the inter-world. Once the Barber has her wallet, the Women begin to watch Rebecca more closely. They appear in her apartment, interact with her belongings, and even pinch her lover's exposed butt cheek (Clements 72). The Women's words and Rebecca's musings become interwoven and it is often unclear whether or not Rebecca can hear (or at least sense) the figures that surround her. When the telephone rings, Rebecca learns that someone has found her wallet and is asked to return to the bar (Clements 85).

Waiting for Rebecca at the bar, the Women warp the Barber's hallucinations as he recalls their murders. The Barber, who was the lucky finder of the lost wallet, quickly lures Rebecca to the barbershop under the guise that he has information about her mother's disappearance. While she waits for him to freshen up, Rebecca finds the hidden braids (Clements 99). This horrific finding allows Rebecca to access the memories and knowledge of the women who came to the shop before her. Inexplicably she knows the Barber's real name ("Gilbert"), she channels some of the words that he spoke to the women, and she imitates some of the actions and gestures that he performed before killing them (99). When Rebecca puts the Barber in his own chair and offers to shave

him, he realizes that she sees him for who he really is. The Barber attacks her, and the Women as Trappers come through the mirror to help Rebecca to slit the Barber's throat with his own razor. The final image of the play is that of the Women in the forest, their braids returned to them, sharing a meal (104).

Clements writes her play to return the women's memories to the cultural body and to accurately represent their lives and their suffering through the Aboriginal repertoire. As a part of the repertoire, Native theatre is a medium that allows for individual memories to become collective memories. Representing murdered women whose memories have been lost or are unknown, however, comes with various ethical quandaries. Clements struggles with some of the questions associated with telling lost stories and asks herself: "[Am I] doing the right thing? [Am I] respectful? [Am I] truthful? Is it [my] place?" ("In The End" 330). In *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, the women can no longer tell their own stories because violent deaths have silenced them, but silence does not annihilate memory or experience. Through her play, Clements adds stories of Skid Row, addiction, isolation, and violent death to the Aboriginal cultural body of knowledge and experience. She recognizes that embodied performance can transmit knowledge that is all but lost, and when Clements presents the violence that is committed against women in her play, she represents the cultural suffering felt by First Nations women collectively while referencing specific violent crimes committed against women in the real world.

The Women in the play are created to reference the women who were victimized by Jordan.⁴² But the characters are not re-presentations or embodiments of the murdered

⁴² In *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, when Clements has her characters act and speak in tandem, she refers to them collectively as "The Women."

women. Roger Copeland states that “[a] representation cannot be fully ‘represented’ precisely because it signifies or alludes to something that isn’t fully there, whose ‘real’ existence lies elsewhere, beyond the confines of the stage” (35). As Zoey Élouard Michele points out, such reproduced representations are misguidedly accepted and trusted by viewers who attempt to understand a subject who is no longer present (54). It quickly becomes evident, as Michele further suggests, that representing a subject on stage, especially one who no longer exists, is highly problematic (50-51). As much as Clements alludes to the off stage murder victims, she is cognizant of the responsible creative and dramatic practice that needs to accompany the repertoire.

The theatre has the capacity to create a dramatic reality that brings together the real and the impossible, and unites facts with fiction. Clements is careful to protect and respect the memories and stories of the women to whom she alludes. She does not print their full names anywhere in the text and she does not show pictures of them as part of the multi-media elements of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*. The ten women in the play are creations from Clements’s imagination. But Clements still makes many references to off stage reality that direct the audience to real life violent events. As past crimes are represented through the present actions and experiences of the fictional characters, a theatrical reality is created. Just as Nolan uses layered temporality and “blended time” to show the omnipresence of past violent events, so too does Clements demonstrate that violence, even that which we have banished as a relic of the past, continues to haunt current and future events and people. Because the audience is able to see the women’s experiences beyond the limitations of chronology, both collective pain and suffering and the individual experiences of violence can be witnessed in the same

moment. Clements allows the audience to see past violence as a present force and shows that the suffering of women is omnipresent. The theatrical reality is constructed with the hopes that when the present borrows from the past, there is the potential to shape the future with the knowledge generated by the new reality (which looks to the past as well as the future) at the forefront (Dolan 12). Clements takes collective memories of suffering and stages them in a manner that tells the women's stories while respecting (and protecting) their identities.

