

**SEE[K]ING ABORIGINAL MOTHERS:
REPAIRING COLONIAL DISRUPTIONS THROUGH MARIE CLEMENTS'
*THE UNNATURAL AND ACCIDENTAL WOMEN***

by

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ABSTRACT

Attempting to understand mainstream dismissal and degradation of missing and murdered Aboriginal women, this thesis investigates Marie Clements' *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*. Retelling the story of Gilbert Paul Jordan's murder of ten women, predominantly Aboriginal, from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* exposes racist media representations that tell little of the women, emphasizing instead their high levels of alcohol and Aboriginal background. Perpetuating stereotypes of Aboriginal women as promiscuous and alcoholic, such representations overlook Jordan's methods of poisoning his victims with alcohol. Central to this thesis is the mother/daughter relationship within the play. Abandoned by her mother at age four, Rebecca begins to search for her mother on the drug-addiction riddled streets of Vancouver's downtown "Skid Row." Asking the question: Why do high numbers of Aboriginal women leave their families to live impoverished and often addicted lives full of danger and isolation?, this thesis explores governmental policies disenfranchising Aboriginal women and enforcing the removal Aboriginal children into residential schools and white foster homes. Within this context, this thesis argues that Aunt Shadie acts as a maternal metaphor, reflecting Aboriginal philosophies that honour the significance of the mother/child bond. Clements' play can be argued to offer a maternal counter-narrative to dominant discourses of Aboriginal womanhood.

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What if?

The world is truly blessed with the presence of these people.

Meegwetch!

DEDICATION

To my children

Jennifer Rae, Jeffrey Douglas, and Alyssa Victoria

And my grandchildren

Taija Hannah, Keira Sian, Robert Donald, and Sean Jeffrey

You are the reason I keep writing

PREFACE

“For many Métis people, myself included, there has been a disruption of tradition, a gap in our family stories that has caused us to question our identity as well as our connections to our ancestors. The family stories that would have taught us about ourselves, the stories that would have recounted our histories, the stories that should have given us pride in ourselves have been left untold for generations...

When was that moment, I wonder, that my ancestors ceased to belong to me and I to them?”

- Lynne Ladret “A Collection of Family Stories.”

Adhering to the predominant “Aboriginal protocol [that] links the right to tell a story with a declaration of involvement or connection to the story” (Ian Anderson qtd. in Fee and Russell 187), I begin this thesis by first acknowledging my roots and discussing some effects of colonization on my family. My name is Laura Johnston. I am a Métis/Cree woman and my roots span across Turtle Island (aka Canada) from the west coast to the Paspaschase Cree to the Montana and Red River Métis to England and France. My maternal grandfather Alfred Ladret was Cree/Métis, and my maternal grandmother Ellen Ladret was born in England and has lived in Canada most of her life. I did not know my father very well and so I leave that journey for another day. This thesis arises from my desire to understand Western society’s degradation of mothering as experienced both within and without my family. Defined within a patriarchal context of the nuclear family, contemporary mothering is downplayed, by both men and women alike, as “just” staying at home with the children in a world defined by monetary success. Single mothers are seen as lacking and single mothers receiving social assistance are harshly criticized

as burdens upon the tax-paying citizens. Single teenage mothers, especially those receiving social assistance, are ostracized while Aboriginal mothers, single or not, impoverished or not, bear the full weight of racist aggression. As a former single teenage mother, now Métis grand/mother, I have long attempted to redefine mothering according to ideals that honour mothering's profound impact on *being*, both in womb and throughout EVERY human's entire lives. Intuitively, I have always know that honoring the mother, we honor the sacredness of children and the(ir) capacity to flourish in healthy nurturing environments.

Tell me a story...

Honouring my mother, I acknowledge the impact her experiences as a Métis great grand/mother in Canada have had on this thesis; through her (mirrored in me mirrored in my sisters mirrored in my daughter) I am driven to abolish patriarchal/colonialist visions of mother. My mother's knowledge is land-based and she understands well the mysteries of plants and soil; everything she touches seems to turn green beneath her fingers. And yet it seems capitalist societies often prioritize cash flow rather than acknowledge the respect required to sustain ourselves from our shared mother, the earth, and my mother's wisdom remains unacknowledged. Had European colonization moved in the direction initiated by the original dependence of fur traders on Indian women, my mother would have been honored for her teachings. My mother understands that "it takes a village to raise a child," and yet, living within neo-colonialism's oppressive confines, my mother's role as young great/grand/mother directly involved in caretaking five generations of life is seen as both self-sacrifice and a burden upon the economy. Defined within monetary terms, my mother remains a factor of production, the significance of her caretaking dismissed as she struggles to survive within this cracking capitalist system.

My mother's search to recover her ancestors transcends western expectations that the "only good Indian is a dead [or assimilated] Indian" and her BA project, "A Small Collection of Family Stories" propels this thesis. Mapping our Métis/Cree genealogy, my mother traces timelines, (re)inscribing family roots into Turtle Island. Through family stories, her work investigates government Indian policy's disruptive effects on her father's family, explaining, in a large way why, despite my [English/Canadian] grandmother's strength and cohesion, disruptions and disconnections continue to play out in my family. However, my mother's argument that our ancestors [do not] cease to belong to me presents possibilities as reparation and re-creation resounds through the power of her words.

The power of her words echoes in my memories as fairies danced upon plants perceived only by the very young and very gentle of souls. And I remember the many times she sent me to that big dictionary¹ to look up a word I did not know. Dancing upon the pages, those words spoke magic to me, not limited by definition but rather opening up whole other worlds with each layer of meaning. Growing up thus, I too believe in the energetic properties of story in rooting one's being in the physical world and so I offer my own narrative of colonization. Remembering the child I once was, curling my fingers in my young mother's hand as she taught me to navigate my entrance into physical consciousness, I once again curl my fingers in hers as I navigate my entrance into cultural consciousness.

Heeding my mother's call, I research and write in order to continue her repair of our family and the disruptions that disconnect us from our ancestors. With this thesis, I honour aunties and uncles, grandmother and grandfathers that have passed to the spirit world as a result of racist policies in Canada. Here I remind my children of their Aboriginal genealogies as I reconnect to the land and culture that once sustained our ancestors. Here too I call upon my

¹ Note to mom – This memory has been here since the first draft.

family, past, present and future, to remember sacred connection and interdependence as I work to expose and explode that which yet haunts our interactions and denials. I know I am rooted in two worlds, one foot more firmly rooted in my grandmother's teachings,² the other stepping tentatively towards my grandfather's Aboriginal heritage; thus, attempting an Aboriginal-specific project within my still colonized body, I engage in a decolonizing process of my mind.

Herstory

As a woman living in an urban environment, I investigate the degradation and urbanization of Aboriginal women in order to expose government policies that ripped generations of children from their families, forever traumatizing them while dividing families and communities. Pointing my finger at the gender-discrimination inherent in the *Indian Act*, I extend my mother's investigation as a "Métis *person* in Canada" (Ladret; emphasis added) in order to speak as a Métis **mother** in Canada. Thus, I seek out herstory³ in order to [re]inscribe women's rootedness in this land. Locating survival, strength and resiliency, this project hopes to emphasize Indigenous⁴ women's wisdom – teachings that empower political, social, and environmental activism in reclaiming cultural consciousness. Aligning myself with Aboriginal feminisms, past and present, I hope to offer Aboriginal people one more tool in our struggle for recognition, reclamation, reconciliation, and self-determination.

² Note to grandma – You have been my strength and inspiration and I look forward to telling your stories with you.

³ My mother's "A Small Collection of Family Stories" traces her story, her father's story, and the stories of the many Métis and mixed-blood peoples inhabiting our family tree back to the fur trade, Hudson's Bay, and the Red River Valley. I, however, seek to undo the patriarchal hold European colonization has on my peoples; thus, I specifically investigate Aboriginal women's voices reconstructing a sense of Aboriginality from within the colonial chaos.

⁴ In order to respect diverse needs, I utilize the various terms currently used both within the academy and within Aboriginal people's everyday life. All the terms are problematic and challenged by theorists; however, I hear Aboriginal people everywhere referring to themselves as Aboriginal, Indigenous, Native, First Nations and even Indian; thus, I incorporate all these terms without further explanation to refer to what the 1982 Canadian Constitution Act defines "as aboriginal peoples of Canada" including "Inuit, First Nations, and Métis." (See <http://www.sfu.ca/~aheard/abrts82.html>)

With these goals in mind, this thesis explores Métis playwright Marie Clements' play *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* and its use of drama and oral storytelling to expose the ongoing violence against Aboriginal women. Presenting a maternalist Aboriginal counter-narrative to patriarchal colonialism, I address concerns of essentialism and domestication by acknowledging and simultaneously defending my idealism. Building upon this foundation, I investigate Euro-Canadian policies and practices that removed Aboriginal children from parents and communities, thereby linking genocidal attempts to erase Aboriginal culture to the current crises amongst Aboriginal populations. Focusing upon the ruptured mother/child bond, I analyze *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* through the eyes of a maternalist feminism, ever alert and increasingly concerned with media representations shaping societal perceptions of our sisters, mothers, and daughters, aunties and nieces who have been murdered or are missing from Vancouver's Downtown East Side. After addressing racist policies historically perpetuating mainstream perceptions, this thesis delves into *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, analyzing both the dramatic strategies and political implications of see(k)ing a maternalist voice within the violent realities haunting the play. See(k)ing the wisdom of our (grand)mothers within Clements' play, this thesis recovers and empowers Aboriginal mothers and daughters through kinship to earth and all living beings, collectively drawing upon the strength of family and community in order to heal colonialist wounds.

Introduction

Namôya mistahi ê-kiskêyih tamân “(I do not know very much).” (Neal McLeod 16)

Indigenous peoples understood the power of the “*word* . . . to create, to make things happen – medicine to heal, plants to grow, animals to be caught, and human beings to enter the spirit world” (Petrone 10). Storytellers were gifted speakers whose “reverence for the word and inherent love of drama . . . organizational skills and reasoning skills and retentive memory” (Petrone 26) ensured that cultural knowledge was safely passed from generation to generation. These teachings express and contain tribal beliefs and customs, morals, laws, and genealogies; thus, stories possess more than simple entertainment value but are fundamental to educating children and community in a particular world-view. As Penny Petrone has observed:

For many indigenous writers stories are ways of passing down the beliefs and values of a culture in the hope that the new generations will treasure them and pass the story down further. The story and the story teller serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with another, the land with the people and the people with the land. (Petrone 145)

Carrying the knowledge of the collective, these stories express Indigenous understandings of interrelation that, unlike notions of hierarchy and linear chronology, espouse a circularity of time and action wherein all organisms are directly related to one another and every action causes a reaction.

Colonial strategies disrupted most of my family’s unmediated knowledge of “tribal histories and cultures” (Foster 269); thus, while I begin with and continue my mother’s [re]search for our family, I also turn to Indigenous scholars and storytellers in order to recover a Cree/Métis worldview. Resisting (neo)colonialist hierarchies of superior/inferior,

modern/traditional, and civilized/primitive, an increasing number of Aboriginal peoples are (re)turning to storytelling traditions to revitalize and transmit cultural knowledge. As a common thread amongst the diverse Indigenous groups across the world, traditional storytelling contains within its very transmission an enduring and collective strength of those peoples that colonial policies were determined to destroy. However, as is also common amongst most Aboriginal peoples, calling upon one's genealogies represents appropriate protocol in asserting Aboriginal identity as kinship creates connections:

Indeed, the tribally specific framework is a necessary basis for much of the most important work of recovery and reading happening in Native studies today, and it begins, often as not, with a recovery of one's own relations, which is a central honoring act. (Foster 269)

I am honoured to interweave my stories into those of my contemporaries and of my ancestors as I re/turn (to) my Cree/Métis lineage. Here, I humbly acknowledge that I am but one storyteller whose telling is an interpretation; this is why I begin my own decolonization process as my elders might begin: "*namôya mistahi ê-kiskêyih tamân*" ("I do not know very much")" (McLeod 16).

Chapter One: Reviving Mother

Significantly reflecting and contributing to a decolonization imperative, Métis playwright Marie Clements' work utilizes story and thus I turn to her work as a gifted and intuitive Aboriginal storyteller. Investigating Clements' 1997 play *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, I offer a 'maternalist' counter-narrative to the ongoing, socially sanctioned, sexual objectification and dehumanization of Aboriginal women living in the slums of urban centers. Constructing a "maternalist" Aboriginal feminism, this project honors the physiological and psychic connections between the maternal body and the child as methodological sutures for the ruptures of colonial corruptions. Understanding that such an endeavor carries significant risks, I must begin this journey by first acknowledging the concerns of another Aboriginal feminist, Emma LaRocque, for concisely and eloquently challenging an essentialist "idealization of nurturing/motherhood" that has historically relegated ALL women of ALL nations to the domestic sphere (55). Carefully outlining stereotypes of women used to confine and devalue women in the role as primary caregivers, LaRocque emphasizes concerns of women who choose not to or cannot have children while cautioning against the potential risks of maternalist feminism perpetuating patriarchal perspectives of motherhood.

