

As we have covered more than half of the play, this essay would help you in analysis of the deeper codes within the play and its underlying themes. This essay would help you in answering previous year questions of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*

Example Question:

Q1) *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* stages naming and witnessing as commemorative as well as recuperative acts. Comment

I have also attached a secondary reading in form of a Jstor essay, kindly read the essay and share your doubts regarding it through email or WhatsApp. If there is anything which you cannot comprehend within the notes and Jstor essays, kindly get in touch with me. I will be more than happy to help.

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Secondary readings: Jstor essay

I See You Sisters Like Yesterday Today

The Unnatural and Accidental Women

By

Marie Clements

Marie Clements' 2005 play *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* both dramatizes marginalized and murdered indigenous women reclaiming their voices and acts as a

mechanism through which living marginalized indigenous women can reclaim their voices, all against the power regimes of the contemporary settler colonial society. My essay elucidates the extent to which Clements' play speaks to the systemic violence to which Indigenous women are subject on a regular basis, not only in North America, but in all White settler societies, while also emphasizing Indigenous resistance to the problematic settler colonial logic of elimination that has resulted in the sociocultural diminishment of so many Indigenous cultures. The violent conquest that facilitated the settlement of White settler societies has been well documented not only in the American context, but in literature from Australia and New Zealand. So, too, is it widely recognized that Indigenous women living in White settler societies are overrepresented as victims of gendered violence, in both intra and intercultural contexts. Importantly, as well, the connection between socio-cultural displacement of Indigenous women during European colonization and contemporary violence against them has been emphasized by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars.ⁱ Feminist scholar Anne McClintock, for instance, suggests that colonial regimes share a common plight and process insofar as recurring patterns of domination of Indigenous groups are consistently present in of 'anticonquest' propagated by European bourgeois men, hoping to 'secure innocence' while simultaneously forcing European rule on conquered states (9). Similarly, Genocide Studies scholar Ward Churchill points to a discursive denial of genocide, connecting the American genocide of Indigenous peoples with like patterns in other genocidal projects, particularly the Nazi Holocaust, suggesting that there exists a genocide 'typology' (8), characterized by deliberate cultural destruction, persistent denial of historical fact, and the imposition of raced and gendered patriarchal hierarchy (85). As argued by these critics and others, the ethnocentrism at the heart of the White settler genocides was certainly innate to the ideological framework of European colonialism; it demanded the subjugation of women – especially Indigenous women – and, consequently, was inherent in imperial perceptions and portrayals of all Indigenous populations (McClintock 25-30; Churchill 85). This consistent relationship between genocide and the 'settler-colonial tendency' Patrick Wolfe has aptly termed 'the logic of elimination' (387). Métis playwright Marie Clements' work in general, and this piece particularly, reveal the manner in which such 'logic' can play-out for vulnerable, marginalized Indigenous people. Clements addresses—and artistically subverts—North America's 'reality of [colonial] ...

dislocation'ⁱⁱ by purposefully creating an ideologically driven piece that stages her vision of decolonized communities and reclaimed theatre spaces. This essay will demonstrate how Clements' play counters colonialist portrayals that misrepresent Indigenous women as promiscuous, hyper-sexual, and morally corrupt, portrayals that have served to 'perpetuate stereotypes'ⁱⁱⁱ and justify devaluation and violence – in particular, sexual violence.

Indeed, the capacity of literary and dramatic representations to influence social functioning has been duly acknowledged by scholars of literature and theatre.^{iv} As such, as I will show, Clements' play "title" reconfigures demeaning colonialist depictions in ways that are informative for contemporary readers and spectators, while also empowering for Indigenous and Métis women. Her dramatic works, when taken together, (re)present the destruction of bodies and land, implying that this destruction, part of a shared colonial legacy, has diminished the potential for harmonious intercultural syncretism and thus impeded the progress of decolonial movements. Her works often represent similarities and differences between genders, races, and political groups and environmental issues in a layered 'semiosis' of interrelated themes.^v Such work, I will suggest, is of particular significance to intercultural solidarity, facilitating dialogue across and between cultures and communities, and is therefore integral to Indigenous and Métis women's artistic and activist work—the envisioning and creation of a culture free of gendered violence. Here, I focus particularly on Clements' 2005 play, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, assessing the extent to which the playwright employs representations of female solidarity in resistance to masculinist violence and domination, encouraging audiences and readers to imagine a reality beyond such violence by staging a collective resistance in public, unceded space. I contend that the playwright's revisionist historical content works in combination with her portrayals of female solidarity and resistance to assist with reclamation for Indigenous women and to promote coalition building across difference, thereby furthering potential for positive social change. This analysis follows *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* in chronological order, elucidating the complex linkages between colonization, violence against Indigenous women, and contemporary Indigenous women's literary/dramatic production.

