

# Narrating (Her)story: The Politics of Commemoration in Yvette Nolan's *Annie Mae's Movement*<sup>(\*)</sup>

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## Abstract

Violence against Indigenous women in Canada is an imperative, yet *invisible* social reality. Thus, I attempt in this paper to reckon with violence against Indigenous women in Canada, not only as an ongoing material reality alternately evoked and elided in the temporalities of dominant discourse, but also in those seemingly less likely places, as in the ostensibly anti-violence rhetoric of remembrance itself. Therefore, narrating the unheard women's stories is considered as a way to both "raise awareness" and promote "recommendations to influence positive change". Thus, this paper analyzes how and why Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash's figure is evoked as *archetypal* victim of gendered and racial violence, in part by querying the reiterative tendency with which her "tragic" path, from life to death, is rehearsed in public acts of remembrance. Ultimately, I argue that narrating Aquash's story can help complicate the place of life narrative. Accordingly, I am concerned to interrogate the memory of Aquash as invited by Yvette Nolan's 2006 commemorative play: *Annie Mae's Movement* to "connect the memory of a woman murdered" to a broader "drive for social reparation". This paper explores the strategy of storytelling as a means of remembrance and as a catalyst toward action, asking: what is at risk in assuming a translucent relation between the telling of missing and murdered women's stories, and the hopeful outcome of social change? Accordingly, the paper strikes the foundations of the ostensible transparency with which anti-violence initiatives employ the "grievable" narratives of missing or murdered Indigenous women toward the end of battling public indifference and raising awareness.

**Keywords:** Commemoration, Indigenous women in Canada, sexism, social reparation, storytelling, violence

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(\*)Narrating (Her)story: The Politics of Commemoration in Yvette Nolan's *Annie Mae's Movement*, Vol.11, Issue No.3, July 2022, pp.207-232.

ملخص:

إن العنف ضد نساء السكان الأصليين في كندا واقع اجتماعي عاجل ووبائي ، لكن ندوب وقصص هؤلاء النساء غير مرئية. وهكذا ، أحاول في هذه الورقة أن اتناول قضية العنف ضد النساء من السكان الأصليين في كندا ، ليس فقط باعتبارها واقعا ماديا مستمرا آثار واستبدل بالتناوب في فترات الخطاب المهيمن ، ولكن أيضا في تلك الوسائل التي تبدو أقل احتمالية في مناهضة ظاهريا خطاب العنف ضد هؤلاء النساء. لذلك ، يعتبر سرد قصص النساء غير المسموعة وسيلة "لزيادة الوعي" وتعزيز "التوصيات للتأثير على التغيير الإيجابي". وبالتالي ، تحلل هذه الورقة كيف ولماذا يتم استحضار شخصية "أكواش" كضحية نموذجية للعنف الجنساني والعنصري ، جزئياً من خلال الاستفسار عن الاتجاه التكراري الذي يتم من خلاله تدريب مسارها "المساوي" ، من الحياة إلى الموت. وفي النهاية ، أزعج أن سرد قصة أكواش كما دعت في مسرحية "إيفيت نولان" التذكارية (٢٠٠٦) حركة *آني ماي* لربط "ذكرى امرأة قتلت" بـ "حملة أوسع للتعبير الاجتماعي". تستكشف هذه الورقة استراتيجية رواية القصص كوسيلة لإحياء ذكرى وكحفز للعمل ، متسائلة: ما هو الخطر في افتراض علاقة شفافة بين رواية قصص النساء المفقودات والمقتولات ، والنتائج المأمولة للتغيير الاجتماعي؟ وهكذا فإن الورقة تبرز أسس الشفافية الظاهرة التي تستخدم بها مبادرات مناهضة العنف في الروايات "المؤلمة" لفقدان أو قتل النساء من السكان الأصليين في نهاية محاربة اللامبالاة العامة وزيادة الوعي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** أحياء ذكرى، نساء السكان الأصليين في كندا، التحيز الجنسي، التعويض الاجتماعي، سرد قصصي – العنف.

Violence against Indigenous women in Canada is an urgent social reality. The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) estimates that in Canada, over five hundred Indigenous women have been murdered or reported missing in the last thirty years alone ("Violence"). Moreover, critics expound upon the relative *invisibility* of this "epidemic" of violence as committed against Indigenous women in Canada (Amnesty International 3). Sharon McIvor and Teresa A. Nahanee, for instance, analyze Indigenous women's "invisibility" as victims of violence under the law (63), while critics like Dara Culhane have explored the effective "erasure" of Indigenous women from dominant public discourse (593).