LaRocque's critical warning that the "idealization of nurturing/motherhood" can confine "women to domestic and nurturing roles" (55) carries much weight for women working to avoid subjugation under patriarchal definitions. Julia Emberley likewise argues that for a "geo-historical analysis of the materialism of the body" it is necessary to

understand, for example, the political technologies, physical and representations of violence, genderings, racial markings, and cultural practices that gave rise to a

specific form of biopolitical organization in the early twentieth century, its continuing legacy and contemporary resistance to it. (54)

Both LaRocque and Emberley warn of essentializing women's roles based solely upon our reproductive abilities and I wholly agree with their warnings. Remaining aware of the flaws in any position remains paramount in the search for healing and independence. And yet, such warnings paradoxically fall into the trap of defining motherhood within the "essentialized politics of patriarchal mothering" (Kailo 14) these theorists warn against and thereby risk, evidenced in first- and second-wave feminisms, defining women's equality only within the political and economic spheres. Such definitions of equality leave those women who do mother struggling to maintain social and political success⁵ balancing their home and families. Thus, while feminisms have indeed increased women's rights, they contribute to the ongoing devaluing of motherhood. Overlooking the profound impact of mothering, these theories dismiss the political and social implications that Aboriginal maternalism offers in healing the generational trauma inflicted by the intentional rupture of the mother/child relationship.

And yet, both LaRocque and Emberley indirectly offer an alternative to a strictly essentialized or constructivist perspective. Showing how the "always-already within the critical discourses, practices, and institutions of the Empire" (54) normalizes identity according to a white male hierarchy, Emberley posits the reconstructive possibilities of Aboriginality through decolonization. As a constructivist, I construct a maternalist feminism of kinship and connection with images of the pregnant body and nurturing earth mother. At the same time, however, this thesis posits an essentialist argument, ironically drawing from LaRocque's article to support a maternalist reading. Challenging Aboriginal scholars and theorists who denounce feminism "because white women have conceptualized it" (67), LaRocque quotes Josephine Donovan, a

⁵ See "Still Waiting for Justice" 27.

non-Aboriginal feminist, to emphasize the same “determinant structures” defining both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women: their “political oppression,” their historical assignment “to the domestic sphere,” their “historical function has been production for use, not production for exchange,” as well as the material fact that “women experience significant physical events that are different from men” (54). Arguing that Aboriginal women experience different events than Aboriginal men, LaRocque concisely argues for the validity of Aboriginal feminism to address the ever-present socio-political-spiritual oppression.

LaRocque only briefly mentions the “significant physical events,” including menstruation and menopause, as she chooses to focus more specifically on constructivist aspects of womanhood; however, unpacking these physical experiences remains central to my analysis. Extending LaRocque’s analysis then, I argue that as women’s physical experiences differ from those of men, so too do pregnant women’s physiological experiences differ from the non-pregnant women as the body becomes the site of profound metamorphosis. Thus, while I might agree with LaRocque about the risks inherent within a maternalist feminism, I construct a maternalist feminism with my feet in both constructive and essentialist territories. My work is wholly informed by the first moment I ‘discovered’ Lee Maracle’s *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism*. Her words “[s]pirituality is re-connecting with the self and our ancestry” (134) answer my mother’s question, inspiring me to re-connect with my ancestors, while Maracle’s healing focuses on nurturing children through cultural teachings and love, articulating my own maternalist tendencies. I listen for these words within my research and I am empowered when Mohawk lawyer Patricia Monture-Anges writes, “Real change will come when the women stand up. When the women stand up, the men and children will soon also be standing” (15). Cheryl Suzack’s description of Indigenous feminism as a political and

“communal position that envisions a common humanity” (187) resonates with my use of maternalism as a political choice. I consistently remember Beverly Hungry-Wolf’s *The Ways of my Grandmothers*, which honours the wisdoms of and kinship to her women elders, “[b]y tribal custom, all the old women of the past are my grandmothers” (8) Hungry-Wolf writes, affirming my need to call upon my grandmothers for guidance in this maternalist journey.

Attempting to reconstruct motherhood outside dominant colonial narratives, I let Clements’ and Kim Anderson’s versions of motherhood, specifically the powerful “symbol of lifegiver” (Anderson 164) guide aspects of this project. Anderson’s quest to recover balance through cultural honoring of female roles resonates with Paula Gunn Allen’s for “gynocratic” societies. For both Allen and Anderson, reconnection to women’s physical experiences in relation to mother earth’s cycles empowers Indigenous women with the strength to reclaim balance and healing. Allen has been duly criticized by Craig Womack for “reduc[ing] diversity among Native people to a gynocratic utopia and ma[king] other totalizing statements about a singular Indian consciousness” (23); however, Allen’s focus upon revitalizing Indigenous motherhood through cultural discourses and practices serves as a strong basis for this thesis.

Clements’ *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* articulates Allen’s description of “the love of a mother” not as “a reference to sentimental attachment [but rather as] a way of saying that a mother is bonded to her offspring through her womb” (24). Viewed through the lens of the sacred and the scientific, the mother’s body is infused with humanity at the most molecular level. The visual image of a fetus holding and/or wrapped within the umbilical cord transcends boundaries of individuality, a (beautiful) symbol of interrelation and inter-dependence. I am not suggesting that all women should be mothers, (or aunts, grandmothers, or other ‘feminine’ role for that matter). Nor do I believe that an idealized vision of mother has to mirror patriarchal

expectations of submission and inferiority. Conversely, I believe healing leads to more choices as freedom from patriarchy offers new ways of constructing identity in the world.

Thus, the powerful image of child in the womb reflects the physical connection that all humans have with Mother – one that reverberates, as this thesis will show, in presence or in absence, throughout a human’s entire life. Despite technological advances allowing for more choice and freedom in mothering we have all been the fetus, dependent upon and birthed by a woman. Once born, our bodies are still designed to drink from our mother’s breasts, her milk enough to sustain our bodies for the first six months of life outside the womb. Imagine then, systems of governance that remembered this dependence and were therefore based within a child-centered politics that incorporated and reflected traditional notions of the “sacredness and central position of children in our lives and in the lives of our nation[s]” (Anderson 163). What if all systems of governance asked the question, “How will this policy/action/law positively/negatively impact the lives of our children?” not from a patriarchal perspective of control and domination, but rather from a maternalist perspective of interconnection. Reading *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* with such questions in mind, this thesis draws upon other mother-centered teachings that honor children as sacred in order to reveal the link between child-removal legislations that disrupt the mother/child bond and the ongoing cultural, spiritual, physical, sexual, and economic crises facing Aboriginal women, indeed all Aboriginal peoples, today.

While much diversity still exists amongst Aboriginal peoples, this respect for women’s ability to give birth and the underlying wisdom of connection seems a common thread amongst many. For instance, while writing about the “societal and cultural importance of Indigenous Plateau women,” Mary C. Wright summarizes, “It has been argued elsewhere that birthing and

motherhood are powerful concepts for Indigenous women, central to the construction of their gender definitions” (262). As Elder Betty McKenna tells Wright et al., sacred spaces such as the woman’s Moon Lodge were used to pass on women’s wisdom:

When women are in that Moon Lodge, you learn about how the concept of Grandmother Moon is so vital. Grandmother Moon is the next light to the sun. Grandmother Moon is so powerful that the water will rise up and follow her. The women had all that knowledge and it was passed from the Grandmother to mother to daughter to granddaughter, aunty to niece. It’s also important to know that your energy at Moon Time is powerful. We think of ourselves as a connection to that Mother Earth, that we are a product of Mother Earth; we come from her, we go back to her. (Wright et al. 234)

Contrary to patriarchal concepts, birthing and motherhood were revered to some Nations, and otherwise valued in most Aboriginal cultures as equal to any other form of work. Communities depended upon one another to sustain life; thus, the mother’s work as caregiver and sustainer mattered a great deal.

Analyzing the impact of residential schools on women and children, Jo-Anne Fiske’s “Spirited Subjects and Wounded Souls: Political Representations of an Im/Moral Frontier” addresses the long-term effects of oppressive Christian ideologies that forcibly disrupted and decried traditional notions of Aboriginal mothering. Referring to both the long-term residential school children and the “teaching sisters” who taught them as “motherless daughters” (93) Fiske reveals the link between residential school (and other forms of separation) and Aboriginal women on the street. Fiske explores the relationship between the loss of “Aboriginal narratives that honor a life-long relationship of mothers and daughters while locating the maternal principle

within a concept of ‘mother earth’” (93) and the ongoing crisis of Aboriginal mothers “incapable” of mothering. Positing ‘the motherless daughter’ as a “metonym of the Aboriginal nation bereft of mother earth” (103), Fiske contributes to a maternal principle grounded in Indigenous teachings of the mother, not confined to the domestic sphere, but sacred teacher/advocate of children and nurturing earth.⁶

Positing *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* as ceremony for transmitting knowledge while prophesying recovery and renewal of Aboriginal motherhood, this thesis draws upon Hopi and Maori prophecies as they are presented in the Alaskan Prophecy. In so doing, I incorporate Aboriginal ways of knowing into a contemporary reading of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*. Maintaining that humanity is moving into the time of the feminine, the Prophecy states,

[t]he world for the last 4,000 or so years has been stuck in the male energy side.

The male energy is thinking from the brain. It is a management from the top down. It is more aggressive. It does not use intuition or feelings from the heart. It is not a bad energy. It is just different than female energy. Female energy is healing, nurturing, loving, caring, touching, sharing. (Mercurieff 4)

The Prophecies recognize and affirm patriarchal imbalance as well as then current return to the words of the mother as a means to create balance and bring about healing and cultural resurgence.

Real[izing] violence

Listening to the words of the mother requires societal responsibility in addressing, overturning, and healing the ongoing violence facing contemporary Aboriginal women. The trial of Robert Pickton forced Canadian society as a whole to confront the ongoing dehumanization, violation and murder of Aboriginal women, conveying the urgency with which such counter-

narratives are required. Convicted of second-degree murder in the deaths of six women and charged for the murders of another twenty women, Pickton unwittingly made public the silencing of Aboriginal women's voices, lives, and humanity. However, Pickton is but one predator whose taste for marginalized women is consistently fed by the racist discourses that force a disturbing number of Aboriginal women into street-level prostitution. While killing prostitutes is a logical extension of the denial of human sexuality promoted by many Christian churches, killing Aboriginal prostitutes continues the discourse of 'purification' by ridding the world of savages. Having unknowingly internalized such discourses, generations of Canadians continue to dismiss or downplay the murderous atrocities inflicted upon Aboriginal women.

The Unnatural and Accidental Women retells the story of Gilbert Paul Jordan's murder of ten women between 1965 and 1988 in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside or "skid row." Dubbed the "boozing barber,"⁷ Jordan lured women, primarily Aboriginal women, with alcohol and money, eventually forcing enough alcohol into each woman so that she died of alcohol poisoning. Sadly, neither the medical system nor the justice system thought to question the dramatically high levels of alcohol in each woman's body or Jordan's obvious connection. Tellingly, not only was more than one woman found dead in Jordan's barbershop, but Jordan himself reported more than one woman's death to the police – after consulting with a lawyer. As Bonita Lawrence writes:

In Western Canada, all but the most light-skinned⁸ urban Native people must negotiate a society that is fundamentally still actively colonialist, where rigidly

⁷ See Hawthorn, "Gilbert Paul Jordan, 'The Boozing Barber': 1931-2006," and Frank Larue "Gilbert Paul Jordan: The Boozing Barber."

⁸ Lawrence makes the valid point that fair skin-color can provide protection; however, as Culleton-Mosionier's character, April Raintree discovers when she marries a white man, it is only briefly so as women who enter into social relationships as 'white' must hide family and lie about their past. Those women working as prostitutes and/or living in poverty are marked by more than skin colour—they are marked by their physical location, their appearance, and their clothes.

segregated spaces, a regime of tacitly organized police violence, and one of the highest rates of imprisonment in the world ensure that Nativeness, particularly in urban centers, is contained in zones of fundamental illegality where universality does not apply. (8)

Proving Lawrence's argument, official coroners'⁹ reports negligently ruled each woman's death "unnatural and accidental" despite much evidence to the contrary. Blatantly demonstrating skid-row as a "zone of fundamental illegality" this oversight reflects dominant stereotypes of Indigenous women as disposable alcoholics, addicts, and prostitutes.

Already known to the police, Jordan had a long history of criminal, including sexual, offenses, yet it took years for anyone to notice and punish this recognizable pattern. He was never charged for kidnapping a five-year-old Aboriginal girl, despite having her far away from her reserve community. One of his first alcohol poisoning victims was Ivy Rose, a switchboard operator, in 1965; however, Jordan did not see prison until he finally served two years in 1976, not for the murder of Ivy Rose, but for kidnapping and raping a mental health patient. Jordan returned to the Downtown Eastside upon his release to begin killing once again (Larue). Having learned a profession while incarcerated, Jordan owned a barbershop in the "zone" of Vancouver's Main and Hastings, a "zone of fundamental illegality" that caters to hard-core drinkers in rough bars.

Jordan killed at least seven women between 1980 and 1987, but he was not investigated until he murdered his sixth victim, a white woman named Vanessa Lee Buckner, whose family pressured police to do something. His seventh victim, Edna Shade, was located a month later and Jordan's fingerprints were connected to Buckner's murder. However, while Jordan was brought in for questioning, police chose to set up surveillance rather than charging him. Within the course

⁹ It is a sad statement that one of these coroners, Larry Campbell, eventually became Vancouver's mayor.

of a week, police ‘rescued’¹⁰ four women before they too became victims. The police also recorded Jordan repetitively taunting and bribing his victims to drink with promises of money: “down the hatch, I’ll give you \$20 to drink it.” Charged in seven cases and linked to approximately ten murders, Jordan was convicted only of manslaughter in Vanessa Buckner’s murder, for which he served only six years of a 15-year sentence (Larue).