Clements's ability to unite past violent events with present embodied performance is perhaps best illustrated by Clements's character Valerie Nancy Homes. The details from the real-life murder of Vera Harry match many of the details listed on a slide during the play regarding Clements's fictional character Valerie Nancy Homes:

SLIDE: Valerie Nancy Homes, 33. Died November 19, 1986 with a 0.04 blood alcohol reading. Jordan arrived at the Vancouver police station with his lawyer to report the death. He said he and Homes had been drinking for two days.

(Clements 38)

This information (excluding the name) is consistent with the Harry murder (Harper n.pag.), but little more than this has been published about Vera Harry's life. It is only known that she was a resident of Vancouver's lower Eastside and that she was allegedly involved in prostitution (Harper n.pag.). Harry's name is typically left out of news reports (arguably due to the fact that so little is known about her). Aside from giving her character the initials V.H., Clements does not mention Vera Harry's real name, but she encourages the connection by listing Harry's date of death, her last-known location, and the inconsistency of Harry's toxicity screen when compared with Jordan's statement

made to police.⁴³ But why does Clements refuse to name the victims, when part of her criticism of the media is based on the lack of attention given to the women's identities?

Although Clements's characters are far from silent, the names of the real life murdered women are never uttered. Žižek suggests that naming a thing destroys it and its potential to be something else (52) and Derrida's treatment of the "proper name" arrives at the same conclusion (102). But I do not believe that Clements avoids naming the women for fear that the process of naming is actually destructive. After all, her characters are referential and the real-life murdered women would still be susceptible to annihilation should Clements buy into the belief that naming destroys. Clements does name her characters and references the proper names of the real-life murdered women (Ivy Doreen Rose Oswald becomes Rose Doreen Holmes, and Edna Marie Shade becomes Aunt Shadie). One might argue that by refusing to use the names of the murdered women, Clements commits further violence against their memories. Embodied performance, however, allows that Clements's represent the murdered women without re-presenting them. While the news-based EuroCanadian archives failed to give the women identities beyond their names, Clements allows her audience to witness the collective suffering of First Nations women and transcends the necessity for individual names. After all, a natural consequence of naming victims is that they become identifiable only through their categorization as victim.

Naming a thing may do violence against the thing's potential to be something else, as is demonstrated by the news archive which fails to cherish the women's identities

⁴³ When Harry's Blood Alcohol Level (BAL) was tested during her murder investigation, the test showed a BAL of 0.04 (the legal limit for driving in Alberta is 0.08). Excessive vomiting before (and after) death lowered Harry's blood alcohol level, but could not reverse the effects of the poisoning (Harper "Suspect" n.p.).

as well as their names and allows them to be collectivized as “victims.”⁴⁴ When discussing *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, Sheila Rabillard points out that because the real life murdered women appeared to play into the “stereotypes of drunkenness and self-destruction” their deaths were not investigated with the vigor and suspicion necessary to properly facilitate a murder investigation (198). Largely, the Skid Row deaths were viewed as “in a different sense, natural” (Rabillard 198). As is often the case in murder trials (especially those involving a serial killer) the women’s individual identities became “conflated” with the concept of victimization (Dean 213). Sharon Marcus further suggests that the language associated with violence against women largely perpetuates the image of a weaker sex and that even in the diction the abuser remains powerful (385). Perhaps grouping the women as victims allows for their lost personal stories to become but a link in the chain of violent victimization that Skid Row is famous for. Regarding Jordan’s crimes, the media allows for women to be no longer recognized as humans. They become identifiable merely as “his” victims. The murdered women become his possession, even after he (as an active agent within a violent system) has taken everything else from them. Yet the Aboriginal repertoire strives to move beyond issues of logocentrism and linguistic paradoxes. Clements is more concerned with essence than nomenclature, and she privileges Aboriginal peoples’s experiences and memories over hard fact.