Yvette Nolan likewise examines in her work the "invisibility" of Indigenous people in general, and of Indigenous women in particular; her

first play, *Blade*, addresses this concern in particular, whereby “nobody really cares if a Native woman dies because she must have been doing something to deserve it, something to bring it on herself” (Nolan, “Selling” 99). For many of the scholars, activists, and cultural producers alike who have noted the “severity and pervasiveness” of violence against Indigenous women, as well as the apparent “lack of political will to address the crisis” (NWAC, “Sisters in Spirit Research” 11), the persistence of this problem remains attached to its lack of serious representation in both public and critical discourse.

Therefore, narrating the unheard women’s stories is considered as a way to both “raise awareness” and promote “recommendations to influence positive change” (NWAC, “Voices” 5). For that reason, this paper aims to analyze how and why Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash’s<sup>(\*)</sup> figure is evoked as an *archetypal* victim of gendered and racial violence, in part by questioning the reiterative tendency with which her “tragic” path, from life to death, is rehearsed in public acts of remembrance (Pyne 246). Thus, I interrogate the memory of Aquash as invited by Yvette Nolan’s 2006 commemorative play: *Annie Mae’s Movement* to “connect the memory of a woman murdered” to a broader “drive for social reparation” (Cultural Memory Group 77). This paper explores the strategy of storytelling as a means of remembrance and as a catalyst toward action, asking: what is at risk in assuming a translucent relation between the telling of missing and murdered women’s stories and the hopeful outcome of social change? Moreover, can literary and artistic contexts of protest provide us with new ways of thinking through the representational strategies of activist rights campaigns?

Indeed, it would seem that in policy, politics, and law, as well as in mainstream reportage, gendered racial violence remains chronically underrepresented and systemically overlooked leading many critics to ask, as Susan Gingell does: “What will it take for people to develop a sense of outrage at this open season on indigenous women?” (A8). In the United Nations’ 1999 *Concluding Observations of the Human Rights Committee*, the Canadian government is on record as acknowledging the

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<sup>(\*)</sup>From now on the real character Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash will be referred to as Aquash and the fictional character in the play as “Anna Mae”

situation of Indigenous peoples as “the most pressing human rights issue facing Canadians” (8); yet, in 2006, the UN Human Rights Committee again noted with concern the ongoing violation of Aboriginal human rights in Canada, making specific mention of the fact that Indigenous women are, as ever, “far more likely to experience a violent death than other Canadian women” (23). Significantly, article 22.2 of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, adopted by the UN General Assembly in September of 2007, upholds as an aspired standard of achievement, that [all] “States shall take measures, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, to ensure that indigenous women and children enjoy the full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination”; nevertheless, at present, Canada remains one of only two states to oppose the *Declaration*. This, only one of the latest examples of what many activists and advocates have termed Canada’s longstanding “official indifference” (Amnesty International 34-35) to its role in ongoing systemic discrimination against Indigenous peoples, has made Canada the subject of widespread criticism at home and on the international stage.

In the international arena and within Canada itself, strategies to combat violence against Indigenous women have been increasingly located at what the International Indigenous Women’s Forum calls the “crossroads of three interrelated fields: Indigenous Peoples’ rights, human rights, and women’s human rights” (6). Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith accentuate in their introduction to *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, that “life narratives have become one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims” (1). While human rights discourse is now perhaps one of the most prominent recognized modes of “addressing human suffering,” injury, and harm (2), the mobilization of life narratives within rights campaigns has become a key site for the telling and witnessing of specific rights violations, while also furnishing activist movements with the critical and effective means of generating awareness, outrage, action, and change. Therefore, investigating the place of life narrative of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada in recent interventions is a vital matter. The Native Women’s Association of Canada, considered to be a leading voice of protest in this context, has worked to document, disseminate, and address not only the extent to

which the violation of Indigenous human rights has been a historical and continuing outcome of colonization (“Violations” 3), but also the wound in which Indigenous women have been specifically affected by these violations.