Adding insult to injury is the fact that the courts denied attempts made by psychologists and Crown prosecutors, dating from 1976, to label Jordan a dangerous sexual offender, effectively allowing Jordan to continue victimizing women. In June 2000, Jordan was again charged with sexual assault, negligence causing bodily harm, and administering a noxious substance – alcohol. In 2002, he was charged with and ultimately served 15 months for breaching probation as he was found in Winnipeg drinking with a woman who was known to have a serious drinking problem. Upon his release in 2005, he moved to Victoria, where police finally released an alert labeling Jordan as a dangerous sexual offender. However, the official police warning, finally released to the public in 2005, stating that “Jordan has a significant criminal history, including manslaughter and indecent assault of a female” (Hawthorne) seriously understates the horrific crimes he committed. As Clements dramatically explores in *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, the murders of the Aboriginal women, unlike those of white women, are taken less seriously by mainstream police and the world at large.¹¹

Clements takes her title from the coroners’ rulings and, prefacing the play with excerpts from an October 22, 1988 edition of *The Vancouver Sun*, interrogates media coverage that emphasizes alcohol readings and therefore suggested self-induced alcohol poisoning. Two of the

¹⁰ I place the word ‘rescued’ in single quotes as it seems absurd that Jordan was still free and therefore able to victimize these women to the point that police first obtained a recording of Jordan feeding the women too much alcohol and finally stopped him mid-poisoning of an Aboriginal woman. (See Larue).

¹¹ See also “nothing to report” and “Stolen Sisters.”

five excerpts also emphasize the women's Aboriginal background, effectively echoing and perpetuating racist stereotypes that define all Native people as alcoholic:

“___, a *native Indian*, had been drinking continuously for four days before she died...Coroner Larry Campbell concluded her death was ‘unnatural and accidental.’”

“___ drank enough to kill her twice. That's the conclusion of a coroner's inquiry into the *native Indian* woman's death. She was found dead, lying face down on a foam mattress with a blanket covering her, in *Jordan's barbershop*...At the time of her death, Coroner Campbell said there was no indication of foul play.”

(Clements 8; emphasis added)

The play directs attention to the mainstream media's role in minimizing such crimes, explaining, in part, how murderers walk free while their victims are blamed. Sadly, while statistics actually show that “[c]ompared to the general populations, a smaller proportion of Aboriginal people consume alcohol (79% versus 66%, respectively)” (Kirmayer 18)¹²; thus, these stereotypes, while remaining prevalent, are based in misinformation.¹³

Re/Presenting Horror

Taking issue with these significant and unacceptable ‘oversights,’ Clements does not simply retell the official stories as represented in media. Rather, she provides vignettes of each woman's *life*, moments, hours, and days before each is murdered, thereby honouring each as a mother, daughter, sister, aunty, niece, lover, and friend. The minimal plot focuses specific attention on acts of violence perpetrated against Aboriginal women who live and work in areas

¹² “[T]he rate of problem drinking is higher in [...] Aboriginal communities,” Kirmayer notes (19).

¹³ For example, see *Toronto Sun*, “Watching the drunk girls die” (Mandell, August 13, 2004). It is important to note how Jordan is still presented as a passive observer “[w]atching” while his victims take on the active roles of drinking themselves to death.

such as the Downtown Eastside. And yet, it is the energetic incarnations of the women, both in this life and in the afterlife, that move the play forward. Here, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* acts as witness to the women's sacred humanity as desire for love, for family, for sustenance and for guidance resonates throughout the play despite the journey into addiction, sexual predators, and legislated helplessness.

Central to Clements' representation is the haunting relationship between the murdered Rita Louise James (aka Aunt Shadie) and her 30-year-old daughter Rebecca, whom she abandoned 26 years earlier.¹⁴ Grounding the story within the horrifying realities that motivate the play, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* follows Rebecca's search for her long-absent mother within the impoverished and addiction-afflicted area of Vancouver's Main and Hastings. Interweaving Aunt Shadie's and Rebecca's memories, the play moves fleetingly through Aunt Shadie's marriage to a white logger, "the Character," and her resulting isolation, depression, and departure; thus, Clements personalizes the devastating consequences of abandonment and the ruptured mother/daughter bond.

Significantly deviating from the 'facts' surrounding Gilbert Paul Jordan's conviction for manslaughter in the death of Vanessa Lee Buckner, the climax of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* comes when the murdered women's spirits, instigated by Aunt Shadie, lead Rebecca to murder the Barber by cutting his throat with his own razor. While this murder seems to advocate personal revenge, this discussion will show that *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* symbolizes a mother's call to eliminate patriarchal 'white'¹⁵ ideologies justifying the sexual objectification, degradation and murders of marginalized Aboriginal women.

¹⁵ Sheila Dawn Gill clearly shows how "the identity of an elite white subject is rooted in the racially "unmarked" space of "universal sameness" (168). Voicing concerns about feminists who argue "Hey, wait a minute. We're all women, we're all equal, so what if you're a different color?" Lee Maracle states "Very patriarchal and very racist.

This mother's call resonates throughout the entire play as Clements interweaves Aboriginal spirituality into a contemporary urban environment.¹⁶ Each actor acts the role of traditionally “gifted and respected storytellers – entertainers whose use of body and voice [is] determined [but not limited] by the context of the story.” Retaining “certain liberties” (Petrone 13) of mind and body, each represents her character according to both individual and collective interpretation, context, and audience response while remaining intimately entwined with the script, plot, and stage directions of the play. In this manner, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* calls upon audiences to witness,¹⁷ thus, restor[ing] and honouring the women's voices while demanding Aboriginal women's rights to visibility and equality.

As the ‘original’ storyteller of this play, Clements secures the plot in much the same way a traditional storyteller would, providing detailed stage directions in order to specifically transmit “the fundamental actions, characters and theme” of her script (Petrone 13). Shifting between a preindustrial logger's landscape to the low-income neighborhood of Vancouver's Main and Hastings, Act I of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* begins in overlapping yet distinct dimensions; past/forest, 1978/hotel/spiritual realm, and 1997/pub. The opening sound effects (*hereafter SFX*), “A collage of trees whispering in the wind” gently invites the audience to relax into nature; however, a slide bearing the title “**The Unnatural and Accidental Women**” in bold black letters immediately disrupts this “*whispering*” tranquility. Again the sound effects speak to the physical senses, “*The sound of a tree opening up to a split. A loud crack – a haunting gasp for air that is suspended. The sustained sound of suspension as the tree teeters.*” Another bold

Simply repeat the tired old story of white men, substituting colour for woman in the appropriate spaces: ‘so what if you're a woman, we're all equal, we're all people, etc.’ There has been no revolution in this country in my lifetime. Given that inequality was structured into every institution in this country from its inception, it is safe to assume just the opposite; inequality still dogs people of colour. It can never be eradicated by people who say ‘so what?’ (“Ramparts Hanging in the Air 164).

¹⁶“*The Unnatural and Accidental Women*” was first presented on November 2, 2000 at Firehall Arts Center in Vancouver, BC” (3).

¹⁷ A traditional protocol on the West Coast at least—see *You are Asked to Witness*.

and black slide, “**FALLING BACK – Beacon Hotel**,” locates us in Vancouver’s skid row while the words “falling back” echo the suspended tree, severed from its roots but not quite fallen. Our senses immersed in falling, the stage directions again disrupt the experience, lighting up on a small room within the hotel that is both room and forest: “*Lights dim up on a small room covered with the shadows of tree leaves and limbs. Lights up on a LOGGER looking up at a tree, handsaw in hand.*” Creating the natural environment through technology, the opening locates the audience at the beginning of the logging era on British Columbia’s west coast. However, the stage directions, “*He shouts across time,*” connects the logger’s era to the Downtown Eastside hotel room within which he logs; metaphorically connecting and equating colonial destruction of the landscape to Aboriginal women who have fallen.

The Unnatural and Accidental Women incorporates electronic technology to dissolve boundaries, thereby emphasizing Aboriginal philosophies of interconnection and timelessness of spirit. Sound effects of the natural elements and of unnatural violence permeate consciousness as patriarchal destruction of earth transforms into paternal destruction of Aboriginal women. Similarly, electronic slides bearing snippets of corners’ reports and newspaper headlines, such as those prefacing the published version of the play, interrogate official ‘stories’ of each woman’s death. Correlating alcoholism with heritage, the slides expose the ways in which dominant society degrades Aboriginal women on the Downtown Eastside:

SLIDE: Rita Louise James, 52, died November 10, 1978 with a 0.12 blood-alcohol reading. No coroner’s report issued. (9)

Even the slides that acknowledge brutality reveal how media blatantly contradicts evidence, effectively obscuring the foul play that has indeed taken each woman’s life:

SLIDE: Rose Doreen Holmes, 52, died January 27, 1965 with a 0.51 blood-alcohol reading. “Coroner’s inquiry reported she was found nude on her bed and recent bruises on her scalp, nose, lips and chin. There was no evidence of violence, or suspicion of foul play.” (19)

More disturbing are those that openly include Jordan:

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.” (51)

Despite actively seeking a lawyer and reporting the death, Jordan, as *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* makes clear, is depicted by newspapers as a passive bystander, beyond suspicion. In so doing, the newspapers reflect and perpetuate a justice system that allows murderers to continue kidnapping, raping, and murdering.

Interweaving fact with fiction, Clements utilizes some names of Jordan’s actual victims, invoking the spirits of the murdered women, while creating names, dates, and places for others. There are indirect references to the real women, most obviously “Aunt Shadie” (Edna Shade RIP 1986) and “Rose Doreen Holmes” (Ivy Rose RIP 1965) while “Patsy” of the Barbershop women most likely honors Patricia Thomas and Patricia Anderson, both found dead in Jordan’s barbershop. “Marilyn” of the Barbershop women could simultaneously refer to Mary Johns and Mary Johnson. While Verna’s death in 1986 suggests that she honors Vera Harry who died November 19, 1986, she could also allude to Verna Chartrand, rescued on November 21, 1987. “Mavis” sounds like Mabel Olsen, rescued in 1987. Within this context, the slides not only

represent societal and media violence but simultaneously act as markers to remember the woman.

Returned to their bodies through the characters on stage, the murdered and missing Aboriginal women are reconstructed over and over again. Nine of the ten murdered women are characterized only as “*Native*,”¹⁸ with one white woman, 52-year-old Rose Doreen, a switchboard operator. Rose simultaneously represents women living/working in skid row who are marked by more than their skin color as well as the statistical imbalances that “young Indigenous women are five times more likely than other women of the same age to die as a result of violence” (“Stolen Sisters”). Two of the women regress to ages four and five, Rebecca (30) in memory, Violet in spirit, and time slips back and forth between 1965 and 1988. Two of the women, Mavis (42) and Verna (38), clearly struggle with alcoholism while Valerie (33) likely works as a prostitute. Listed as the barbershop women, Marilyn (25), Penny (30) and Patsy (40) most certainly refer to the three women found dead in Jordan’s barbershop between 19

Challenging dominant representations of Aboriginal women, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* works to (re)create and transmit the women’s stories. Here drama takes the form of Aboriginal oral storytelling traditions as the play asks audiences to witness the women’s marginalization and isolation on Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Here a maternalist perspective contributes to academic discussion by remembering the murdered and missing women as our daughters, our sisters, our mothers. Asking, what happened to these women who were, as we all are, once children of mothers? this thesis investigates ruptured mother/daughter bonds while seeking healing for Aboriginal women.

¹⁸ With the exception of Rebecca who is Mixed Blood/Native.

Chapter Two: Losing Mother

“Everything not quite there, because you can’t quite touch your own loss.”

(Rebecca, Clements 79)

Through Rebecca, the abandoned daughter, Clements investigates the effects of colonialist policies upon Aboriginal children who may have never attended residential schools or suffered relocation, but nonetheless exhibits the symptoms of generational trauma. Abandoned by her Native mother and raised by her white logger father, Rebecca has, as her Kitsilano residence and her occupation as a writer suggests, utilized the education and privileges of her Euro-Canadian heritage. Like Beatrice Culleton-Mosionier’s April Raintree, Rebecca has “passed” into the dominant society; however, she passes at the expense of her mother’s, and therefore her own, culture and community. Anger drives Rebecca into the streets, and she exudes many symptoms of generational trauma. Her father has died, and her west-end apartment “*reflect[s] the symptoms of urban isolation even without being on Hastings Street*” (6), signifying her lack of family, friends, and community. Searching desperately for answers, she begins and ends many of her scenes with a beer in hand; her entire being, including her occupation, radiates the desire to escape reality.

Alone and drinking angrily when she first enters, Rebecca speaks predominantly through her journal or through thinking aloud. Writing of deep loss, despair, and disconnection, Rebecca states, “I am sitting here thinking of everything that has passed, everyone that is gone, and hoping I can find her, my mother. Not because she is my first choice but because she is my last choice and...my world has gone to shit” (13). Without her father to help define/confine her identity within the white world, Rebecca’s “world has gone to shit.” She describes her uprootedness and the need for understanding that has shaped her since the day her mother left.

The loss of “everything [and] everyone” forces Rebecca to start her search by remembering the day her mother left.