In response to the criticism that Clements presents all Native women as victims, I argue that Clements does not intend to reembody the real life murdered women.⁴⁵ She

⁴⁴ I recognize that, for the sake of clarity, I often refer to the nine women as “victims,” and “murdered women,” but for ethical reasons, I specifically avoid referring to them as “Jordan’s victims.”

⁴⁵ I am cognizant that the reprinting of names may come with legal obstacles. Clements may have required permission from the next of kin (which many of the women did not have) and a disclaimer (which she does

does not use their names directly because she does not want to presume to stage “them,” but rather to remember them by creating fictional characters who share some of their experiences. Although her characters and plot allude to the Jordan crimes and the murdered women, Clements’s primary goal is for her characters to represent First Nations women who experience violence and suffering without presenting them as helpless and highly feminized victims. Bannerji explains that “[silence’s] presence, in the shape of an absence in public discourse about violence against women... speaks volumes about our political and socio-cultural organization and stance” (262). By employing the theatre as her chosen medium, Clements utilizes the highly corporeal repertoire to tell the stories of the murdered women. The repertoire is not logocentric in the way that the archive must be. As Taylor notes, “theatricality does not rely on language to transmit a set pattern of behavior or action” (13). Although performance often calls upon language to aid in the communication of its meaning, language cannot transmit the essence of identity or experiences, and embodied memory depends more on performance than it does words (Taylor 20). Logocentrism denies the reality that the women murdered by men have suffered corporeal and emotional trauma that cannot be expressed through language alone.

As Žižek notes, the existence of language and names does not create a more equal playing field for those who engage with language; it does not automatically create a “symmetric mutually responsible” relationship between users (*Violence* 53). When communicating a message, it is important to pair language with the body. This union of

not include). In the preface of the play, Clements quotes several sections of the October 22, 1988 Vancouver Sun article entitled “Death by Alcohol.” Clements blacks out the names, perhaps because she cannot legally reprint them, or perhaps to show that the women discussed in the article were not granted identities by the media.

words and presence creates a human experience that may affect those who are also present to bear witnessing. Most of the people who die on Skid Row have been long isolated and marginalized from society and it is the act of recognition that allows the women to reclaim their identities. In *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, the victims of Jordan's crimes are united by collective suffering, but even though all ten women are victims, they retain their individuality through testimonials of memories and experiences. For Vancouver's murdered women, storytelling becomes the most effective way to reclaim identity.

Because the women's stories were never properly told, Clements attempts to theatrically offer their stories through the embodied presentation of the Aboriginal cultural body. Clements's play does not perpetuate the incomplete representation of the murdered women's identities without knowing and accurately representing their histories. Instead, she removes the women's names and references their deaths while her characters embody the suffering of Native women and culture. For Clements, the cultural body exists as collective memory and experiences that are shared by her characters. At the time of Jordan's crimes, when the murdered women took up residency in Vancouver's most notorious neighbourhood, they were instantly viewed as "faceless drifters" by Canadian society (Harper n.pag.). Even before their deaths, it was assumed that these women had no stories to tell and no identities that existed beyond addiction, prostitution, and destitution. But by exploring collective memory and experience, Clements builds a representation of the lives and deaths of Native women whose experiences and suffering are often thought to be unworthy of exploration and attention.