Beverley Jacobs, the former NWAC president, has emphasized in her recent work with Andrea Williams, “the legacy of colonization ... is gendered in the way it impacts Aboriginal women” (119). Superseding in this gendered legacy of colonization, NWAC has characterized its recent work in terms of a “national momentum built around taking action countering violence against Aboriginal women and girls” (“Violence” 7). As part of this national momentum, March 2004 saw the launch of the association’s “Sisters in Spirit” Campaign. Designed to raise awareness around the distressingly high levels of violence against Indigenous women in Canada, the “Sisters in Spirit” Campaign now constitutes a multi-year federally funded research that seeks to identify the “root causes” of sexualized and racialized violence (7). In the earliest stages of this campaign, the association urged Amnesty International and other human rights organizations to “take action”, and in October of 2004, Amnesty International released its well-known report: *Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada* which frames violence against Indigenous women in terms of international human rights discourse.

The *Stolen Sisters* report identifies a number of interrelated causative factors (both historical and ongoing) that put Indigenous women at risk of “racist, sexist attacks by private individuals” (5). The report contextualizes such attacks as human rights violations by framing individual narrated experiences of violence in terms of the state’s broader failure to promote and protect Indigenous women’s fundamental right to be “safe and free from violence” (4). It also points to the legacy of state policy and legislation (from the Indian Act to the residential schools program) that have not only enacted various forms of violence, but that have also had long-lasting and intergenerational repercussions for Indigenous women’s access to the basic resources and needs that would contribute to their overall safety and security. In this way, the report characterizes both individual acts of violence and ongoing acts of state

violence within the broader context of international human rights discourse:

When a woman is targeted for violence because of her gender or because of her Indigenous identity, her fundamental rights have been abused. And when she is not offered an adequate level of protection by state authorities because of her gender or because of her Indigenous identity, those rights have been violated. (4)

Amnesty International also reports a number of statistics that prefigure the UN Human Rights Committee's expressed concerns regarding the state of Indigenous women's human rights in Canada, including the fact that "Indigenous women between the ages of 25 and 44 are five times more likely than other women of the same age to die as the result of violence" (23). Significantly, the report also frames itself as a project in remembrance and a call to action; it claims to account for not only the scale of violence against Indigenous women, or the "official indifference" (34-35) with which it is so often met, but also (and crucially) the victims of this violence who are "all too often forgotten" (3). The report seeks to demonstrate, "in human terms" (37), the ongoing cost of discrimination and violence against Indigenous women in Canada, while ultimately calling on Canadian officials "to commit themselves to immediate action" (36). It accomplishes this call largely through its use of the narrative case study form including life narrative.

Arguably the centre-piece of the *Stolen Sisters* document, nine narrative case studies make up nearly the entire second half of the report. In these case studies, the individual stories of missing or murdered Indigenous women are told with the permission of their families and friends (3). Woven, in part, from interviews conducted with the families, as well as the organizations and advocates who work with them, these stories are rendered in a third-person expository narrative mode that hinges together the report's simultaneous commitments to "honour[ing] the missing and murdered women" and their school policy (Acoose 33). Nonetheless, in an earlier section detailing the colonial policies that have contributed to violence against Indigenous women, the report identifies residential schools and the Indian Act as the two historic policies most directly responsible for the gendered dispossession and subsequent

marginalization of Indigenous women in Canada (12). The report moreover emphasizes that “the disruption of Indigenous families and communities is not a thing of the past” (16), but rather persists radically in our present. Thus, I intend in this paper to launch a commemorative war against the invisibility of the escalating number of victims and utilize the story of Aquash as an example of the missing or murdered Indigenous women narratives.

Storytelling is considered as a way to both “raise awareness” and promote “recommendations to influence positive change” (NWAC, “Voices” 5). These commendable victims and figures of martyrdom seem to have been represented more readily as appropriate ambassadors for the cause. Indeed, while many critics have sought to account for the marginalization of Indigenous women in the “areas of social engagement, education and economic opportunities, cultural practices, political action, and civil/ human rights,” and for the “overexposure to violence and abuse” that ensues as a result of this marginalization (Jacobs and Williams 135), others have critiqued the often delayed or inadequate media coverage, police response, and public outrage proffered in reply to the ongoing reality of gendered and racial violence (NWAC, “Voices” 9).