While *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* follows her present search, Rebecca’s words and actions reveal a consciousness slipping seamlessly through time, reliving and attempting to explain, presumably for the first time, her mother’s absence. Rebecca’s “*journey through Act I [represents] a growing up through memory. Being in memory, but present in time*” (6). Extremely vulnerable and angry in this state, Rebecca voices a child’s trauma that is reinforced by background props. For example, as Rebecca recalls the day her mother left, the scene “*gradually brings in close-ups of Hastings Street when it was the center of shopping. The Army and Navy, Woodward’s – late 1960s/70s*” (20), further signifying Rebecca’s embodied remembering as her mind leaves her present moment and relives the day her mother left. Highlighting Rebecca’s monologue, the slide, “**RUNNING SHOES**” expresses a child’s desire for normality while also predicting her mother’s decision to run away. Retelling the moments before she learns, as a four-year-old girl, that her mother has left, Rebecca recounts:

I started complaining about the big fact that I was supposed to get new running shoes today....It was supposed to have been a great day, and now we had to wait. I was getting pissed off, because I was getting tired of going to the Salvation Army for smelly clothes, and I felt like I was going to be normal like everyone else when Mom said we could go to the Army and Navy and get something new, something that smelled good, something that nobody had ever worn.” (20).

Born to a white logger father and a Native housewife mother in the 1950s, Rebecca would have known poverty and therefore, as a young child, longed for a sense of normality defined within a white capitalist world. Overcome with shock and disbelief at his wife’s departure, Rebecca’s

father succumbs to his daughter's complaints, allowing her to splurge "on everything [she] could see in the posters of food on the walls of the Woolworth's cafeteria on Hastings Street" (21).

When they return to a still, empty home, Rebecca's father speaks, "[S]he left us. I didn't know anything was wrong" (21). Even at four years old, the little girl, new runners in hand, suddenly understands that "nothing was going to be normal" (21). The longed-for running shoes, once epitomizing normality, now and forever symbolize loss, betrayal, and guilt.

Rebecca symbolizes the vast number of Aboriginal daughters (and sons) who have lost their mothers and the resulting trauma. Sarcasm permeates her monologue, and her voice is that of a thirty-year old woman h[a]unted by her mother's absence. As Jo-Anne Fiske writes:

Narratives grounded in psychological precepts are drawn from psychoanalytical concepts of childhood trauma in which the loss of a mother, whether through death, lifelong severance, or long-term alienation, is seen as a defining moment in identity formation. . . . Loss of mother is not an event from which daughters recover, but a lifelong wound that undermines self-esteem and identity. ("Spirited Subjects and Wounded Souls" 94)

Rebecca's childhood trauma and bitterness are evident in her cynical recognition that running shoes are only a "big fact" to the naïve child who does not know her world has collapsed. This sarcasm reveals the hurt and exhaustion the now-adult Rebecca feels as she confronts childhood trauma: the "big fact" that was ultimately her mother's leaving. Rebecca's consciousness lights upon her remembrances: she "*started* complaining," was "*supposed* to get new running shoes," and was "*supposed to have been* a great day" and yet her voice is that of an impatient child metaphorically stomping her foot, "and *now* we had to wait" (emphasis added).

Rebecca understands her father's guilt and complicity in dehumanizing her mother and this understanding seems to grow as Rebecca immerses herself in the Downtown Eastside. Her remembrances of her father are at times compassionate, even affectionate, yet she is drinking and alone when recounting these events. Rebecca's memories of dancing in Pigeon Square for "[a] row of old men...sitting like stumps...smoking, laughing, tilting their heads back in a chuckle or a slug of rum" (24) reveal her father's complicity in a society that fetishizes his four-year old daughter:

He's playing the harmonica. I'm pretending I am a dancer. We don't know who is pretending more. Me or him [. . .].The coppers fall . . . it is the most beautiful sound you can imagine, because you see I am very special, and talented, and the "poor bastards," as my father would say, are happy, clapping. I bow. (24)

Both father and daughter "pretend" she is a dancer, daydreaming their way out of their reality. In so doing, they paradoxically construct the four-year old girl both as commodity and as sexually manipulative of those "poor bastards" (24).

This scene highlights the instability and danger always already present for the objectified young girl. One of those "poor bastards . . . reaches his glove to surround [Rebecca's] braid" (25), effectively exposing a racist fetish as Rebecca's braid clearly symbolizes her maternal Aboriginal heritage. Likewise guilty is "the Character" who, while physically protecting and reassuring his child, still takes the four-year-old to dance.

My dad – the Character – takes his hand and says to the man in the clearest logger "I could kill you": "Enough." The man lets go of my braid. My father, in the clearest, "I love you," squishes my shoulder....(25)

Rebecca remembers her father's physical protection and reassurances, and yet these events demonstrate the dominant discourses perpetuating the loss of Aboriginal women's humanity. Likewise, while acknowledging the desperate choices people make when living in poverty conjures sympathy for Rebecca's father, her continued reference to him as "the Character" suggests her disassociation from him. Represented only through Rebecca's memories, her father remains flat throughout, attaining no physical presence upon the stage; his importance lies not in his personal history but in his role in perpetuating racist ideologies against Rebecca and her mother.

Seeing her mother "in half-looks everywhere" (36), Rebecca speaks of moving through life only partially present: "[e]verything not quite there, because you can't quite touch your own loss. Because it is so hollow/...so far away – when you scream, it echoes" (79). Having repressed this aching loss, Rebecca must now confront that which is her "last choice": the mother who gave birth to her and who is yet, through her abandonment, more other than mother. In order to find her mother, Rebecca must finally confront her father's ignorance of her mother's, and therefore the daughter's, experiences as an Aboriginal woman subsumed by white society. Rebecca remembers her father's role in the spiritual and emotional murder of her mother:

Something dead sits in her eyes, and rests itself on the tone of her voice, when my dad – the Character – asks irritated: "Jesus Rita. What's wrong now? ... She slowly smiles oddly, "Nothing." My dad – the Character – continues talking as if nothing has died. But I saw it flutter and die. (37)

Startled, the four-year-old Rebecca asks "Are you alright Mom? Mom?"; however, her mother's inability to respond reveals Rita Louise's spiritual detachment preceding her physical departure.

Rebecca's search for her mother exemplifies the absent mother/seeking daughter theme that echoes through *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, symbolizing the disrupted mother/daughter bond still haunting Aboriginal women today. Rebecca's question, "Where do women walk to when they have fallen?", and her angry need to know why her mother left drives her into the dark corners of the inner city. Herein the child's running shoes morph into detective gumshoes as Rebecca journeys to find her mother, evidenced in "**Slide: Keep on Walking – Hastings Street – Continued**" (57). As she walks, her encounters lead her tellingly deeper into the surreal world of shifting perceptions – the kaleidoscope of the alcoholic, impoverished, and ultimately disassociated gaze:

I walk through the elderly and the mentally and the people stir-fried on Chinese cooking wine. I walk, and when I get tired I stop for a pack of smokes at the corner store and look at the Aqua Velva people in front of me in line. They are not blue. I then look in the Aqua Velva bottles all lined up pretty on the shelf next to the Aspirin. The most normal of refreshments to sell. I look into the woman punching the figures into the till. She could be my mother except that she is Asian. I look for some kind clue that allows a hard-working woman who's worked hard all her life to ring up a bottle of Aqua Velva and sell it to a man who is not "The Aqua Velva Man" but "Man with huge red nose." She rings it in, all business, no trace of remorse. She stocks it for him – refreshment meeting cologne. Seller meeting buyer. It stinks, and I need a drink that isn't blue." (57)

The sharp edge of 'skid row' normality envelops Rebecca's search in despair. Sensing disassociation in the "hard-working woman" who could be her "mother except that she is Asian," Rebecca's movements and words are those of leaving and unfulfilled expectations. This hollow-

ness reverberates throughout *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, echoing Rebecca's search while simultaneously shining light into the abject spaces that Indigenous women walk to when fleeing the violence, whether physical or mental, of their homes, communities, and loved ones. Walking away from the patriarchal ideologies permeating their lives, the women end up in the only place that a colonizing society allows marginalized women to go. To seek freedom in areas such as Vancouver's Downtown Eastside seems contradictory; however, slipping namelessly into the streets seems to offer escape, the possibility of existing within the margins of the margins of the city away from the demanding gaze of the father.

Mothers who walk...

"Not able to soothe her, even when she was a child, because I wasn't there"

(Aunt Shadie, Clements 81).

Dominant colonizing discourses would mistakenly relegate Rita Louise/Aunt Shadie to the realm of the stereotypical Indian woman who has abandoned her family for a life of drugs, alcohol, and promiscuity. Such discourses do not ask: "Why did she leave her husband and child?"; rather, they simplify the context by pointing fingers at the selfish and therefore undeserving mother. Under Section 12(1)(b) of the 1951 *Indian Act*, which enfranchised Indigenous women "who married 'any other than an Indian or non-treaty Indian,'" as well as "Indian women who married non-treaty Indians, and 'half-breeds'" (Razack 56)¹⁹ Rita Louise's 1950s marriage to a white man would have rendered her a non-Indian. The 1951 *Indian Act*, as Emberley observes:

entrenched gender divisions by introducing section 12(1)(b), whereby Indian women who married non-Indian men were stripped of their status and any other

¹⁹ See also Lawrence and Fiske.

supplementary rights, band benefits to annuities granted to status Indian women.

(62)

Removing all legal rights to band membership, this section putatively assimilated Rita Louise, leaving her without a home to return to upon leaving her husband. Assuming Rita Louise understood the political implications of her marriage suggests that she made a life-long commitment to her husband out of love, which is suggested in her memories of how she “loved his strong arms and body, loved the way his body tanned to meet me in the summer, loved the way he used to love me” (82). Within this context, this thesis investigates her reasons for leaving the husband and child she loved in relation to her marginalization and murder in the urban downtown core.

Shame, shame, shame...

Mapping out timelines to which the play alludes reveals racist ideologies defining and degrading Aunt Shadie, and thereby offers reasons why she abandoned her family. Commonly accepted ideologies made assimilation virtually impossible, clearly contributing to Aunt Shadie’s leaving in 1971 and then to her murder in 1978:

SLIDE: Rita Louise James, 52, died November 10, 1978 with a 0.12 blood-alcohol reading. No coroner’s report issued. (9)

The fact that there was “no coroner’s report issued” expresses the invisibility of Aboriginal women in the ‘the white man’s system.’ Living in the Downtown Eastside, women such as Aunt Shadie, as her name implies, slip deeply into the shadows of urban skid row communities. Indeed, this alias reinforces the notion that she is “invisible” in the same city where her family still lives.

As exemplified in Aunt Shadie's death, newspaper headlines and other media representations reveal little of each woman's life, choosing instead to foreground their alcoholism and disposability. And yet, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women's* timeline hints at the generational trauma inflicted by legislated racism. Aunt Shadie's age, 52 in 1978, suggests she would likely have been one of the first-wave children to attend residential school. Her birth in 1926 allowed her to spend her early life on the trap-line (38) while also making her a primary target of residential school recruitment given that residential school attendance

expanded rapidly between 1910 and 1932, bolstered by amendments to the Indian Act making residential school attendance mandatory for at least ten months of the year for children older than six. . . . By 1930, almost 75 per cent of all Indian children in Canada between the ages of seven and fifteen attended residential school. (Fournier and Crey 61)

Aunt Shadie's poignant memory, "[w]hen my mother waved, it wasn't so much pretty as it was sad" (17), alludes to mournful separations between mother and daughter, quite likely for ten months out of the year. Equally telling, Aunt Shadie's spirit emerges nude "from a dark bed of leaves" (9); however, she affectionately chooses "*an outfit from when she was a housewife [and] drapes [it] over her body*" (10). This act expresses her grief for her lost family while also referencing residential school policy of training Indigenous girls for domestic service.²⁰

The abuses perpetrated against Aboriginal children in residential schools were nationally acknowledged by Prime Minister Harper's Official Apology of June 2008. Children were beaten, sexually abused, and poorly fed in these schools. Their parents, communities, and culture were persistently denigrated as they were indoctrinated into Christianity. Many died of illness; others

²⁰ See Acoose, Barman, Carter, Fiske, and Lawrence.

committed suicide or died in attempts to get home.²¹ Initiated in the late 1800s, Canadian residential school policy sought to annihilate Aboriginal culture by Christianizing and ‘civilizing’ children to reject their ‘heathen’ and ‘savage’ ways. With such policies in place, Indian agents, aided by police and other institutional supports, forcibly removed Aboriginal children from their homes. Residential schools physically stripped the children of cultural identity, shaving their heads and providing generic clothing, and then brainwashed them over long periods of time to accept Euro-Canadian ideologies of civility. Aboriginal children were brutally disciplined, even badly beaten, for speaking their languages and the schools routinely and completely separated siblings. Working as unpaid labor to keep the schools running, most children received little academic education beyond domesticity and physical labor.

Overwhelming numbers tell of physical and sexual abuse at very young ages, all were “damaged by witnessing the abuses of others” and “[f]ew escaped with their cultural identity intact” (Fournier and Crey 62).

Presuming her attendance in residential school, this thesis imagines that Rita Louise/Aunt Shadie felt, as Marilyn Dumont’s “Squaw Poems: *nisto*” poetically captures, the internalized drive to conform to Euro-Canadian ideologies of ‘respectable’ woman:

I learned I should never be seen drunk in public, nor should I dress/provocatively,
 because these would be irrefutable signs. So / as a teenager I avoided red lipstick,
 never wore my skirts too / short or too tight, never chose shoes that looked the
 least / ‘hooker like,” I never moved in ways that might be interpreted as / loose.
 Instead, I became what Jean Rhys phrased ‘aggressively / respectable.’ I’d be so
 god-damned respectable that while people / would feel slovenly in my presence.
 (18)

²¹ See Milloy; Fournier and Crey.