In Clements's *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, moreover, violence is mediated through the eyes of the women. For the majority of the play, the killer is not physically present on stage. The killer is, however, given a name. In the media, Jordan was given ample attention and was described by his lawyer as "a lonely man, twice married and with no children and little money... [with] no friends and [who] has been ostracized by society" (Simair qtd in McCulloch n.pag.). It seems odd that Clements should accurately name the killer when she does not name the women he murdered.⁴⁶ The name "Gilbert" is spoken by Rebecca at the very end of the play when the Barber's true identity is revealed to her (99). Although he is named at the end, for the majority of the play, Clements' murderer is a catalyst who takes on many different forms. In his most literal form, the killer takes the shape of the Barber, but also takes on the role of the Man, the Romantic Partner, the Dresser, the Pillow, the Man's Shadow, the Airline Steward, and the 2nd Fatherly Male Voice (Clements 1).⁴⁷ These multiple representations through shape-shifting allow the killer to take on two contradictory identities: the killer is no one, and the killer is everyone. In the same way that Clements's women characters may represent the suffering and experiences of all Native women, the killer in his various forms represents all the oppressive bodies that commit violence (both physical and conceptual) against women.

In general, Clements resists representing Jordan and instead presents a story that focuses on the murdered women. For the purpose of storytelling, she does not remove the murderer entirely, but immediately naming the murderer would add to his notoriety and

⁴⁶ The name Jordan appears once on a slide (Clements 38) and the name Gilbert appears five times in the stage directions, and is spoken aloud twice by Rebecca (91, 92, 97, 99).

⁴⁷ Clements's killer, who takes on multiple roles, is comparable to Nolan's male character who represents various characters and cultural identities. Nolan's man also becomes a killed in the end of Annie Mae's Movement.

shift the focus away from the women. For obvious reasons, Clements is not interested in representing or furthering an understanding of Jordan as an individual who experiences suffering and addiction himself. Clements could have represented Jordan as an agent of violence who is a product of a violent environment, but her refusal to do so is likely motivated by a desire to respect the memories of women who he allegedly killed. But when attempting to counter violence, dehumanizing a criminal and disallowing for her/him to have a personal history and a troubled identity does nothing to interrupt the cycle of violence. Clements aims to represent the women without judging their personal choices, struggles, and addictions, but her refusal to give Jordan the same treatment weakens the presentation.

The fact that Jordan's story is immortalized in the EuroCanadian archive helps to justify this apparent defect in Clements's play. Jordan's life and experiences have been largely explored in the archive, and it is note-worthy that Jordan was alive while the play was being written and performed. Jordan took advantage of opportunities to speak publicly and to tell his own story from his (often twisted) perspective.⁴⁸ Jordan was capable of representing himself, just as he was capable (and given multiple opportunities) to tell his version of the events. Although Clements's text may have been strengthened had she recognized Jordan as a violent manifestation of a violent system, instead of refusing to represent his identity within *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, his persona has no place in the Aboriginal repertoire. In her foreword, Clements states that the female characters's "Colours of personality and spirit, life and isolation, paint their reality and activate their own particular landscape within their own particular hotel room

⁴⁸ During a live segment broadcasted by the Chorus Radio Network in Vancouver, he publicly stated, "Screw 'em all. I like booze and so do they" and "I didn't give a damn who I was drinking with...We are all dying sooner or later" (Warren n.p.).

and world. The killer is a manipulative embodiment of their human need” (2).⁴⁹ Clements clearly wants the focus to be on the active needs of the women. The killer may not be fully separate from the women, but he is presented as the personification of their suffering and loss. Furthermore, his character cannot exist without the female characters: he is fully dependent on them. Clements takes the image of the killer, strips it down, and represents it in a manner that is beneficial to the representation of the female characters through embodied performance. The killer is remediated through the collective memories of her characters and stands to represent all forms of patriarchal and systemic oppression that led to the deaths of the women.

