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Mourning the Body in Pain: Aboriginal Women's Revisionist Re-enactments of Murder

“Trauma in Aboriginal performance art practice implicitly reveals the precariousness of any established Aboriginal history. In the reenactment of trauma—individual pain confronting collective pain—performance art does not make meaning or create closure.” (81 Crosby)

This essay examines different ways that Aboriginal artists have referenced murdered Aboriginal women's bodies in their work as a means of mourning the lives of murdered and missing women. I start with a discussion of Clements' play *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* and focus, in particular, on the revisionist re-enactments of murder and the liminality of the body in the spirit world. Clements uses slides to represent “official narratives” on these women's deaths as a means of implicating the state. She also empowers the “live” woman character through her link to the murdered “ghost women” who collectively enact revenge from the spirit world. Like Clements', Yvette Nolan centres her play *Annie Mae's Movement* on life and death but focuses her narrative on a single, powerful political figure of Anna Mae Aquash. Like Clements, Nolan also utilizes a re-enactment of death on stage that challenges the historical narrative. In addition to a dying Aboriginal woman's body, Nolan includes the character's awareness of her own immanent death in the monologue that precedes her death to ensure that Nolan's view of Aquash's role as martyr is made evident to the witnesses. Belmore, as performance artist takes risks with her body in *Vigil* by showing her own body in pain through a highly symbolic re-enactment of the trauma of murder. Her vitally alive body is in stark contrast to the deceased women she commemorates in this performance. Throughout the performance we witness Belmore's body increasingly becoming a conduit and container for the vicarious trauma of murdered Aboriginal women whose lives were taken in the very location of her performance. In different ways these means of embodiment and use of particular affective elements, theatrical conventions and symbolic gestures in the performances implicate the audience(s) in witnessing murder. In the largest perspective, these performances may be understood as commemorative gestures for murdered and missing Aboriginal women in Canada. In addition, these performances are a form of theatrical medicine for Aboriginal communities (and others) who endure these performances in order to honour lives that have been (un) officially (under) recorded.

Works cited

Crosby, Marcia. “Humble Materials and Powerful Signs: Remembering the Suffering of Others.” *Rebecca Belmore: Rising to the Occasion*. Diana Augaitis and Kathleen Ritter (eds.). Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2008.77-92.