To become “an aggressively respectable” woman meant assimilation into “the bourgeois colonial family with the White Father at its head” (Emberley 54); thus, Rita Louise’s marriage to a white man in the 1940s or 1950s,²² temporarily completed the assimilation initiated in residential school; however, this transformation inevitably leaves her isolated and vulnerable to deep depressions.

Gail Guthrie Valaskakis draws upon Rayna Green’s “Pocahontas Perplex” to explain the Indian Princess/Squaw dichotomy framing mainstream perceptions of Indigenous women. Ultimately unable to assimilate, Aboriginal women remain defined according to dominant definitions as either noble Indian Princess who romantically saves the white man and then dies or disappears, or Indian Squaw who epitomizes the lazy, gossiping, dirty Indian biologically predisposed to promiscuity. Valaskakis observes that these myths are grounded in romanticized stories such as Pocahontas, “the paragon Indian princess of North American culture” (131),²³ blatantly apparent in Disney’s cartoon version:

In the legendary narrative of North America, fictive history constructs an imaginary Indian princess, a noble savage named Pocahontas, who saves the life of an Englishman for whom she feels a romantic attraction. Her actions bring peace between the Indians and the colonists of Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent colony in North America. She inevitably marries a non-Indian, becomes civilized and Christian, and assimilates with the settlers. (131)

²²The timeline of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women’s* remains confusing and inconsistent. At times, the play seems set at the time of Aunt Shadie’s death in 1978 (born in 1926, gave birth to Rebecca at age 22 in 1948, left her family at age 26 in 1952, murdered at age 52 in 1978); however, a backdrop of Vancouver in the late 1960/70s backgrounds Rebecca’s memory of her mother leaving (Rebecca is 4, which would make her 30 in the 1990s). Similarly, Rebecca, 30, says her mother left 20 years ago; however, she was 4 when her mother left, which means would 26 years have passed (this works with the 1978 setting). Adding to this confusion, Clements includes newspaper obituaries from 1980 to 1988 while stage directions describe “[s]cenes in Rebecca’s apartment are *present* and in Kitsilano” (6; emphasis added), suggesting the year the play was first presented in 2000.

²³ See also Brownlie, Lawrence, and Emberley.

It is interesting to note that when the 18-year old Pocahontas, whose real name was Matoaka, married John Rolfe in 1614, she became known as Rebecca (Valaskakis 131-132). It is not clear whether Clements named her character after the real Pocahontas; however, this naming articulates the disconnection between Rebecca, symbolically the assimilated Indian Princess, and her mother, defined within her husband's world as the promiscuous squaw who cannot mother.

The Unnatural and Accidental Women explores the reality that while women like Aunt Shadie attempted to assimilate through Euro-Canadian domesticity, motherhood was not an attainable role. Attempts to assimilate left many Aboriginal women unable or ashamed to consult their 'Indian' families or traditional teachings and, as Aunt Shadie's experiences with her white husband exemplify, Aboriginal women are denied access to western definitions of the "ideal mother," as their 'shadie' heritage affects their day-to-day lives. As Emberley states:

Defined against the bourgeois ideal of the heterosexual white female body of leisure, romance, and femininity, the Aboriginal Mother emerged as a key figure of biopolitical and rule. She stood in direct conflict to the European patriarchal organization of power. (46)

Similarly, in "Aboriginal Women on the Streets of Victoria" Jean Barman further provides an example of the 'ideal' mother as defined within the Christian virgin/whore dichotomy:

As succinctly summed up by George Stocking, for Victorian England, "if the ideal wife and mother was 'so pure-hearted as to be utterly ignorant of and averse to any sensual indulgence,' the alternate cultural image of the 'fallen woman' conveys a hint of an underlying occupation with the threat of uncontrolled female sexuality." (208)

Under an insistent Victorian model, “firmly rooted, of course, in nineteenth-century assumptions about women, domesticity, and individualism” (Davin qtd. in Emberley 50), Aboriginal women’s sexual autonomy, apparent in many nations, was considered “uncontrolled female sexuality.” Thus, the image of Indian woman as squaw/prostitute eventually came to dominate Euro-centric expectations.

Exemplifying the destructive effects of racism, even in those who do not realize they have succumbed, Rita Louise’s husband’s increasing lack of affection causes her emotional deterioration:

men can be cruel with the twist of their face. I could feel myself disappearing, becoming invisible in his eyes; and when I looked in the mirror, what I held good like a stone deep inside was gone. I could no longer see myself. In life, you see yourself in how the people you love see you, and I began to hate seeing myself through his eyes. I began to hate my reflection. (82)

Her husband was not “cruel” but started to look at her “the way white people” do, “up and down without seeing you” (82). She is not as angry as one might expect, rather, this passage shows both her love and her hurt: “In life, you see yourself in how the people you love see you.” Judging herself by the negative stereotypes reflected in her husband’s eyes, Rita Louise inevitably begins to “hate” herself and all of her culture, that which she had always “held good like a stone deep inside.”

Losing her sense of self-worth as woman, as wife, and finally as mother, Rita Louise fears the same judgment from her daughter, “I didn’t want her to see the way he began to look at me. I was afraid she would begin to see me the way he saw me. Extinct, like a ghost . . . being invisible can kill you” (82). Despite loving her husband and child, Rita Louise understands that

Rebecca will be indoctrinated into white culture and learn to see her Aboriginal heritage as shameful. Rather than burden her child with this shame, Rita Louise leaves Rebecca with her white father. Sadly, as she reflects upon her decision to leave, Aunt Shadie's words "being invisible can kill you," communicate the fate that awaits her as she slips into the shadows, her life ending in the horrors that become urban legends.

Urban Legends

The Unnatural and Accidental Women does not directly answer the question of how Aunt Shadie has come live on the downtown eastside; however, the known horrors inflicted upon women there begs a closer look into this question. As Bonita Lawrence points out, returning to community after separation from a white man was generally not an option:

[I]t is the personal and cultural losses of losing status that Indian women have most frequently spoken about. Some of the costs have included being unable to participate with family and relatives in the life of their former communities, being rejected by their communities, being culturally different and often socially rejected within white society, being unable to access cultural programs for their children, and finally not even being able to be buried with other family members on reserve. (Lawrence 55)

Alienated from family and friends and lacking access to treaty rights or reserve lands, Aboriginal women moved to urban centers in the hopes of finding better lives. Exposing the de-Indianizing tendencies inherent in place for "116 years, from 1869 until 1985," Lawrence labels such policies the "bleeding off" of Native women and their children" (55). This bleeding off has been historically challenged by Aboriginal women's association and in the courts of law; however,

even after Bill C-31²⁴ was enacted in 1985, reinstating disenfranchised Aboriginal women, many bands refuse(d) to accept Bill C-31 women, specifically to protect the pittance of governmental money provided for members' education, housing, and other 'rights' promised in the treaties.

Asking the question "Where do women walk to when they have fallen?" (46), Rebecca sheds some light on the limited options available to Aboriginal women within colonialist patriarchy:

They leave their bastardly husbands, get a job and free themselves from suffocating domesticity [sic]. 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 changed. If they can stand this, they stay, if not, one day they keep walking. (46)

Rebecca directly addresses the 'white' or colonialist audience in her accusatory monologue as the play demands a closer inspection of societal complicity in the complete and often fatal marginalization of Aboriginal women. Here it seems reasonable to include the stories of both Valerie and Verna, two other murdered mothers whose characters reveal the places to which women "keep walking" while expressing the terrible longing that haunts them to their deaths. While Valerie and Verna may have attended residential school, their ages, 33 and 38 in 1986, combined with the fact that their stories are closely interwoven with that of "The Woman" suggest they might both have been victims of the "sixties scoop."²⁵ As a government legislated Aboriginal child-removal system, the "sixties scoop" simply transformed assimilative policies

²⁴ "Bill C-31 removed the gender discrimination of the Indian Act and reinstated many Indian women who had been previously disbarred from band membership. This came about, in part because such discrimination contravened the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, passed in 1982, legislating against discrimination the discrimination of women. But the move to reinstate dispossessed Indian women was largely the result of a sustained struggle on the part of individual indigenous women and First Nations women's organizations since the 1970s." (Emberley 63)

²⁵ See Lawrence.

from one of overt abduction to the systematic removal of Aboriginal children from parents who were also first- and second- generation residential school attendees struggling with the trauma of split communities and disconnected families.

The Unnatural and Accidental Women's character "The Woman" embodies the disruptive consequences of the sixties scoop; her story is told as a bedtime story of a deer that has been adopted and then abandoned by her human family:

"Once upon a time, a very long time ago, there was a deer who lost its mother, because someone shot its mother. Something like the story of Bambi, except that the little fawn was adopted by a human family that loved it. And then someone said that the fawn that grew to a deer should be with its own kind, so the father of the human family, who lived on the mainland, took a ferry and dropped the deer on an island miles away and hoped it would be happier." (31-32)

The fairy-tale quality of this passage echoes mainstream society's belief that abuses to Indigenous peoples happened – "a very long time ago" – somewhere beyond Canada's beginnings and therefore beyond any individual or collective responsibility. The unexplained killing of "its mother," whether physically, culturally, and/or emotionally, leaves the deer vulnerable and she is, for whatever reason, placed within a white home. Conflated with the stereotype of Aboriginal women as natural, the deer is instead referred to as "it," therefore expressing the lack of both humanity and autonomous sexuality.

Alienated from her cultural community and white society, this deer drifts into the skid row community where she is brutally raped and murdered. The story, initially told as a mournful tragedy, is told again with an underlying narrative of incestuous proportions. Unlike the first

story, told by a “male-fatherly voice” (31), this second story is the voice of the Barber narrating “*faster, more emotional*” (52) as rape and murder occur:

Someone had told her a story, a very long long time ago, about a deer who lost its mother because someone shot its mother. Something like the story of Bambi, except that the little fawn was adopted by a white family that loved it, and then someone said that the fawn that grew to be an Indian girl should be with its own kind, so the father of the white family, who lived on the mainland, took a ferry and dropped the Indian girl on an island miles away, and hoped she would be happier.
(52)

In this version, the fawn suddenly becomes an “Indian girl” who is still less than human, not belonging in white communities and thus “dropped off” with her “own kind.” Narrated a second time during the rape scene, the story sounds more like a detached memory, told impersonally “a very very long time ago.”

Luring “the woman” to her death, the unseen murderer constructs her as prey and, by extension, himself as hunter:

SFX: “You have the most beautiful brown skin.” (she steps)

The Woman: Thank you. *(she stumbles)*

SFX: “You don’t have to be scared. I would never let anyone hurt you.”

. . . She looks down at her legs as if something is wrong with them. The silhouette of a deer’s legs and hooves look back from the floor. She begins to cry, confused..

. . He lifts her chin and dries her tears. (42)

Patronizingly fatherly, the murderer interprets the dominant/superior, civilized/primitive ideology to justify, even arouse, rape and murder; thus, he articulates patriarchal promises and

kills without remorse.²⁶ A glaring absence of mother, adoptive, birth or otherwise, echoes in the “fatherly male” voice-over that narrates the tale (32). Subjugated by white patriarchal authority, the maternal remains disposable, “shot” in this story, in order for patriarchal corruption to continue unfettered and without question.

While exposing the horrific practices destroying marginalized Aboriginal women’s lives, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* challenges notions that absent/ sex-worker and/or addicted mothers do not long for their children. Verna’s scenes provide a glimpse into a mother’s desire to be loved by her child, even when that mother is unreliable, alcoholic, and predominantly absent. Attempting recovery from alcoholism, “one fuckin’ day at a time” (46), Verna reaches out to her ex-partner to let her see their son, “Yeah. I am serious. I got a gift for him . . . for his birthday. If you come and pick me up . . . maybe we could take the kid for Chinese food and I will give him his present then” (47). Verna reveals the desire for her son to love her. Speaking to the toy plane she has bought as a present, she says, “My son will like you. Almost spent my whole skinny cheque. I hope he likes you. I hope he likes me. I hope he’s not mad. My son has a temper like his mother” (54). Playing upon Verna’s guilt and fear, the murderer triggers her alcoholism through her anxiety: “SFX: *A slight whispering. A male voice that grows louder under and . . . /*”*Can I get you a drink?*” (55). He lures Verna away from her son and to her death:

Slide: Verna Deborah Gregory, 38. Died September 25, 1986 with a 0.63 blood reading. Gregory’s death was ruled ‘unnatural and accidental as a result of acute alcohol poisoning.’ (62)

²⁶ The Barber later states, “I am a good and decent man. / I am a good and good-living man” (112) while *The Vancouver Sun*’s Jim Beatty quotes Jordan, “[t]hey were on their last legs. . . . ‘I didn’t give a damn who I was [drinking] with. I mean, we’re all dying sooner or later, whether it’s in this bar, across the street or wherever” (Hawthorne “The ‘Boozing Barber”).

Similarly distorted in its use of animated objects with their own will, Valerie's story plays out her final hours in a fatalistic yet morbidly humorous dialogue with her murderer. An animated "*old DRESSER with an ugly personality*" (26), this version of the murderer articulates colonization's infected patriarchal consciousness. Valerie and the dresser banter sexual innuendos back and forth, "why don't you just shut up? / why don't you make me? / I made you already. / I made *you* already" (47), creating a surreal and humorous atmosphere. Calling Valerie a "CHUG," a derogatory name for Aboriginal people that implies laziness, alcoholism, and inbreeding, the dresser asserts an assumed patriarchal authority, and his insults move quickly from amusingly rude to sexist and racist remarks that blatantly express the Pocahontas/squaw dichotomy:

Valerie: I had two sons you know . . . and I still have a great set of tits.