In *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, the Barber, in all of his shapes and forms, is not the only killer. In a telling speech, Rebecca attempts to understand what would influence her mother to become a part of Vancouver’s Lower Eastside:

REBECCA: Where do women walk to when they have fallen? Sure, you could say some of them walk to something better. They leave their bastard husbands, get a job and free themselves from suffocating domesticity. They learn to type, or waitress, or become your chambermaid, your housekeeper, your cleaner, your babysitter and pretty soon it feels like this new-found freedom is not so free – the man’s face has just changed. If they can stand this, they stay. If not, one day they just keep walking. (Clements 34)

⁴⁹ It may be interpreted that this stage direction suggests that the killer is an extension of the women, and that their deaths, therefore, are manifestations of self-destruction. However, I do not believe that this is the message that Clements is attempting to communicate. She connects the victims and the murderer through violence, but the women become vulnerable to the murderer because of their desperation (which is brought on by various forces, both internal and external). The women are not innately drawn or connected to the killer by design, he is merely a product of their suffering.

Here, two more murder suspects are added to the list: domesticity suffocates, while “the man” entraps. A third party responsible for the state of the women is implied in this passage: “you” play a crucial role in keeping them down once they have fallen.

Furthermore, because of their addictions, another culprit in the deaths of the women is alcoholism. Recognition of these multiple violent influences is vital because, as Žižek suggests, before violence can be functionally countered the violence must first be properly identified (*Violence 1*). While Clements’s murderer is given a specific name, he takes on many faces, and Clements utilizes the multifaceted nature of the repertoire to present reality through the boundlessness of performance. In order to adequately tell her story, Clements requires a murderer. But her murderer is not a stock depiction of a killer or a mere re-presentation of Jordan. Clements does not just blame one person for the deaths of her female characters; she also does not immortalize a single killer by giving him a concrete identity. Instead, Clements uses the violence surrounding the crimes to highlight systemic violence, and allows embodied performance to express the multiple systemic factors that lead to the demise of murdered women.

The memories of The Women in *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* come together in an inter-wordly space. They are united in the spirit world by the common experience that they shared while living and dying. Their suffering and loss become a collective reality and The Women are able to move in and out of each others’ memories and experiences in the same way that they can move in and out of the spirit world and the world of the living. The permeability of The Women's experiences relates to Taylor's argument that the repertoire is accessed differently than the archive, because the repertoire is collective and embodied, while the archive is literate and logocentric (19-

20). While writing puts “distance” between the signifier and the signified, performance aims to bring people, places, and time closer together (Taylor 18). In the spirit world, The Women continue to communicate their life experiences to one another. The perceived limitations that keep them isolated in life are unable to continue to separate them after death. The women share memories, their experiences overlap, and when they speak together as the Women and the Trappers, they participate in a collective identity and create a collective memory that is active within the cultural body.

The Unnatural and Accidental Women shows that when one accesses a memory, "stories, cultural images, and topoi of the past flow together and are conflated into a sight of memory" (Erll & Rigney 110). Memory is not an exact replica of events, but memory offers a perfect representation of how an individual or even a collective group experiences (emotionally, somatically) violent events. Visceral memory may be much closer to truth than hard facts, though both are important when trying to paint a picture of a personal experience. As Taylor notes, “the telling is as important as the writing, the doing as central as the recording” when “the memory [is] passed down through bodies and mnemonic practices” (35). Since cultural memory is a "self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment" and images can trigger cultural memory in a viewer (Erll & Rigney 110-111), staging violence against women allows an audience to be affected by the testimony that they have heard, and the moments of witnessing within which they have participated. As the women tell the stories of their pasts, the exact details, including the dates, times, and places are left out. This archival information is important, but is not as vital as the essential message that remains intact during transmission of knowledge.

Symbolic events and the essential meaning that they carry are vital to the repertoire and to Clements's play. Interestingly, for much of the play Rebecca is disconnected from the cultural body, but the closer she comes to solving the murders, the more Rebecca is able to access the cultural body and the collective memory shared by The Women. Her early disconnection manifests itself symbolically in the short length of her hair. When the Barber asks Rebecca if she once wore her hair long, she responds with "Yeah, but I cut it because I...you wouldn't understand... It will grow back, and I'll braid it like I used to when I was a kid" (Clements 98). The braids symbolically represent the unity between Native women and the Aboriginal repertoire. By cutting her hair, Rebecca attempts to distance herself from Aboriginality. Yet, ironically, her actions prevent the killer from stealing a vital piece of her identity. The closer Rebecca comes, both spiritually and physically, to the Women's deaths (and their lost braids), the more she is able to tap into Aboriginal cultural knowledge and collective memory. Though she does not necessarily do this consciously, Rebecca can access and add to the cultural body of knowledge and experience that she was separated from when she cut her hair. It is only when the Women reclaim their braids at the end of the play that the story comes full circle. The Women transcend their suffering and become the Trappers as they are finally able to convene in the forest and unite completely in the spirit world.