Inspired by Clements' background in journalism, the play is a provocative and, ultimately, empowering two-act revisitation of the real-life murders of at least ten women, committed in Vancouver's East Hastings Street district — otherwise known as 'Skid Row'^{vi} —between 1967 and 1985. All but one of the murder victims, mainly street-based sex-workers,^{vii} were Indigenous women of middle-age,^{viii} rendered vulnerable by social disregard. The killings, overlooked by authorities and sensationalized by media, were committed by the same man, using the same modus operandi. The women died of alcohol poisoning, after being forced to consume toxic amounts of alcohol. Despite a great deal of evidence against the killer, the women's deaths were dismissed as 'unnatural and accidental'^{ix} by coroners Mary Lou Glazier, Larry Campbell, and Glen McDonald,^x each of whom found 'no evidence of violence or suspicion of foul play',^{xi} language Clements' stage directions indicate be displayed on stage with slide projections. It took more than twenty years for Gilbert Paul Jordan, a local barber, represented in the press as the 'Demon Barber',^{xii} to be arrested in connection with the horrific femicides. Not until 1988 was Jordan charged with but one count of manslaughter.^{xiii} Clements resists the injustice of this verdict and the treatment of the indigenous women by creating a play where the women, as ghosts, tell their stories and are recognized as empowered, thus deserving of love and respect.

Clements began writing the play upon reading an article pertaining to the women's murders that was published after the arrest of the killer. Concerning her initial motivation, she states:

It came from the four-page spread I read in *The Vancouver Sun* in 1988. It was quite a detailed story of Gilbert Paul Jordan's career and of these events ... I guess what really put me over was that it was a huge spread on him and maybe half a page of all of his victims and very little of them as human beings—just basically their last traced days.^{xiv}

Released from prison in 1994, Jordan was again charged in June 2000: this time, the allegations included administering a 'noxious' substance (alcohol) and sexual assault.^{xv} When the judge stayed proceedings in the fall of 2000, the killer gave an 'extensive' interview, which appeared on the front page of the *Vancouver Sun*, the very evening *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* premiered at the Firehall Arts Centre. By the time the

play closed months later, Jordan had once again been arrested, caught in violation of his parole, drinking in a hotel room with a woman who was attempting to escape him.^{xvi}

Although the killer served no further substantial prison time and died a free man on 7 July 2006, at 73 years of age,^{xvii} Clements' play galvanized a local multicultural feminist community in the East-Strathcona district, which held sessions at the Firehall Arts Centre, the venue of the premiere, for inhabitants to speak out against such violence.

Significantly, the Firehall Arts Centre centers the area where the play's events occurred and, as Clements notes and the forthcoming analysis elucidates, the neighbourhood is a character in the play:

... the land and the evolution of this specific area is the environment of the play—from the trees to the hotels and to the old timers who felled those trees. In that way, it goes to this place and time where these women are now standing where the trees used to stand.^{xviii}

Through the play, audiences become familiarized with the Hastings Street neighbourhood geography, as the playwright—with documentary-like accuracy—represents the area's various establishments, including the Empress and Beacon Hotels and the old Woodward's Building. Because the play's first act is a tribute to the women's ability to survive in a harsh and sometimes brutal urban environment, it is relevant that the play's venue was Firehall, an integral structure in East-Strathcona that prioritized the staging of works reflective of the neighbourhood's demographics — mainly immigrant and minoritized individuals.^{xix} After the premiere of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, audience members phoned, faxed, and e-mailed Clements and Spencer, initiating an expansion of the 'community outreach aspect' of Firehall and resulting in the neighbourhood 'talk back' sessions where local women discussed their personal struggles and concerns about safety in the neighbourhood, and duly instituted their own form/s of community watch.^{xx} This outcome, a direct effect of the play's staging, serves as a powerful example of theatre employed as a tool of social message and empowerment for Indigenous women, promoting the enhancement of community dialogue, the betterment of Indigenous peoples and, ultimately, decolonization.