The Dresser: Yah, you're a real Hollywood dairy cow.

Valerie: What did you say?

The Dresser: I said you're a real Pocahontas. (30 - 31)

Referring to Valerie as Pocahontas, the Barber's words exemplify the objectification and fetishization of the Indian Princess, who, though resembling the virgin, is nonetheless sexualized as virgin territory for patriarchal conquest. Uncomfortably familiar with this talk, Valerie sarcastically engages in the bantering and their interaction quickly becomes sexual, presumably as a cash transaction.

However, as the "*manipulative embodiment of [the women's] human needs*" (5), the dresser intuitively and plays upon Valerie's vulnerabilities and need for her children. A composite of a (murderous) lover/client and Valerie's abandoned children, the dresser conjures the voices of

Valerie's two sons Evan (8) "*wise and angry*" and Tommy (5) "*naïve and sweet*" (4). Each boy's voice reaches painfully out as the dresser opens each of his two drawers:

TOMMY: When are you coming home?

EVAN: Probably never.

VALERIE: Soon . . . real soon.

EVAN: Soon . . . liar. (49)

Manipulating Valerie's guilt and fear, the dresser silences the children's voices, bringing Valerie to her knees as she begs for her children. Rendering her physically and emotionally vulnerable, the dresser physically assaults her, "*punching her till she lays on the floor semi-conscious*" (51). Drawn in once again by the voice of Tommy asking "Mommy?", Valerie crawls to the dresser, towards her child, only to have her head smashed in. Valerie's final grasping for her son expresses her maternal longing as she reaches for her child in her moment of death.

Aunt Shadie most strongly articulates this motherly longing in her conversations with Rose and in so doing poetically expresses the impact of colonial violence. Silently listening for her child despite the years of absence, Aunt Shadie mourns, "I heard her voice through the wall. As if I've had my ear to her as she's grown up. Just listening, not touching. Not being able to soothe her, even when she was a child because I wasn't there" (81). Sharing a mother's despair from the depths of legislated segregation, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* re/presents Aunt Shadie's leaving less as an act of selfish abandonment and more of a profound act of love. In so doing, Clements returns responsibility to the racist colonial regime that preys upon, disrupts, devastates and destroys Aboriginal women. Overwriting *HIS/story*, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* creates space for Aboriginal women to release the shame imposed by

colonization. Prioritizing the word of the mother, the play makes room for (re)birth through a maternalist decolonization.

Chapter Three: Unfallen Mother

The word of the mother infuses *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* as Clements calls attention to an idealizing maternalism that is grounded in interconnection, kinship, and land-based spirituality. Act I opens at the moment Aunt Shadie's spirit leaves her murdered body and, as an Indigenous maternal metaphor, her ancestral energy resonates throughout the play. Arising nude, yet "unfallen," "from a dark bed of leaves," Aunt Shadie radiates images of earth and of earth mother (9) and her haunting call for her daughter is a mother's call for recovery and rediscovery. The stage directions have her rise "*unfallen*," at once undoing the violence of her death; in her "gasping," she breathes her new spiritual breath. Departing from the biblical Eve's apparent "fall from grace," Aunt Shadie counteracts Christian definitions of women within the virgin/whore dichotomy while simultaneously undoing the Pocahontas/Squaw dichotomy.

In this first scene, Aunt Shadie is intimately connected to the logger and to the falling tree; the LOGGER and his tree figuratively represent her violent murder at the hands of Gilbert Paul Jordan while also representing Aunt Shadie's connection to the living landscape. The LOGGER's shout "TIM-BER" as he falls his tree is echoed by Aunt Shadie's cry for her daughter: "Re-becca," instantly thrusting the audience into the empty arms of the murdered mother at the moment her spirit leaves her body. Pulsating within this aching call is the psychic umbilical cord connecting this mother and child; thus, the maternal invokes Aboriginal epistemologies of earth, kinship, and interconnection as a means to speak of and repair colonial ruptures. Refusing linearity, time undulates seamlessly between past and present, life and death, nature and industry, spirit and body.

Grounded in Aboriginal epistemologies of spiritual b/earth, Aunt Shadie transcends the violence of her death to inhabit a central role of spiritual mother to the murdered women. Many

Aboriginal philosophies honour those who embody Mother Earth's powers of creation and nurturing. As Leroy Little Bear states:

Tribal territory is important because the Earth is our Mother (and this is not a metaphor: it is real). . . . The Earth is where the continuous and/or repetitive process of creation occurs. It is on the Earth and from the Earth that cycles, phases, patterns – in other words, the constant motion or flux – can be observed.

Creation is continuity. (78)

For contemporary First Nations engaged in treaty negotiations, connections to Mother Earth are, as Little Bear explains, reclamations of specific tribal territories. However, colonization forcibly relocated and reconfigured “tens of thousands of Native peoples while simultaneously undermining indigenous conceptions of peoplehood” (Heath Justice 160); thus, direct connection to a physical land-base can no longer be the primary definition of Aboriginal identity. Indeed, it is “urban traditionalism” that acts “as a glue that maintains a cohesive sense of Aboriginal identity who at every turn face hegemonic images of Indianness that damage or negate their own sense of identity” (Lawrence 169-170). Thus, many urban Aboriginal people develop a sense of identity through kinship connections based on Aboriginal heritage and rituals rather than specific territories.

Exemplifying such kinship connections, Aunt Shadie's title “Aunt” indicates that she is a respected older woman amongst the Aboriginal urban population. Imbued with “*mother qualities of strength, humor, love and patience,*” (5), Aunt Shadie stands in direct contrast to dominant narratives defining her as ‘squaw.’ Undoing colonial disruptions to Aboriginal motherhood, Aunt Shadie embodies traditional teachings of women “as a smaller version of Mother Earth; we give life, we work, and we protect” (Elder Betty McKenna qtd. in Wright 235); thus, she

metaphorically reclaims mothering as a sacred job.²⁷ *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* does not offer much information on Aunt Shadie’s life after she leaves her husband and child and her death; her nurturing earthly presence and firm guidance combined with her title of Aunt suggest she inhabited the role of “Urban Clan Mother.” In her study of urban Indians in the San Francisco Bay area, Susan Lobo describes “Urban Clan Mothers” as older, predominantly Aboriginal, women who provide a sense of stability to their street ‘families,’ usually in the form of a household, in an otherwise “highly mobile population” (511). These women often act as role models for younger men and women, act as teachers and counselors, or carry out spiritual responsibilities. . . . They are activating widely shared values regarding the role of elders and women in assuring the well being of the community overall through the sharing and circulation of resources and knowledge” (Lobos 519).²⁸ In life, Aunt Shadie mothers the transient women—the population on which Pickton and Jordan preyed. In death she brings the murdered women together as a spiritual force that restores justice; Aunt Shadie prepares to eliminate the Barber as a metaphor for cleansing and maternal decolonization.

Propelling this process forward, Aunt Shadie’s call to her daughter is answered by Rebecca’s search and together, mother and child expose colonialist policies and practices that profoundly disrupted not only their lives but the lives of the men perpetuating sexist hierarchies. Narrating “*across time*,” the women tell the history of “skid row” while the lone logger, first with handsaw and then with chainsaw, enacts their words as the backdrop shifts from forest to the Downtown Eastside: “*One by one, the trees have been carved into a row of hotels.*” Referring to a time when loggers believed that “cutting down a tree was an honest job” and to an economy

²⁷ “These teachings are meant to be shared as well as to encourage dialogue about sexuality and womanhood. It is also important to note that these teachings cannot be described as generalized experience for all Aboriginal peoples; these are told from stories by an Anishnabe Elder who was raised with the experience and the teachings of the Moon Lodge” (Quoted in the Conclusion by Mary Hampton et al. 241)

²⁸ See also Valaskakis 143

based on the women trace the loss of logger's limbs and bodies that were the reality of the "honest trade between a logger and his trees" (13). Heeding her mother's call for recovery, Rebecca exposes the consequences of colonization:

Everything here has been falling – a hundred years of trees have fallen from the sky's grace. They laid on their backs trying to catch their breath as the loggers connected them to anything that could move, and moved them, creating a long muddy path where the ends of trees scraped the ground, whispering their last connection to the earth. This whispering left a skid. A skid mark. A row. Skid Row. (11)

Rebecca narrates the consequences of colonization in clearing the land, severing the trees from their roots, and leaving behind "Skid Row," a drug-addiction-riddled neighborhood of old broken men and an economy of sexual and alcoholic escape. Like her mother, Rebecca's first words counteract Eve's "fall from grace" while begging the question, is it not colonialism itself that has "fallen from the sky's grace" with its excessive greed for superiority and obsessive death drive?

Driven by patriarchal perceptions of power and progress, colonialism/capitalism and industry has practiced over "a hundred years" of thoughtless consumption of the land for profit. Dismissing, even outlawing, Aboriginal peoples' traditional practice of seeking "spirituality through intimate communion with ecological biodiversity" (*American Indian Religious Freedom Act* qtd. in Battiste and Henderson 100), Euro-Canadian laws viewed the land, the trees, and any 'other,' as tools in the industrial machine – worthy only when productive. An excerpt from Joy Harjo's poem, "A Map to the Next World" articulates the 'sins' of the colonial/capitalist father:

In the legend are instructions on the language of the land, how it was we forgot to acknowledge the gift, as if we were not in it or of it.

Take note of the proliferation of supermarkets and malls, the altars of money.

They best describe our *detour from grace*. (8-11, 231; emphasis added)

As Aunt Shadie and Rebecca emphasize, forgetting “to acknowledge the gift” (Harjo) of Mother Earth “as if we are not in it or of it,” inevitably leads to the falling of the men, “first, just pieces” (11) and then whole bodies. Negating the loggers’ beliefs that they “fed their families for the Grace of God” (11), their livelihoods ran out with the breaking of their bodies, suggesting that ‘god’ had in fact turned against those who would mindlessly take. Unable to adequately support their families or assert patriarchal authority as breadwinners, many of these broken loggers turn(ed) to alcoholism and “sit like stumps, and drink, and think. And think the world has gone to shit” (13). Angry and helpless within a hierarchal society, many of these men turned on their women kin, particularly if those women were Aboriginal.

Embedded within this story is that of Aunt Shadie/Rita Louise’s former husband, Rebecca’s father, “the Character,” who “didn’t know anything was wrong” (21). “[S]till full limbed but hard of hearing when he died. Still saying “‘Eh?’ after every sentence” (20), Rebecca’s father lost his hearing because of his work with chainsaws, and was devastatingly altered by his position as a white male logger in a colonialist/capitalist society. Being born white and male immediately placed him in a position of relative power. However, as a broken laborer, his power remained limited to authority over those lower than him in the white male hierarchy that believed, according to “pseudo-scientific ideas associated with Darwinism . . . [and] demonstrated by the triumph of colonialism and technological advances, that mankind had evolved into a hierarch[y] with Whites on top and Aboriginal people at the bottom” (Barman 280). Socialized within this context, “the Character” remains deaf to his wife’s pain. Thus, when he asks “Jesus, Rita, what’s wrong now?” his question contains blame and, unable to ‘hear’ past

colonial constructions of his Aboriginal wife, the Character never understands that his racism has caused his wife to leave (37).

However, both Aunt Shadie and Rebecca reject colonialist philosophies as their words honor the living landscape. Modeling the “core belief of Indigenous spirituality [. . .] that everything is alive” (Battiste and Henderson 100), Aunt Shadie and Rebecca apply a living salve to Aboriginal women and the men who have been corrupted by colonial promises. The two women speak of the trees as living beings, therefore repairing the disconnection between humans and mother earth:

Rebecca: ... You never knew what might be fallen. A tree. A man. Or, a tree on its way down deciding to lay on its faller like a thick and humorous lover, saying,

Aunt Shadie: “Honey, I love you – we are both in this together. This is love till death do us part – just try and crawl out from under me.” (11)

Finishing (and beginning) one another’s sentences, Rebecca’s and Aunt Shadie’s intertwined voices undo colonial ruptures by refusing to accept binary oppositions and ideologies of individuality. Rooted in cultural philosophies of Mother Earth and interconnection, mother and daughter temporarily separate after their opening narrative in order to begin their spiritual quests: Rebecca in the streets of Vancouver’s Skid Row and Aunt Shadie from “*Happy hunting ground and/or heaven*” (5), nonetheless, however, Aunt Shadie remains present, her face appearing in windows and background images,²⁹ through Rebecca’s journey.

Having discussed Rebecca’s search for her mother at length, it becomes necessary to investigate Aunt Shadie’s spiritual transition as she prepares for the maternal decolonization process initiated in her opening call to Rebecca. Still naked and walking the liminal space between the physical and spiritual realms, Aunt Shadie begins her healing journey:

²⁹ See for example pages 46, 53, and 57.

Lights up on the same hotel room, as AUNT SHADIE takes two old suitcases out from under her bed. She lies them on the bed and opens them slowly, hesitantly. Cree words spill out everywhere. She opens and closes the sound and begins to laugh. Affectionately, she snaps them shut, picks them up and walks toward the door and up. The suitcases get heavier and heavier as she rises.