Although the murdered women in the play find peace, Clements (and many others) feel that Jordan was never fully brought to justice in the real world. As a response to this failure of the Canadian Justice System, Clements rewrites and represents history as it exists beyond temporality and mortality, concluding the play with closure and, arguably, justice for her murdered female characters. It seems that justice is achieved

through an act of retribution or revenge, and when the Barber dies, the Women are able to transition fully into the spirit world. But the Women are not freed from their suffering and violent ends by the Barber's death.⁵⁰ What sets them free is having their braids returned and having their stories added to the living cultural body by Rebecca accessing both the knowledge and memory of the spirit world and the world of the living. By returning to the repertoire, the women find peace and each other. The play becomes what Žižek refers to as a "symbolic rewriting," which, as he suggests, may lead to the healing of the traumatic past – although the rewriting process is constantly interrupted and countered by that past's reality ("A Plea for Ethical Violence" 2). Clements's end is altered and rewritten in a manner that allows the women to regain some semblance of control and she allows The Women to enact their own retribution. Representation should necessarily reflect the "political processes, practices and effects both determining and affected by representational practices" (Godard 200) and since Clements cannot help but write within the system, she represents and counters the system in the midst of its failures. By representing the stories through embodied performance, Clements reveals the violent system from which the violence originated and offers a suggestion as to what justice should look like from the perspective of the Aboriginal repertoire.

The violence that the Barber commits against each of the women is meant to destroy their identities, and stealing their braids is meant to sever a symbolic cultural connection. Although the women feel angry and regretful, despite their mistakes and

⁵⁰ I do not read the killing of The Barber as an act of vengeance. Although Rebecca considers killing him, in the final fight between the two characters The Barber nearly succeeds in killing Rebecca. Slitting his throat (with the help of The Women) is an act of self-defense. In his death, The Barber, who has stood to represent various forms and entities, now represents the various oppressive forces that negatively impacted the women's lives. The Women kill The Barber, but in doing so they fight against racism, hegemony, sexism, and the violent patriarchy that helped to destroy their lives.

losses they maintain an individual and collective connection with the Aboriginal repertoire. This connection cannot be destroyed by subjective violence. After being murdered, the women are united in an unspoken quest to reclaim their stolen braids and reaffirm their identities. When Rebecca finds the stolen braids, she inexplicably is able to identify the Barber by his first name (99). At this moment in the play, the killer cannot hide behind the system, or a pseudonym, or his various shapes – he becomes fully visible and fully present as his true identity is revealed through the symbolic understanding of the repertoire. When the Barber takes the place of the victim in his Barbershop chair, the mirror before him does not reflect his identity. Instead, the mirror shows the Women and the forest, linking back to the play’s original image (103). The killer with a name remains faceless even as he dies at the hands of those who his actions harmed most. The mirror reflects only the Trappers surrounded by their natural setting, at peace with their pasts (104). Through the representation of subjective violence, Clements creates justice for her characters and highlights the systemic injustices suffered by the real victims of Vancouver’s Eastside murders.