As Laurie McNeill observes, material marginalization often begets representational marginalization, with many Indigenous women’s cases earning negligible attention in the public eye: “As in life, some dead continue to be marginalized (377). Specifically, McNeill is concerned to highlight—via Judith Butler’s notion of “grievability”—the racialized hierarchization of human loss legible in the “gap between official and marginalized” (375) victims of violence, as well as in the memorial practices available to survivors. For McNeill, as with others who have written recently on the question of memorial-making relative to the marginalization of missing and murdered Indigenous women, commemoration itself constitutes a particular rhetorical practice in which one can read a discerning of just “whose lives count” in so-called “collective memory” (377). Not surprisingly, in these kinds of reckonings, Indigenous women’s lives have decidedly counted “less.”

In resistance to a dominant public discourse characterized by apathetic, indifferent, or even incredulous responses to the social reality

of missing and murdered women (McNeill 378), various anti-violence campaigns around remembrance and remedy seem to have fashioned for public consumption the stories of certain emblematic negligible figures in particular—figures who, from the frequency with which they circulate, are often constructed as especially capable of challenging complacency regarding “the truth of society’s treatment of aboriginal people” (Robertson 6). Reiterated with a near compulsory zeal such exemplary figures ostensibly serve both memorial and pedagogical functions in the efforts of activists, policy-makers, and cultural-producers to challenge public apathy toward gendered and racial violence. This paper attempts to analyze how and why Aquash’s figure is evoked as an *archetypal* victim of gendered and racial violence, by querying the reiterative tendency with which her “tragic” path, from life to death, is rehearsed in public acts of remembrance (Pyne 246).

Aquash’s biography is part of a commemorative antiviolenence central discourse—from the activist-oriented *Stolen Sisters* report, to such popular history texts as *Hidden in Plain Sight: Contributions of Aboriginal Peoples to Canadian Identity and Culture*. At the time of her death in 1975, Aquash was thirty years old and already an experienced activist who had participated in some of the American Indian Movement’s (AIM) most well-publicized and protracted protests from the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs head office in the 1972 march in Washington to the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota. Aquash is now thought to have been murdered by fellow AIM activists who suspected she was an FBI informant. In this sense, her murder is attributable to internalized gendered and colonial violence made especially acute by the climate of heightened tension and suspicion fostered by the FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program (Churchill and Vander Wall 404). Aquash’s execution-style murder was evidently premeditated and carefully planned. Nonetheless, she was sexually assaulted, and met a violent end that she would not have had she not been an Indigenous woman. Aquash’s death is often regarded as all the more “tragic” for having cut short a promising future. Moreover, the guilty parties eluded justice for decades and twenty-nine years had passed before charges were laid (Amnesty International 35). It is perhaps for this reason that the story of Aquash apparently reveals the justice system’s

failure of Indigenous women.

The story of Aquash—as the story of “one of the most notorious killings of an Indigenous woman from Canada” (35)—likewise features in the Amnesty International report, and in fact serves as a transitional device between the report’s section on “Official Indifference” (34) and the subsequent “case studies that follow” (36). While the narrative case studies are themselves meant to illustrate what the report has termed the “seeming indifference of Canadian officials and Canadian society for the welfare and safety of Indigenous women” (34), the story of Aquash substantiates this apathy as a longstanding feature of the government’s response. Toward this end, the report quotes Aquash’s daughter, Denise Maloney, who expressed the “frustration that the Canadian government has done little to support them in their three decade long call for justice” (36). Maloney states further that: “Any direct contact from any Canadian authorities would be nice. The level of apathy from governmental authorities surrounding my mother’s case is disturbing and insulting” (36). Undeniably, the report finds the government’s response to be inadequate (35-36; 38), and in this sense, Aquash’s life narrative functions as mutual substantiation that the “authorities have failed in their responsibility to protect the rights of Indigenous women in Canada” (3), and to launch a decisive war of justice against the government indifference. Nevertheless, justice- according to the international human rights discourse in which the *Stolen Sisters* report is written- refers to more than the “punishment” of the guilty parties who have committed violence; it includes also the “public acknowledgment of the crime” (Amnesty International 33).