Jarring in its analysis of human cruelty, the play certainly emphasizes the despicable treatment of Jordan's victims—primarily drug users, sex workers, impoverished Indigenous women — abandoned by society and forced to live on the streets, yet *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* far exceeds such a myopic treatment of Jordan's victims. Rather than a reaffirmation of defeat, Clements' play directly contests both the contemptuous treatment of the women by authorities and media and the social script of victimhood into which Indigenous women are far too often cast. In the piece, the women are not mere victims, but form an empowered community, uniting to resist misogynistic violence and their social dismissal by journalistic accounts. The astounding, change-provoking audience response proves that Clements' proactive gesture was not in vain. After attending the play's premiere, reviewer Peter Birnie duly noted '[h]ow strange it was to read Jim Beatty's interview with Gilbert Paul Jordan in last Saturday's Sun, then see this play about the 'demon barber' and his Downtown Eastside victims', yet, as Birnie argues, 'The Unnatural and Accidental Women rightly asks us to focus less on Jordan and more on the victims of his vicious ways'.^{xxi} Far more than a saddening, defeatist interrogation of the negligence which characterized the investigation into the women's deaths, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* is, as feminist social critic Anne Stone suggests, an intricate, emancipating refiguring of the tragic tale in which the 'faceless and nameless'^{xxii} women who lost their lives to Jordan are recuperated as women, mothers, lovers, and powerful Indigenous leaders. Importantly, Clements' play speaks also to a broader socio-political context in which Indigenous women are regularly exploited in White settler colonialist states. By reading this play chronologically as it is staged, we see the manner in which gender is perhaps the most pertinent analytical tool through which settler colonial studies must be theorized.

Community, Witnessing, and Empowerment

Act 1 is staged as a detective story, as Rebecca, the daughter of one of the murder victims, desperately seeks to discover what happened to her mother. 'A writer searching for the end of a story,' Rebecca lives and writes in the present, as indicated in Clements' *dramatis personæ*.^{xxiii} Clements, working to fully humanize the murder victims, represents their stories surreally by interjecting the women's narratives, set in the past, amidst Rebecca's dreams and memories, allowing Rebecca to transcribe them for readers

and viewers. Early in the play, the spectral women are placed on center stage— except for Rose, the ‘English immigrant’^{xxiv} switch-board operator who occupies a liminal space on stage side, striving to maintain a connection between women and worlds. Throughout Act 1, Rebecca is a partial narrator, seeking her mother, the character called “Aunt Shadie,” while also bearing witness to the dead women’s testimonies, each of which occurs in a separate, surreal scene.

The authorities’ handling of the murders evinces the extent to which Indigenous women dwelling in White settler societies are subject to marginalization and disregard. ‘White people look up and down without seeing you — like you are not worthy of seeing’, Aunt Shadie tells Rebecca. ‘Extinct like a ghost ... being invisible can kill you’.^{xxv} In her essay/book “Title,” United Nations Officer and author of the seminal text *Women Witnessing Terror* Anne Cubilié contends that minoritized women, after subjection to sexual violence, become increasingly ‘voiceless’ even when given the opportunity to speak out against the crimes enacted against them,^{xxvi} which Clements represents by having such women are constructed as ‘ghosts’.^{xxvii} However, Cubilié conclusively argues that when the testimony of ‘ghosts’ is unimpeded by social restraint,^{xxviii} as occurs in *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* – between Rebecca and the individual murdered women initially, and, later in the play, between and amongst the murdered women and Rebecca communally – spatial, cultural and, in this case, worldly ‘difference’ can be mobilized as a ‘site of resistance’.^{xxix} Italian philosopher, Adriana Cavarero has argued similarly that ‘narration’ of one’s ‘story’, functioning most usefully as a tool of ‘feminine’ subversion,^{xxx} is, in sum, a ‘verbal response’, a ‘definitive’ reply to the broad (very political) question of ‘who’ one is.^{xxxi} Given that individuals marginalized and eliminated under settler colonialism are subject to a heightened level of social dismissal and silencing, the importance of sharing testimony in the company of witnesses is simultaneously more difficult and more politically relevant. The stakes of self-representation are thus rendered far greater for Indigenous women, making Clements’ play, in which Jordan’s victims are given an opportunity to speak, all the more politically important. In *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, the playwright reimagines history, removing these women — discursively obscured by hegemonic culture — from a space that theater critic Michelle La Flamme succinctly terms ‘the margins of history’,^{xxxii} with the women’s public self-representations amounting to

