

Theatrical Medicine:**Aboriginal performance, ritual and commemoration**

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There are many different definitions of Medicine. As a woman of mixed heritage (Métis, African-Canadian and Creek) I have been exposed to many Aboriginal teachings and ceremonies. My own definition of medicine is based on the teachings of traditional elders who have shared their cultural insight with me regarding the power and meaning of medicine. There are Medicine Wheel ceremonies that involve respect for the four directions and the balance between the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional aspects of an individual. Medicine can be understood in a psychological or philosophical way whereby individuals go through a form of catharsis when they are guided by the teachings. There is medicine involved in seeking advice from elders by way of offering them tobacco. There is participatory medicine involved in being a witness or participant in talking circles, and there is medicine that is physical in the form of tobacco, sweet grass, sage and cedar. There is medicine in ceremony whether these be sweat lodge ceremonies, moon lodge ceremonies, naming ceremonies or longhouse ceremonies. There is medicine in the practice of creating art whether that be carving, weaving or painting. Some traditional languages do not have a word for theatrical performance, so they use the closest word, which is ceremony. These cultural beliefs about medicine and practices which are referred to as medicinal reflect a belief in the power of performance and the possibility of the performance being medicinal for any and all of these cultural

associations with medicine. The performances and plays that I examine in this essay can be understood as medicine in that they bring balance to the witnesses through honouring the deceased by way of naming rituals, they bring balance to communities by showing the humanity of Aboriginal women and they provide a cathartic ritual or ceremony for the release of trauma.

The most infamous story of a murdered Aboriginal woman in Canadian history is the story of Annie Mae Pictou Aquash. A version of her story was brought to Canadian stages in Yvette Nolan's play *Annie Mae's Movement*. This play provides an interesting representation of Aquash that can be understood within this cultural context as medicinal. Nolan's play was first presented as a staged reading at Native Earth Performing Arts' Weesakechak Begins to Dance festival of new plays in Toronto, February 17-22, 1998, and premiered in Whitehorse, Yukon, September 17, 1998. Nolan's play has had a number of productions and most recently was staged as part of the 2006 Honouring Theatre event that offered a trilogy of plays by Aboriginal artists from Canada, Australia and Samoa. It was produced again in October of 2007 at the Firehall Theatre in Vancouver. Aquash is represented as one of the "disappeared" warriors in the struggle for Aboriginal empowerment and she uses the character of Annie Mae Pictou Aquash to suggest that the "disappeared" women warriors will not be left on the margins of history. Marie Clements also tells a story of murdered Aboriginal women in her play *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* (1997). These plays and two performances by Aboriginal performance artists Rebecca Belmore and Archer Pechawis provide important moments of collective grieving and medicinal witnessing for all Canadian audiences. I will start with a close reading of Nolan's play, compare it with Clements' play and follow

the thread of performance as medicine through an examination of two examples of performance art which achieves many of the same goals. These playwrights have created work that inspires others and, simultaneously, transforms the grief of a community through the ritual of witnessing and naming in commemorative performance.¹

In *order* to evaluate the impact of Nolan's play, we need to engage in a close examination of the ways in which she characterizes the central figure of Aquash.

Whereas some playwrights address transnational and transhistoric feminist struggles, Nolan investigates feminist struggles *within* the American Indian Movement itself. Nolan delves into the patriarchy of the American Indian Movement by documenting the complex position Aquash was in as a woman in the largely male-dominated organization. Nolan's Aquash offers her own perspective on her political views and feminist ideals in the opening monologue:

ANNA. You gotta stand up, you gotta fight for what's important, no matter who wants you to shut up. We have to fight, even if it seems like we're fighting ourselves. Or else we will disappear, just disappear. (4)

The Aquash character in Nolan's play is given an interiority and first-person perspective on the need to resist erasure within the organization itself. In this respect the play is emancipatory for women because it documents the culturally specific contours of patriarchy within the American Indian movement and, by extension, other Aboriginal community contexts.

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The character “Anna” in Nolan’s play re-enacts her murder on stage and this allows the members of the audience to express their grief over her murder. These two objectives are finely balanced in the staging of the story surrounding this important Canadian Aboriginal woman. In *Annie Mae’s Movement*, Nolan stages the murder after this prophetic speech:

ANNA. My name is Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Micmac nation from Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia. My mother is Mary Ellen Pictou, my father is Francis Thomas Levi, my sisters are Rebecca Julien and Mary Lafford, my brother is Francis. My daughters are Denise and Deborah. You cannot kill us all. You can kill me, but my sisters live, my daughters live. You cannot kill us all. My sisters live. Becky and Mary, Helen and Priscilla, Janet and Raven, Sylvia, Ellen, Pelajia, Agnes, Monica, Edie, Jessica, Gloria and Lisa and Muriel, Monique, Joy and Tina, Margo, Maria, Beatrice, Minnie, April, Colleen...