Clements’s depiction of off stage subjective violence is not the first artistic attempt to visually represent and counter systemic violence against women,⁵¹ and Žižek notes that “a particular crisis only explodes into media visibility as a result of a complex struggle” (*Violence 2*). Although Clements works necessarily within convention, she still challenges the multiple factors that lead to the murders of her characters and the murdered women from Skid Row. In order to create an ethical representation, Clements develops the female characters as individuals and explores their personal histories and

⁵¹ A few examples include Lincoln Clarke’s *Heroines*, and the *NHI – No Humans Involved* Collective by Deborah Small, Elizabeth Sisco, Carla Kirkwood, Scott Kessler, and Louis Hock (Lord & Burfoot).

memories so that they are recognizable as people and not simply as categorical representations. The violence that is experienced on stage is from the perspectives of the women and the perpetrator's presence does not overpower the presence of the female characters. Instead of allowing her characters to hide in the shadows, to be marginalized and victimized, and to be ashamed of the violence that they have experienced, Clements confronts the killer and rewrites the violent past. In the play, Clements represents both the subjective and systemic violence that surrounds the murdered women and her female characters. She does so while respecting the names, identities, and histories of the murdered women. Although there are numerous difficulties that accompany the representation of a subject who no longer exists, Clements does not shy away from the challenge. *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* counters violence in a manner that is ethical, respectful, and creates a necessary representation to both highlight and challenge the omnipresence of systemic violence. When asked whether or not she accepts ethical responsibility for her work, Clements states, "in the end you are made accountable personally, ethically, artistically, and professionally... after all that you better be able to stand" (331). *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* is duly cognizant and respectful of the people most notably impacted by violence. Her work shows that violent acts are perpetrated from within a violence system, yet even from within the system, violence can still be countered.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Conclusion

The three plays under study represent the violence that largely defines contemporary First Nations existence in Canada. In *The Rez Sisters*, much of the violence is not presented on stage, but is described by victims-as-witnesses as they testify to the audience. Highway's fictional characters discuss the violence committed against them, and through the processes of witnessing and testifying the sisters are able to speak out against their personal suffering and the collective suffering of Native women. In *Annie Mae's Movement*, the violence against the female protagonist is committed on stage, and the silence that oppresses Native women is countered by Annie Mae's fierce and omnipresent narration. Nolan re-conceptualizes historical events leading to the murder of a political figure, and her play adds to the complex knowledge surrounding Aquash's personal history. Clements's *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* represents violence through layered temporality and offers Vancouver's women a chance to tell their own stories without perpetuating the notoriety of a killer. Clements represents a group of women who were largely disconnected from society before their deaths and her play speaks to the collective suffering of Native women as she rewrites the past in a way that cherishes the memories of those whose lives and identities have suffered due to violence.

Highway, Nolan, and Clements expose the brutal and volatile nature of gendered violence as it impacts First Nations women and culture, but differ in how they utilize the theatre for the purpose of representation. In all three cases, however, their theatrical practice stems from the Aboriginal repertoire and requires the physicality and bodily presence that is missing in many other forms of artistic expression. The devastation that

results from the systematic abuse of women is best communicated through the embodied presentation of Native drama, while those who have access to the archive may also access the works in a written format. The playwrights employ the repertoire in order to transmit the cultural body of knowledge, experience, and memory to an audience. Should a successful transmission of the cultural body occur, the knowledge of the Aboriginal repertoire may alter the lived violent realities of First Nations women.

On stage, when a physically present body has violence forced upon it, the performance transforms a concept into an event, and this event requires a witness. Without a witness present at the time that the repertoire is performed, the knowledge cannot be transferred. Although this fact may appear to challenge the longevity of performance-based repertoire, it makes the transfer of knowledge in performance far less mediated by the passage of time and changing relevance than the transfer of archival knowledge (Taylor 19-20). Repertoire requires the embodiment of knowledge; it requires a “being there,” which in turn requires the temporal and spatial presence of a witness (Taylor 20). The necessity of a witness adds to the communicability of the knowledge that is transferred through embodiment, and, as Taylor further notes, through “embodiment changes, the meaning might very well remain the same” (20). Requiring a witness to carry information also directly connects the repertoire to a body who is present in time and who can relate to current understandings of violence. If violence occurs without a witness, the information surrounding the events is difficult to transfer, and the story can be changed to suit the needs of the most powerful who typically have a larger audience. But when a witness is present, it is more difficult to alter the story as the victim’s experiences may be corroborated by the witness.