(14)

Conscious as spirit, Aunt Shadie's first action is to take her 'mother tongue,' literally packed away, presumably since residential school, from its hiding place. Despite "slowly, hesitantly" opening the suitcases, her Cree words eagerly "spill out everywhere," revealing how important the language is to a collective decolonization consciousness.

Marie Battiste and James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson's *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: A Global Challenge* eloquently articulates the significance of Indigenous languages in decolonization. According to Battiste and Henderson:

Since languages house the lessons and knowledge that constitute the cognitive-spiritual powers of groups of people in specific places, Indigenous peoples view their languages as forms of spiritual identity. Indigenous languages are thus sacred to Indigenous peoples. (48-49)

Taking up her language, Aunt Shadie "slowly, hesitantly," yet "affectionately" returns to her first teachings, the "cognitive-spiritual powers" of her people inherent in her original language.

Moving forward in her ascent, Aunt Shadie likewise begins community building as a means to gather strength and healing. Somewhat unexpectedly, Aunt Shadie's first connection is Rose, a 52-year-old murdered English woman and switchboard operator/hotel receptionist that

registers ‘guests’ arriving in the spiritual realm. Their initial conversation begins tensely, expressing the disconnected expectations and miscommunications of racism:

Aunt Shadie: I’m looking for a place to leave my baggage for a while.

Rose: I’m sorry, I can’t do that.

Aunt Shadie: Why, because I’m In . . .

Rose: . . . naked. Yes, that’s it. You’ll have to register first. I can’t be taking just anybody’s baggage now, can I? Can you write your name?

Aunt Shadie: Listen, I’m naked, not stupid.

Rose: Oh. Well. I’m just trying to help you people out. (14-15)

Despite their common age and gender, Rose cannot understand Aunt Shadie’s experiences of patriarchal oppression, and their exchange exemplifies the internalized self/other dichotomy. Aunt Shadie projects sarcastic defensiveness while Rose unconsciously patronizes Aunt Shadie as she tries to “*help you* people out” (emphasis added). Their relationship begins to shift, however, as soon as Aunt Shadie sees Rose’s face, “*a black eye and bruises*” (15), and realizes that they have both suffered the same fate. As their relationship deepens, Rose, unlike the Character who cannot hear his complicity in colonialism, provides a counterpoint for Aunt Shadie to articulate loss and longing. Ultimately expressing kinship and connection, Aunt Shadie and Rose transcend their differences as both become nurturing Elders to the murdered women. *That which she held good. . .*

Symbolically representing the word of the mother, Aunt Shadie calls to her daughter calls for healing of Aboriginal peoples and the landscape so badly damaged by colonialist avarice. As an “Urban Clan Mother,” Aunt Shadie recalls the teachings of her early life, and therefore returns to the Aboriginal practice of passing knowledge from one generation to the next. Having called

her daughter, reclaimed her language, and initiated community building, Aunt Shadie now puts her “*trapper clothes over her young housewife clothes*” (37), and gathers strength through remembered connections to Mother Earth. Aunt Shadie tells Rose:

I used to be a real good trapper when I was young. You wouldn't believe it now that I'm such a city girl, but before my legs and body were young and muscular, I could go forever. Walking those traplines with snowshoes. The sun coming down sprinkling everything with crystals, some floating down, and dusting the white comforter with magic. I would walk the trapline like a map, knowing every turn, every tree, every curve the land uses to confuse us. I felt like I was part of the magic, that wasn't confused. (38)

Profoundly connected to the landscape, at that time imprinted only by snowshoes and going on “forever,” the young Rita Louise learned from and experienced interdependence with the living land. Her interconnection with all beings is apparent in her compassion and gratitude to each animal she trapped “Poor thing. I hate to see an animal suffer. Meegwetch and thank you” (39). A strong sense of agency guides this memory – an independence and self-sufficiency stolen from Aboriginal peoples. Having transcended the physical bonds of colonial rule through death, Aunt Shadie's spirit repossesses this agency and she once again draws upon her land-based knowledge and trapper's instincts to lead the women through a ritualistic process of decolonization and reparation.

Understanding that Rebecca bears the generational shame “of cultural genocide, racism, and poverty, suffering the effects of hundreds of years of colonialist policies” (Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples qtd. in Ignace), Aunt Shadie prepares Rebecca to murder the Barber, quite literally reclaiming power by eliminating this white man and the harm

he inflicts upon Aboriginal women. However, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* makes clear that, “white is a blindness – it has nothing to do with the colour of your skin” (82); thus, murdering the Barber acts as an extended metaphor for eliminating whiteness as an attitude, an elimination necessary to heal colonial destruction all over the world.

Indeed, the play does not promote reverse racism or man-hating; rather, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* returns to traditional notions of holism and balance as a call to healing. Equating “whiteness” to a positive, Clements clarifies that symbolic markers are constructs that can, in fact, be reconstructed. Within this context, Aunt Shadie’s poetic memories of snow “dusting the *white comforter* with magic” (emphasis added) produce positive themes of whiteness challenging patriarchal ideologies. Julie Cruikshank’s “Claiming Legitimacy: Prophecy Narratives from Northern Aboriginal Women” aids this maternalist discussion of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*. Arguing for legitimacy of prophecy narratives in both academic and broader social contexts, Cruikshank unpacks “common scaffolding” (151) amongst many prophecy narratives, including the ways in which “shared metaphors are mutually understood and reproduced through oral tradition. (Ridington qtd. in Cruikshank 152) One of these metaphors, as Cruikshank states, is the

recurring metaphor [that] presents the world as incorporating two parallel realities – one, the dimension which underlies the secular, material, temporal world of everyday life; the other, a domain which could more aptly be called superhuman and timeless. . . . One of the usual characteristics of this world, for example is that everything, including humans and animals, is white. (152-153)

Categorizing these “white” prophecy narratives predominantly to foretelling the “eventual coming of the white people” (154), Cruikshank’s analysis nonetheless reveals relevant

connections to and “shared metaphors” with this reading of the play. Cruikshank’s third type of narrative where the spiritual world or “heaven often assumes the same dimensions as the ‘winter world,’ being bright, or white and providing the protagonist [generally a shaman] with a new way of seeing” (156), enhances the spirit world in *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, which, in the end, mirrors the “magic” winter landscape of Aunt Shadie’s past. Reclaiming the concept of “white,” not as a negative but rather as part of the “magic [landscape] that [isn’t] confused” (38), *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* asserts balance. Read according to the Alaskan prophecy *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* calls for balance between red and white, thereby beginning the movement to “a time when all the four sacred powers are going to be connected. They are the red-white-black-yellow” (Mercurieff 2).

Also illuminating this analysis of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* is Cruikshank’s discussion of “(white) swan power, conventionally a symbol of particularly powerful transformation” (Cruikshank 154). Immediately after sharing memories of her earlier life, Aunt Shadie engages in a discussion of the “white swan” metaphor, initiated by Rose: “*Rose takes out a pair of long, white gloves and puts them on.* / Rose: I like the swan metaphor” (39). The women’s conversation humorously flows through this metaphor, first as long white gloves and then into feelings of love:

Aunt Shadie: Have you ever hugged a swan so much you almost squished it?

Rose: No, I haven’t actually. What kind of animal lover do you think I am?

Aunt Shadie: I never hugged a swan. . . . I was just trying to get across to you that feeling of loving something so much you could squish it. I think everybody should have that feeling at least once.

Following closely after and echoing profoundly with Rebecca's "seeing-the white-bird look of hope" (36), this passage indirectly invokes "white swan power," to transform and reclaim Aboriginal agency through hope and love. Echoing the Alaskan prophecy, "a message of hope" born out of destruction, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* embarks on a journey of "great healing" (2) in order to re-establish balance and interconnection.

Metaphorically embracing "(white) swan power," Aunt Shadie creates a ritualistic and collective environment within which to transmit collective knowledge and responsibility to her daughter. Aunt Shadie's spirit stands in front of the barbershop mirror and calls to the murdered women's spirits, "*in song and [the women] respond, in song, in rounds of their original language,*" calling upon their 'mother' tongues as they gather their energies. Their voices seem to take up what Cheryl Suzack, quoting Sean Teuton, describes as "the demand for decolonization and social justice as a transformative 'callout' that reverberates through an intellectual tradition of historically engaged writing to politicize our colonial present" (176); thus, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* calls out through Aunt Shadie. Asserting kinship, Aunt Shadie calls to the other women: "Do I hear you sister like yesterday today" and the women call back in their 'original languages,' thereby privileging a feminine vision of connection and community (60).³⁰

Linking drinking to acts of survival in an uncompromising world of lost children, the women mourn alcohol's promises to wash away the 'sins of the father:' "[s]o the river says drink me feel better / Like the river must have said to you first." Drowning in disassociation, the women lament the "war of the great thirst" (65). The women's song "*floats in and out of each scene submerging under some, and taking over others. Each call and response is a current. It*

³⁰ See Heath Justice. See also "Stolen Sisters," which utilizes this kinship term for murdered and missing Aboriginal women.

grows in strength and intensity to the end of Act I where all their voices join force” (58) and together they mourn their now lifeless bodies:

Under the water – under the earth . . . / Eetam pehg /etam-as-keke
 My body’s floating where all the days are the same/Ne-eow/e-pa-pam-
 mau-ho/Tehk/eddie-tah-to-ke-sik/Kow/pe-ya-kwun-nohk
 Long and flowing like the river/E-ke-knock/aqua/e-pe-mow-/Ho-teak/tas-
 kooch/se-p-h
 My heart –my root/Weh-geese/ne dee
 My hair drifts behind me/Nes-ta-ga-yah/e-pim-mow/How-te-key.
 (58-65)³¹

Having each ‘fallen’ into the hands of a murderous man, the Barber only one amongst many, the women’s spirits conjure images of drowning, both literally and figuratively, in sorrowful rivers of alcoholism and of broken bodies lying “[u]nder the water – under the earth / . . . where all the days are the same” (63-64)

The song references the murdered women’s hair, at once calling attention to and undoing colonial attempts to eradicate Aboriginal culture. Repetitively recreating the Indian princess stereotype, the Barber braids his victim’s hair and then cuts their braid off as part of his murderous ritual that mirrors residential schools who “routinely shaved [children’s heads] because of lice infestations” (Milloy 284):

The Barber dressed in whites follows after [Patsy] with the scissors. The scissors make a chopping noise as he grabs her braid . . . The Barber emerges from the swirl with Patsy’s braid. He covers her body on the floor with his white cape. (53)

³¹ I do not have access to a translation of this song and so I am unsure if the words are all Cree or if the women are repeating those of Aunt Shadie in their “original” languages.

Thus becoming “the poor bastard” who once grabbed the four-year-old Rebecca’s braid, the Barber asserts white male superiority/authority by humiliating the women, stripping them of humanity and culture and finally “cutting” off their lives. The fact that the Barber wears his “whites” and covers the murdered woman with “his white cape” suggests that he has whitened her, erased Aboriginal identity and therefore enacted genocidal practices bent on eliminating “the Indian problem” in the first place.

A profound sadness infuses the women’s song, which speaks to their painful struggle in a society determined to eliminate them ending only in horrifyingly unnatural and intentional murder. And yet, a maternalist perspective finds a gentle rootedness to the women’s song with “water” and “earth” speaking of women’s cycles in relation to Mother Earth. Kim Anderson quotes Maria Campbell – “That river is a strong feminine image for me because, she is the veins for the earth” – and Sylvia Maracle – “whether it’s that single drop, or the largest body of water, it represents the female element.” Anderson states,

[t]he image of Mother Earth, Grandmother Moon and the waters speak of lifegiving cycles, and the teachings are as old as we are as peoples. The earth produces and nourishes and the moon regulates. In turn the waters of the earth are vital in that they bring on and sustain life. (183-184)

The women’s spirits, “long and flowing like the river,” move powerfully together, a beautiful image of timeless interconnections and spiritual rebirth. Their hair, drifting behind them, paradoxically resonates with traditions that cut their hair in mourning.³² Invoking healing through mourning, the song is Clements’ callout, not only to Rebecca but to the ancestors of all murdered and missing women to eliminate white blindness.

³² See Beverly Hungry Wolf for one example of this tradition.

Like a stone

“From nearly all traditions, account after account tells of stones giving guidance. . . .”

(Linda Hogan 117)

Clements turns to Aboriginal teachings that honor stones as the oldest beings that hold ancestral knowledge required to walk a good path on and with the earth. Discussing sacred places, Neal McLeod quotes Isadore Pelletier: “The stones, as you probably know, are listeners, they are grandfathers, they are older than, you know, just as old as Mother Earth” (20). In the play, Aunt Shadie speaks of her “redness” as her “stone,” which is, in this instance, cultural, physical, and emotional rootedness: “The stone though . . . loved the way he used to love me. I thought my silence complimented his voice, thought my redness, my stone, gave him weight.” Unable to freely access “the magic” that “wasn’t confused,” renders Rita Louise / Aunt Shadie unable to mother, “I have this child – light and dark, old and new. I place my stone in her and I leave” (82). Leaving Rebecca in this way, Aunt Shadie leaves “all that she held good” in order to protect her daughter.

Symbolically weighting her daughter with ancestral knowledge and with love, Aunt Shadie offers the possibility of emotional and spiritual healing. Freed through death, Aunt Shadie’s spirit nurtures that possibility, exemplifying the teachings of the Moon Lodge as she prepares her daughter to assert Aboriginal agency. Guiding her daughter to what seems a shocking act of revenge, Aunt Shadie understands the need to first eliminate the Barber in order to create the safety required for healing.