You can kill me, but you cannot kill us all. You can kill me.

There is a gunshot. She falls, curls into a foetal position. Blackout. (41-42)

There are four aspects of Nolan’s choice that deserve attention here. By pairing this hopeful speech with the dramatic murder of this character on stage, she implicates the audience as witness to this murder. She also allows the audience members, understood here as witnesses in a ceremony who are grieving the murder of many

Aboriginal women, to have some commemorative moment throughout the duration of the play. The importance of community and the bonds that exist in the seven generations of Aboriginal women is a traditional element in this play expressed through the power of naming. By naming family, friends, and Aboriginal playwrights and claiming that “You can kill me, but you cannot kill us all” (42), the character suggests the powerful and enduring effect that her life has had, and will continue to have, on Aboriginal women.

The figure of Aquash becomes more than an individual in this moment in the play; she reminds the audience that the struggles are not over for Aboriginal women in this celebratory speech. In Nolan’s play, Aquash is prophetic in that she has a first-person perspective on her existence before her staged death. This first-person perspective enables the actor and the audience to consider the possibility of Annie Mae’s conscious awareness of her role as a martyr for a larger cause. After an intense interrogation, when her death becomes inevitable, Aquash reflects on the power of women to make change and ruminates on the effect that her death will have on other activists. In addition, this final speech extends the life of Aquash beyond the point of her physical death in order to suggest that her martyrdom was not in vain. Nolan’s narrative documents the playwright’s own refusal to accept the silencing of women *and* the audience is positioned as witness to the Aquash murder. Her death is a marker and political touchstone of feminist resistance in a way that provides both a defiant and a tragic example of some of the consequences of being an Aboriginal woman warrior.

The second contemporary Canadian play that can usefully be compared to *Annie Mae’s Movement* is Marie Clements’ *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*. The play was written in 1997 and a staged reading was given at the Vancouver East Cultural

Centre in the same year. It premiered in 2000 at the Firehall Arts Centre in Vancouver and was first published in 2001. Clements' play, like *Annie Mae's Movement*, offers a vision of Aboriginal women whose influence extends beyond the point of death. Clements, like Nolan, has managed to write beyond the death of these women by employing specific narrative techniques. They have also managed to provide a healing ritual for the audience members through these commemorative acts that are based on colonial trauma, the act of witnessing and the power of naming. Although Clements' play is not about Aquash, the murder of Aboriginal women is the focus of the drama and it is this point that I want to use to draw a comparison between these two plays.

In *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, the tragedy of the women's deaths is transformed by Clements' use of a fictional revenge plot in which the murdered Aboriginal women, who appear as ghosts, execute the man who has murdered them. Although the basis of this play is factual, Clements takes creative license to extend the power of these murdered Aboriginal women to affect change beyond the grave by giving them an embodied and active presence as ghost murderers. The "truth" about these murdered women is that the killer, Gilbert Robert Jordan, was only sentenced for one of the eleven murders, served six years, and was released.ⁱⁱ However, by choosing to construct a play in which the murderer is killed on stage, Clements effectively rewrites the events in a way that empowers the Aboriginal women who were murdered.

Clements has consciously avoided representing the murder of the women on stage; she chooses to focus on the last few hours in their lives before they were killed. The indication that the women have been murdered is represented by way of slides that document the "official" versions of the coroner's reports, which state that each woman

died of “unnatural and accidental” causes. Only one murder is shown on stage and that is the murder of the killer. In this respect, Clements’ vision is similar to Nolan’s in that the playwright, in each case, refuses to close the play with the horrific murder(s) of the Aboriginal women while simultaneously finding a way to foreground the murder(s) in the performance.

Annie Mae’s Movement and *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* use the power of drama to document the lives of real Aboriginal women. In this respect they commemorate and heal communities and retell Aboriginal women’s stories. Because of these two plays, Aquash’s story has been rescued from the margins of history. They are intrinsically emancipatory gestures by Nolan and Clements because the plays bring the lives of murdered Aboriginal women to the stage. In this respect, both plays function as memorials for the “disappeared” Aboriginal women in Canadian society.

Other Canadian artists have more explicitly used performance as a means to create memorials for the Aboriginal women who have been victims of violence in Canada. The following two performances use the lighting of candles and a ritualized naming of the missing women as both performance art and elegy. They provide medicine by way of performance, and it is in this respect that they are connected to the two plays I have examined.