political action, effectively liberating them from the fixity of their historical and, in the context of Clements' politics, journalistic representation.

From the outset, the play contests the societal invisibilization of the women by using the surrealism allowed by theatre to stage the women as real and actual for the audience. The *Unnatural and Accidental Women* opens with the sound of a tree falling, as Clements describes in her stage directions, '[a] loud crack — a haunting gasp for air that is suspended',^{xxxiii} as Aunt Shadie awakes and speaks to Rebecca — the former in the spirit world, the latter still part of the living world. Aunt Shadie, naked, depicted in association with the 'spirits of the trees' chopped down by the loggers,^{xxxiv} emerges from a bed of leaves and 'walks through the forest, covered by the leaves / branches in them',^{xxxv} a powerful figure, rising in the face of violence. While Clements implies the connection between misogynistic, colonial violence against women and destruction of the natural world, Aunt Shadie is portrayed as indomitable, resisting settler colonial destruction: she is 'unfallen',^{xxxvi} naked and refusing erasure. Just as the play's opening scene expressly connects environmental destruction and gendered, racialized violence, so, too, does the introduction suggest a direct linkage between mother and daughter, and spirit world and living, as Rebecca and Aunt Shadie come to complete one another's sentences:

Aunt Shadie: Fingers ...

Rebecca: ... chopped down to the palm.

Aunt Shadie: Legs ...

Rebecca: ... chopped up to the thighs.^{xxxvii}

Notwithstanding the violent — however purposeful — conflation of female limbs with branches, Clements' hopeful portrayal of this interworldly maternal bond between mother and daughter is vast in its implications, an overtly recuperative representation, undermining colonialist malignment of Indigenous motherhood.

As with a number of her other plays, Clements infuses *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* with maternalist themes in order to combat ongoing derogation of Indigenous maternity by a settler colonial culture.^{xxxviii} It is important to note that, for many

Indigenous women, pride in maternity derives not only from ‘matricentric’ historical traditions,^{xxxix} but also from an overarching awareness of state-sanctioned, non-consensual sterilization of Indigenous women, federal and provincial government abduction of Indigenous children, in conjunction with Canada’s highest infant mortality rates, rendering all representations of motherhood extremely complex.^{xl} The unbreakable connection between Rebecca and her mother is reflective of Aunt Shadie’s role as the embodied maternal; throughout the play, she acts not only as mother to Rebecca, but as mother to all the ‘unnatural and accidental’ women.^{xli} As such, she is as an emblem of Indigenous motherhood redeemed, functioning as a figurative Sky Woman, reminiscent of playwright Tomson Highway’s description of a ‘benevolent female God’.^{xlii} Karen Bamford rightly argues that in ‘gratifying a mother’s desire for reunion and reconciliation’, Clements configures a ‘feminist, maternal romance’, effectively ‘transform[ing]’ tragedy.^{xliii}