As much as witnessing is an individual experience, witnessing is also a collective responsibility that relates to “the production of knowledge” (Taylor xx). As Taylor reiterates, the underlying cause of violence is often difficult to see because “normalization has rendered it invisible” (5) and Žižek agrees that violence is “inherent to [the] normal state of things” (*Violence 2*). Even if the source of violence is identified by an active audience, this recognition that subjective violence is symptomatic of objective violence does not make the fight against violence any simpler. Žižek’s symbolic violence is equally difficult to recognize because symbolic violence exists all around us, but because it is not visible and does not involve “identifiable agents” it is rarely recognized as being violent (*Violence 1*). First Nations theatre strives to make the agents responsible for violence visible and to present that knowledge through embodied performance to an audience of active witnesses.

I argue that the theatre is an advantageous medium of communication and representation that allows for the potent and efficacious transfer of the Aboriginal cultural body of knowledge and collective memory of suffering to audiences. The audience, in turn, is granted the opportunity to perceive reality as it is projected through the Aboriginal repertoire. The works of Highway, Nolan, and Clements present a cultural body of knowledge that stems simultaneously from personal experiences, observations, and reflections and collective knowledge that is passed down through the repertoire (Taylor 193). The theatre is an artistic avenue for First Nations playwrights to tell the stories of those who are often denied the right to speak and gives a willing audience the chance to bear witness to these stories. As prominent Native writers gain further recognition and prestigious accolades, more federal funding is granted to them (Clements

“Developmental” 4). With increased funds, new writers are encouraged to step forward and add their insights to the Aboriginal repertoire. Through the constant collecting of knowledge, experience, and memory, the Aboriginal repertoire is able to create and carry the cultural body. The theatre attempts to transmit this cultural body to audiences who, in turn, may transmit the knowledge into the real world.

With those who have specific knowledge and/or experience pertaining to violence at the helm, Canadian theatre has the potential to become an outlet for those who have experienced violence (either directly or indirectly) to express their outrage and to respond to the violence that impacts the world around them. First Nations playwrights use the theatre to dramatically represent experiences and actualities that are otherwise unnoticed or ignored by the majority of the Canadian population. The studied representations of violence against women aim to challenge those who subscribe to dominant modes of knowing. The playwrights attempt to affect the audience and to encourage those with power and influence to stand up against violence and protect vulnerable individuals and groups. When the purpose of a representation is to alter the numerous cultural, social, and political influences that breed violence, the theatre is the best vehicle. Theatrical performance is affective in its execution, and that theatre effectively demands the attention of those who require representation to explicate the nature of violence. By countering violence through representation, Aboriginal drama bridges the disconnect between EuroCanadian hegemonic bodies that consider the suffering of women to be a non-issue, and the sectors of the public who feel that gendered violence committed against First Nations women is a national crisis.

The abstract process of altering reality is complicated, however, by the cyclical nature of violence. From the EuroCanadian perspective, violence in Native communities

is understood and portrayed as a circle that reinforces, repeats, and ruins. However, when this understanding is countered by the First Nations perspective on the circle as a symbol of reconceptualization, regeneration, and rebirth, the desire to counter violence against First Nations women takes on new dimensions. If violence is cyclical, its circularity at least insinuates a capacity for transference. The aim of the theatre, then, is to interrupt the current patterns of violent transfer and to insert cultural and embodied knowledge into the circle so that the new knowledge may be perpetuated in the place of violence. The suffering of individuals, communities, and post-colonial cultures is circular. But, as Native theatre illustrates, the circle of suffering can be interrupted, and pain can be countered by artistic processes that foster healing. I contend that the theatre can be an advocate for victims; a fierce adversary of those who engage in violent acts; and an affective medium that counters violence, reinforces First Nations identity, and breaks the circle of suffering.

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