Assuming the role of clan mother and Elder, Aunt Shadie takes Violet, a murdered woman whose spirit temporarily regresses to her five-year-old self, to meet Rose with whom they prepare a feast – **“The First Supper, not to be confused with the Last Supper”** – for the

spirits after the murder (126). While the Elder women prepare to celebrate this first step of decolonization, the women's spirits join Rebecca, now overwhelmed and drunk with the darkness of the Downtown Eastside. Offering Rebecca as bait, the women's spirits paradoxically pave the path for healing as they prepare their woman warrior to avenge their murders. Setting the trap, Verna places Rebecca's wallet on a table in order to lure the Barber while Mavis pushes Rebecca into a white, off-duty police officer who will be her almost one night stand.

"She sleeps like a rock" (83)

Act II opens in Rebecca's apartment the morning after and it is here that the play shifts from the women's victimization to reclamation. Awakening at "4:08 am," Rebecca is both hung-over and dismayed to find Ron, the police officer, in her bed. While attempting to make Ron leave, Rebecca discovers that they did not have sex and that Ron is a nice man. Characterized as: "[a] cop – handsome, with a nice body and a good sense of humour[, a]lso plays *THE LOGGER*, and is *IT* until he is *RON*" (6), Ron represents men who, like the Logger and "the Character" have been socialized to work "an honest job," and believe dominant narratives of women. Alluding to the notion that women on the Downtown Eastside are promiscuous, Ron asks Rebecca, "Do you bring a lot of men home?" without realizing he is now a catalyst for Rebecca to articulate an awakened sense of agency,

What, to mother? No, RON. I don't bring a lot of men home. Actually, you are the first man I've thought to bring HOME in ten years. And really, what if I did?

What if I enjoyed sleeping with men so much I slept with men? What then RON .

. . would that make me a slut? (75)

Challenging Ron to think beyond colonialist definitions, Rebecca negates double-standards while reclaiming sexual autonomy and self-determination. Through Rebecca's anger, *The Unnatural*

and Accidental Women fiercely defies patriarchal [mis]conceptions by refusing to accept white blindness on any level.

Returning to Aboriginal ways of knowing as a way to heal this blindness, the women's spirits instill a dream in the now sleeping Rebecca in order to bring forth her mother's stone. Neal McLeod quotes Sara Whitecalf to articulate the significance of dreaming in Cree culture:

It is true that [dream helpers] used to look like human beings to the people, coming to tell them things, that is what is meant when one says, "she has a dream spirit," that it looks like a human being to them, coming to teach things, but in their sleep; and it is true that when they would try it, they would indeed be able to do that which they had been taught. (30)³³

Within an Aboriginal worldview, dreaming provides a connection between the living and the spirits, allowing ancestors to transmit wisdom and/or provide guidance for a journey. The child Violet swings above Rebecca's head, dropping pebbles upon her sleeping body as Rebecca dreams first of her loss, "I want to place my face in my mother's palm and say . . . and feel my lips on her lifeline and palm softness and whisper . . . I love you, you fucking bitch. I love you and where is everyone?" (80). However, as Aunt Shadie explains to Rose why she abandoned her family, Rebecca's dream softens as the stone, her redness, begins to take shape:

My heaviness has shifted – I'm all lopsided. Right now, I am deep down lying between friends, tumbling over each other, because we are round and hard and loving every minute of it, because it is so far down the only language we have to know has molded from the earth – its tears and blood, its laughter and love – gone solid. I hold it in my heart, it keeps me attached to the gravity of perfect knowing.
(83)

³³ See also Cruikshank, Shoemaker, and Valaskakis.

Reminiscent of the women spirits' mourning song, Rebecca's dream vision pulls her "deep down" – "under the water – under the earth" – and she awakens to connections and kinships. Here, Rebecca is the stone, "round and hard" and "molded from the earth" and she carries with her collective strength and understanding. While understandably "[l]opsided" in this rebalancing Rebecca remains connected to the "gravity of perfect knowing." As individuality gives way to collective consciousness and earth-based understanding, Valerie and Verna, the other mothers, speak of maternal love:

Valerie: A mother opens the heart of her child and places her rock inside the flesh. Inside, so no one – no man, no ugliness, will ever place its grubby hands on it.

Verna: A mother buries its knowledge inside the child. Kiss-ageeta-ooma. It drops inside the eternity of blood and earth. Kiss-ageeta-ooma. I love you, silly face.

(83)

The word of the mother reverberates with love and thus awakens the daughter's understanding and self-awareness. Rebecca's dreaming words, "It makes me hit the riverbed like a rock. Water shining all over me new, over me new, a new reflection of my true self, knowing I am heavy" (83) draw once again upon maternal energy as water cleanses Rebecca's confusion, leaving understanding and strength in this spiritual rebirth. Watched over by the women's spirits, Rebecca makes sense of the darkness and is finally able to forgive.

Forgiveness does not mean immediate peace; however, as Rebecca awakens to the still colonizing and dangerous realities around her. Here again Ron provides a vehicle for Rebecca to articulate her mother's absence and renewed self-determination. Awakening from her dream-state, Rebecca finds Ron bringing her a morning coffee. Unintentionally interrogating Rebecca,

Ron questions her reasons for “[t]hinking and drinking” at the Empress Hotel where “the people who live down there are mostly drunks and junkies and Ind. . . First Na. . .” (96). Mocking his attempts at “political correctness,” Rebecca fiercely challenges Ron’s question, “[W]hy do you think so many [Indians] end up down there?” (97). As Rebecca expresses, her journey has taught her that “so many people end up down there. Period.” She further clarifies, “It’s an accident. Something heavy falls on them. It might just be one Thing . . . one thing and then everything seems to tumble down and pretty soon there is no getting up (98),” effectively pointing out, what her mother already knows, human vulnerability and the weight of colonial practices.

Putting it out of its misery

Carrying this knowledge deep within her “like a stone,” Rebecca unknowingly moves toward the Barber’s murder weighted with the collective consciousness, which is both present anger and future hope. Unaware of the trap, the Barber phones Rebecca and they arrange to meet so he can return her wallet. When Rebecca arrives at the bar, the Barber persuades Rebecca to have a beer and then, acting as a compassionate man who is “always trying to help these women out” (118), he lures Rebecca back to his barbershop under the pretence that Aunt Shadie “left some things with me to hold for safekeeping [for] a daughter she hadn’t seen in awhile” (117). Once there, Rebecca discovers her mother’s braid:

She goes to pull out a drawer and then stops and looks at the red-and-white barber light. She stops for a long moment and breathes. She walks directly towards it, taking the bottom off the light. A handful of long black braids falls to the floor. She picks her mother’s braid up and buries her face in it and sobs. (121)

Infused with the spirits of the murdered women, Rebecca uses the Barber's own language and murderous rituals against him, saying "Slow down Gilbert. Slow down, we have lots of time.

Would you like a drink? Can I buy you a drink? Can I pour you a drink?" She continues:

I'd never do anything to hurt you. Do you want your bottle? Here, why don't I place it right here, so it can be close to you? Do you like that? It's right here so it can be close to you. Do you like that? *She grooves it into his crotch. He moans.*

Flipping the Barber's ideals of man hunter/Indian woman/prey, Rebecca becomes the hunter and the Barber her prey. Again mimicking the Barber, Rebecca places his white cape over his body, effectively erasing his identity as his body comes to signify the consequences of white blindness. The scene in the mirrors shifts to reveal the spirit world, "a forest . . . as it is being covered by billowing snow. A beautiful, crystallized snow scene" (124) as *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* further decolonizes whiteness, no longer representing blindness; rather, signifying spiritual renewal. Aunt Shadie joins her daughter.

Aunt Shadie and Rebecca narrate memories of the trapline as both embody the hunter and remember "magic that wasn't confused" (125). Together, with the "THE WOMEN/TRAPPERS" looking on, mother and daughter slit the murderer's throat, committing revenge while eliminating his threat. And yet, Aunt Shadie speaks of the Barber as she spoke of the animals she once trapped: "If it squirmed, I would put it out of its misery as fast as I could" (125). In this description, she once again expresses interconnection and kinship with all beings and the Barber's murder, like leaving her family, becomes a maternal act of love and of protection. Aunt Shadie and Rebecca free the Barber from his murderous chains while simultaneously reclaiming cultural identity and collective agency, which Rebecca symbolically reinforces as she returns the

murdered women's braids to the women's spirits, now THE TRAPPERS, and thereby returning them to their sense of self-determination.

Conclusion

Utilizing drama as an extension of oral storytelling traditions, Marie Clements returns voice to the ten, predominantly Aboriginal women murdered by Gilbert Paul Jordan. The play confronts media representations that glorified Jordan's gruesome crimes as most media representations barely mentioned the women, referring more to their Aboriginal heritage, their high alcohol levels, and their location on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Offering moments in each woman's thoughts and emotions just before she is murdered by Jordan, Clements honours these women as mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, and lovers. *The Unnatural and Accidental* personalizes the women's desires, memories, pain and despair, and in so doing, asks the audiences to witness the murdered and missing women's lives, and to thereby assume responsibility for passing on the lessons learned throughout. Aunt Shadie enacts and initiates these teachings, her call for her daughter a mother's call of rediscovery and recovery but most of all of love, longing and [re]connection. Leading the women in their spiritual transition, Aunt Shadie articulates the urgency with which 'white blindness' must be eliminated and healing processes initiated. Indeed, Aunt Shadie's journey to recover her daughter and Aboriginal agency metaphorically repairs the ruptures of colonialist policies and practices that disrupted the mother/child bond; thus, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* offers a maternalist counter-narrative to the process of decolonization.

See[k]ing Aboriginal Mothers

Reading *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* the first time, I was struck with images of magic and of the surreal world described by the whispering of the trees and billowing snows. I was deeply moved by the mother's longing for her child and her willingness to do anything to protect that child overshadowed the violence driving the play forward. Clements' use of

animated objects took attention away from the intensity of the human violence and I persisted in connecting colonial environmental destruction to patriarchal destruction of Aboriginal women. Here I could argue an idealized reconnection to Mother [Earth] as the healing salve. While these images continue to inform this thesis, Carl Bessai's 2006 film adaptation *Unnatural and Accidental* disrupted idealized my maternal visions with graphic depictions of violence, rape, and murder that literally obliterate textual images of the "magic." Deeply disturbed, I wondered if the male non-Aboriginal director was simply catering to mainstream's romance with mediated sex and violence.

I remembered that Clements wrote the screenplay however, and so the film demanded closer comparison, which inevitably revealed direct references to the violence in *The Unnatural and Accidental Women's* stage directions. Similarly, the film incorporated the images of the play's magic, thereby reinforcing the notion that drama/oral storytelling is meant to be seen rather than read. Despite acknowledging the similarities, the magic within the film remains minimal and I am yet unable to reconcile the violence acted out in the film with the healing and collective empowerment available in a maternalist reading of the play.

Tantoo and Me

"...before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed."

Lyle Longclaws in Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Ought Move to Kapuskasing* (6)

Tantoo Cardinal provided a blunt answer to my questioning and concerns on a November evening in 2009 where I was attending a First Nations Education Steering Committee conference in Vancouver, BC. I normally do not approach actors; however, seeing Tantoo there, the chance to speak to her seemed too important given that Tantoo plays the character of Aunt Shadie in Bessai's adaptation and therefore I felt she was central to my project. Running madly after her,

my little legs flailing to catch up with her elegant strides, I was mortified to find that I could not articulate my arguments or interest in the mother/daughter relationship. I finally stammered what I considered my profound research question whether the violence in the film was necessary. Tantoo responded, “That IS the point!”³⁴ I was horrified when she softened, took my hand in hers and graciously suggested I write my thesis so I knew what I was trying to say.

Wallowing in self-pity, I gradually realized that my drive to reclaim sacred motherhood overlooked current violence against Aboriginal women in favor of idealized political, cultural and spiritual connections rooted in philosophies of Mother Earth and sustainability. Clements’ poetic images of earth/mother do in fact invite a maternalism of whispering interconnections and spirit magic to heal the generational wounds of capitalism. However, upon closer analysis Clements’ stage directions also depict the despair of the Downtown Eastside; the terrifying rapes and horrific murders demanding societal responsibility to not only acknowledge and apologize for capitalist crimes but to recognize kinship and actively seek healing.

I remain concerned about mainstream audience’s ability to see past the film’s realistic images of alcoholic Aboriginal women and the graphic enactment of rape and murder. However, the film likewise asks me to acknowledge that Aboriginal stories, always already adaptations and interpretations, are meant to be witnessed as ceremonial performances. Within this context, I am grateful to Tantoo Cardinal for letting me know in no uncertain terms that the film purposely depicts the graphic violence in order to alert mainstream society to the reality facing contemporary. Within her firm words in mind, I argue that a maternalist feminism must, as mothers must do, multitask in this healing process, keeping one protective eye on this present moment in order to expose patriarchal violence still marginalizing and murdering Aboriginal women, while the other loving eye looks into the future in order to nurture a (idealized) world

³⁴ I paraphrase Tantoo Cardinal as I did not take notes or recordings.

where mothers are once again honoured as embodying Mother Earth's lessons of respect and reciprocity. Such a return to the maternal metaphor is not simply a return to an idealized past nor does it relegate all women to the domestic sphere. Rather, a (re)turn to a maternalist feminism offers another way reconstructing systems of governance and ways of being that are rooted in Aboriginal epistemologies of balance and kinship connections.

Meegwetch and thank you!

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