Most integral to this transformation is Rebecca’s conscious and subconscious, dreamlike witnessing of Aunt Shadie’s resistance to the settler colonial logic of elimination. As she says, ‘I’ve come to find her story. My mother. My mother’s one story’.^{xliv} However, while roaming Main and Hastings, Rebecca also ‘walk[s] through’^{xlv} the narratives of Jordan’s other victims, as the other women as ghosts tell their stories to her as she is walking by. Guiding and assisting Rebecca, it is the motherly Aunt Shadie who brings the women together, initiating subversion characterized by coalition. Once summoned by Aunt Shadie’s ‘song’,^{xlvi} the spectral women now enter and become an active part of Rebecca’s living world, interacting with her directly and inviting not only the protagonist, but also audiences, to witness their narratives, creating — as Erin Wunker suggests — a ‘community of witnessing’ and thereby diminishing the potential for discursive dismissal and social disavowal of their stories.^{xlvii} Cubilié likewise asserts that when the witnessing of narrative testimony is revealed to a broader audience, as occurs in theatre and literature, where outsiders behold and absorb the very act of painful ‘witnessing’, transmission becomes an ‘ongoing process’, the efficacy being that readers and viewers are brought, through empathy and the awareness of their own passivity, to acknowledge the hardships experienced by speakers, while also assessing their potential culpability in fostering and sustaining a culture of denial and disregard.^{xlviii}

Mobilizing this emancipatory ‘ongoing process’ of witnessing,^{xlix} Clements, using a combination of poetic dialogue and surreal effects, purposefully avoids focusing on the women’s brutal and untimely deaths. Rather than representing such violence directly, the playwright uses bleak slide projections as a backdrop on the stage, documenting news clippings and segments of the coroners’ official reports to indicate that the women have been killed. These disturbing reminders suggest – to some extent – a disregard for evidence on the part of investigative authorities, coroners, and judiciary, while also serving as markers honouring the women:

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.’^l

Even as Aunt Shadie awakens in the opening scene, strong and enlivened, a projection appears, reading, ‘Rita Louise James, 52, died November 10, 1978 with a 0.12 blood-alcohol reading. No coroner’s report issued’, as Clements continually asks audiences to consider the social significance of the events upon which her play is based.^{li} With the slides functioning as commemorative monuments, the play itself becomes a textual and performative monument, positioning audiences as witnesses to the settler colonial logic of elimination, and ensuring that Jordan’s victims are granted space in collective public memory.

In her article ‘Breaking the Framework of Representational Violence’, Julia Emberley argues for a ‘fundamental transformation’ in representations of violence against Indigenous women, suggesting that, when portrayed as victims, these women must be given names and personhood, in order for testimony to elicit ‘a range of affective responses’, outweighing and thus subsuming the dehumanizing brutality of the (real) violent enactment upon which such depictions are based.^{lii} Clements artfully answers Emberley’s valid and timely call in *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, not only providing her female characters with names, but also imbuing the murdered women with humor and warmth.^{liii} In the play’s second act, the murdered women manifestly gather around Rebecca to guide her on her journey, making humorous interjections, provoking action, and driving the plot forward. At first, these figures can only ‘be vaguely seen’ as they are shrouded in darkness, while Rebecca ‘cannot really see or really hear them’,^{liv}

but, as the plot progresses, the spectral women gain increased agency and vividness, as they gather together and gradually move into the light, leading the protagonist towards the end of her story. It is most crucial to the reclamation function of Clements' play that the women are depicted as enlivened, complex, and impassioned. Aunt Shadie is appropriately attributed with, as the stage directions explain, 'mother qualities of strength, humor, love, [and] patience', while Verna is depicted as 'sarcastic, but always searching to do the right thing, the right way'. Violet is 'an old spirit who grows younger to see herself again' and Mavis is represented as 'a little slow from the butt down, but stubborn in life and memory'.^{lv} Rose, Jordan's only non-Indigenous victim, is 'thorny', but 'soft-heart[ed]'.^{lvi} Endowing each woman with a specific charisma that translates easily to audiences and readers, Clements subverts realistic violence by seating the action of the play in the women's respective narrative consciousness. As she writes in her stage directions,

Scenes involving the women should have the feel of a black and white picture that is animated by the bleeding-in of colour as the scene and their imaginations unfold. Colours of personality and spirit, life and isolation paint their reality and activate the particular landscape within each woman's own particular hotel room and world.^{lvii}

Formerly divided by filmic images, in uniting communally, the women seem characterized (perhaps oxymoronically) by vitality; they listen to and assist one another, upsetting the negating process of invisibilization to which they have been subject in life and death. When Aunt Shadie describes 'becoming invisible' in the 'eyes' of her former husband—a White logger—it is Rose who assertively opposes his disregard, while Aunt Shadie, responding reciprocally, provides Rose with support and reassurance.