Aboriginal performance artist Rebecca Belmore has created a performance art installation titled “Vigil” that commemorates missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Vancouver.ⁱⁱⁱ Belmore set her performance in an alley in the downtown Eastside where Aboriginal women’s bodies have been found. She wore a white tank top that revealed the names of some of the murdered women written on her body in black. She vigorously

scrubbed the cement in preparation for the ceremonial naming of the deceased while an audience member lit a candle for each woman. Once the candles were lit, Belmore put on a red dress and nailed parts of it to telephone poles that lined the alley. She then ripped the dress so that pieces of red fabric remained on the poles. To close the performance, she read the names of the women from her own body, one at a time. With the recitation of each name, she used her mouth to rip the thorns and leaves from red roses for each of the women. The candles, the red bits of fabric on the poles, the violently discarded roses, and the names of the women formed the core of this performance. Belmore also used her own body as a script that memorialized the murdered women and brought the notion of embodiment to the centre of the performance. The performance piece was videotaped and became a video installation that was presented as part of the Talking Stick Festival in Vancouver, 2002.

Memorializing and naming missing Aboriginal women is still represented in performance today and continues to achieve the same transformative goal of commemoration for murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. Aboriginal performance and new media artist Archer Pechawis also memorialized Aboriginal women who have gone “missing” in his performance “Elegy” which was first presented at the Talking Stick Festival in Vancouver, 2006. On his website, Pechawis states that this performance is “a memorial to the missing women of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Using video projections and an original score by drummer/singer Anthony Favel and cellist Cris Derksen, ‘Elegy’ is a meditation on the lives of these women and on the tragically indifferent response of the Vancouver Police Department.”^{iv}

Again, the performance involved the lighting of candles and a ritualized naming of the missing women. As Derksen spoke the name of each woman, the name was also projected onto a screen behind the performance and Pechawis lit a candle for each of the women. Pechawis and Belmore used the medium of performance to document real Aboriginal women's lives in such a way that the performances explicitly functioned as memorial rituals for the Aboriginal community and Canadian society. Pechawis and Belmore created their performances specifically for Aboriginal audiences within cities where there is still an enormous amount of grief about murdered Aboriginal women, and so it is fitting that they more explicitly use performance as community ritual and commemoration for Vancouver's Aboriginal community.

Aboriginal playwrights Clements and Nolan use the medium of theatre less explicitly to document and memorialize the lives of these women. In addition, each of these playwrights has, in her own way, used performance to confront audiences with the issue of missing Aboriginal women in order to ensure that we remember their lives, their deaths, and their names.

Nolan sets in motion a revisionist narrative that ultimately allows the story of Aquash's warrior activism to extend beyond the grave. Nolan's Aquash character is murdered on stage and members of the American Indian Movement are implicated in the murder. The influence of the deceased is evident in the closing lines of both plays and in Nolan's play Aquash is given a first-person perspective on the intergenerational empowerment that her story will have on women. Clements, like Nolan, has created a play that extends the influence of murdered Aboriginal women beyond the grave, but, unlike Nolan, she chooses to *not* represent the murder of an Aboriginal woman on stage.

Where Nolan uses a prophetic speech about this warrior's living on at the close of her play, Clements uses a fictionalized revenge plot in order to extend the power of the murdered Aboriginal women.

Each playwright uses different narrative, rhetorical, and dramatic means in order to suggest that these Aboriginal women have not been murdered in vain. Each presents a feminist vision that suggests other women will be inspired (like the playwrights themselves) to remember and retell these stories of resistance. Each playwright addresses the murder of Aboriginal women in performances that function as national commemorations. Together, these performances document, historicize, and elegize the deaths of Aboriginal women in Canada. The final lines spoken by Annie Mae Aquash in Nolan's play offer a means by which to contemplate the power of the feminist vision in each of these plays, and within the work of these two important Aboriginal performance artists: "You can kill me, but you cannot kill us all" (42). As live performances, they create moments of collective remembering in Canadian theatre history and, as a result, they are important examples of commemoration that have the potential to transform the trauma of the past. They are medicine that heals, addressed through ritual in the form of performance.

ⁱ The issue of the notorious "barbershop killer" has also been represented in film and television. First, the killer and the details of these murders were fictionalized in the first episodes of the television series, *Da Vinci's Inquest*. More recently, Carl Bessai's 2006 film adaptation of Clements' play, *Unnatural and Accidental*, brings these women's lives to a whole new audience. The television series and the film adaptation indicate a contemporary revival of the interest in addressing the murder of Canadian Aboriginal women. In addition, the recent trial of Robert Pickton has again brought the issue of murdered Aboriginal women into contemporary popular culture by way of the media.

ⁱⁱ For more information on the details of this gruesome crime, see:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_Paul_Jordan>

ⁱⁱⁱ For further details on this performance or to watch a video of the performance, see:

<<http://www.rebeccabelmore.com/video/Vigil.html>>

^{iv} To view stills of this performance or to watch a video of this performance see:

<<http://www.apxo.net/performance/elegy.html>>

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