Rose: I see you, and I like what I see.

Aunt Shadie: I see you—and don't worry, you're not white.

Rose: I'm pretty sure I'm white. I'm English.

Aunt Shadie: White is Blindness—it has nothing to do with the colour of your skin.^{lviii}

The exchange between Aunt Shadie and Rose suggests the importance of female solidarity in resistance to settler colonial violence, while also acknowledging the

necessity of forming coalitions across socio-cultural difference. So, too, does the relationship subvert notions of female Indigenous violability. In this case, Aunt Shadie claims Rose, addressing the concept of assimilative processes that have, historically, operated conversely in settler colonialism. Here, however, the ‘claiming’ process is positive, rather than marginalizing. Yet it is also the case that in equating generalized Whiteness with blindness, Aunt Shadie suggests that White people are, primarily, ‘colour blind’: to wit, completely unaware of the struggles of Indigenous people, while also alluding to colonial processes of ongoing assimilation.

In one particularly unnerving, albeit recuperative, scene, Violet, with great pain, narrates and thereby reclaims her death in front of a chorus of ‘sister[s]: I didn't know if it was the neck of the bottle I was swallowing’, she says. lix At the ‘Niagara Hotel’, she ‘sits on the floor ... Her focus upwards’, while ‘[t]he shadow of a man casts itself long on the walls’.lx The Barber is unseen, a figure contrived of shifting darkness. Accompanied by a supportive community of ‘the women’, Violet is at last given time and opportunity to relive and relate her final moments in a space of physical and emotional safety.lxi It is only posthumously that Violet can give testimony to a group of likeminded witnesses whose presence assists her to ‘see herself again’ as a desirable and loved human being and not an object.lxii Just as Violet’s ‘head falls down’,lxiii a slide appears, reading ‘Violet Leslie Taylor, 27. Died October 12, 1987 with a 0.91 blood-alcohol reading. She had the highest blood-alcohol reading of all the women. No coroner's report has been issued’.lxiv Yet the profoundly disturbing image invoked by these is upended by the celebratory Bacchic chorus of spectral women, who gather protectively around Violet—quite alive in death—and chant soothingly:

I hear you sister like yesterday today Ke-peh-tat-in/jee/ne-gee-metch Das-goots/o-tahg-gos-ehk Ahnotes/ka-kee-se-khak
Hear your words right next to mine
Ee-pee-ta-man/ke-ta-yaur-e
Win/me-too-nee/o-ta.lxv

With the ghost women functioning centrally as resistant observers, and the murderous barber, rendered obsolete via Violet’s revelation and subsequent release of trauma, the

scene undoes conceptions of Violet as merely a victim. She is now viewed as a loved and respected member of a community.

In his seminal text *Fugitive Poses*, Gerald Vizenor argues that Indigenous people are regularly conceptualized—and thus discursively represented—as victims of a lesser heritage. Since colonial hierarchies of power hinge upon gender, as well as race, Indigenous women are subject to two-fold misrepresentation, ‘victims’ of both lineage and (inherently violable) female embodiment. Vizenor asserts that portrayals of Indigenous victimization imply that Indigenous people ‘offer the world nothing but their victimization’. However, for such inferiorizing depictions to be viable, it is essential that ‘the victim never talks back’. Adamant in her refusal to reify this cycle of ‘victimry’, Clements unwaveringly contests reinscriptions of defeat that depict the women killed by Jordan as victims, ensuring that—even from beyond the grave—they ‘talk back’ and therefore ‘stop being victims’.^{lxvi} Vizenor terms this notion of sustained resistance as ‘survivance,’ the manner in which Indigenous peoples overcome colonialist oppression, particularly the strength of Indigenous women in leading resistant movements.

Work Cited:

Community and Resistance in Marie Clements 'The Unnatural and Accidental Women