Certainly, the case of Aquash has been rehearsed in anti-violence activist discourse as illustrative of not only “the patterns of violence which threaten the lives of Indigenous women” (36), but also the patterns of indifference that condition the public’s lack of acknowledgement, and that contribute to the climate of “impunity” in which such crimes occur (14). As stated in the report, then, the “stories of missing and murdered Indigenous women” (1) contained therein effectively “illustrate” (16,35,36), “demonstrate” (37), “reflect” (37), or otherwise “speak to” the “painful human cost” (38) of Canada’s indifference to violence

against Indigenous women. While Aquash is often remembered as a “courageous Canadian activist who dedicated her life to helping other Native people” (Forster 34), it is in this paper that her figure becomes an exemplary or illustrative victim of violence against Indigenous women in Canada. Aquash’s story is more than merely influential in terms of the indifference with which governments and citizens alike have responded to the issue of violence against Indigenous women in Canada. It in fact speaks volumes about who might be considered “worthy” of “recognition, remembrance, and redress” (Robertson 29).

In exploring the representational politics that inform how Aquash is remembered, my concern is that, in pushing back against what Butler terms the “differential allocation of grievability” (*Precarious* xiv) informing the frequent marginalization of Indigenous women in mainstream public discourse. Butler’s relational view of grief helps explain why some lives in some contexts are grieved while others are regarded as ‘ungrievable’, substitutable and ‘lose-able’ (*Frames of War* 31). Butler speaks of this as a ‘differential allocation of grievability.’ She uses the term ‘framing’; a being is framed as grievable when it is given a certain position in relation to the wider norms that demarcate individual and collective identity (*Precarious* xiv). Those who are framed are considered as grievable to be included in our moral community—a shared sense of ‘we’—whereas who is framed as ungrievable and thus ‘lose-able’ is excluded from that community (*Precarious* 20 ; *Frames of War* 37).

Butler’s theory of grief is best understood in terms of three central concepts. First, the grieved always appears as impossible to substitute, as *irreplaceable*, to the grieving person: grieving persons have lost a specific relationship which made them into who they are (*Precarious* 20). For Butler “grief is a phenomenon of interdependence: it reminds us that our personal identities depend on our interactions with others, and that our own status as grievable is a prerequisite for our existence as subjects” (*Frames of War* 98). A griever has not lost an isolated individual, but a relationship, or a ‘relationality’, that cannot be reduced to its related parts because it precedes the related individuals (*Precarious* 22). Accordingly, grief refers to this interdependence and may particularly emphasize the irreplaceability of the grieved one. Second, the expression that grief takes

is always to some extent *unpredictable* because the relationalities that we are a part of are complex and opaque (*Precarious* 46). Butler points out that grieving people may discover aspects of themselves which they did not know existed, and for that reason, loss has a ‘transformative effect’ (*Precarious* 21). Any attempt to stay the same after losing someone important is in vain because the relationality is no longer the same. For these reasons, accounts of grief are often characterized by a lack of words or accurate descriptions, as well as by expressions of astonishment. Third, a grievable loss is always *embodied*; “loss and grief draws the attention of grieving persons to themselves and their lost ones as precarious bodies, and loss is therefore always a bodily experience” (*Precarious* 26). For Butler, existence is bound up with precariousness (*Frames of War* 14).

We are precarious socially and emotionally because our identities are permeable and dependent on others. We are precarious physically because we all share a bodily vulnerability from birth; quite literally our bodies are in the hands of others— ‘not quite ever only our own’. (*Precarious* 26)

For that reason, in accounts of grief, one should be able to find references to bodies, physical sensation and vulnerability.

Thus, ‘irreplaceability’, ‘unpredictability’ and ‘embodied loss’ are, according to Butler, frame someone as ‘grievable’. By contrast, to make someone lose-able, the being must be framed as replaceable, the consequences of its loss must be framed as predictable and non-transformative, and the loss must not be framed as stressing a common state of precariousness. Butler points out that ‘there are deaths that are partially eclipsed and partially marked, and that instability may well activate the frame, making the frame itself unstable’ (*Precarious* 75). Aquash, the victim of violence, is an exemplary figure of gendered colonial victims whose life and death are outlined in the discourses which address the social issue of violence against Indigenous women in Canada. Aquash’s death is tragic and *necessary* to the promotion of justice for women victims of violence. Her death represents the deaths of countless other Indigenous women, *and* (in their commendable grievability) the possibility of public remorse and subsequent “social reparation” (Cultural

Memory Group 77). That is, Aquash's death is at once overtly "illustrative" of the broader "patterns of violence that threatens the lives of Indigenous women" (Amnesty International 36), and implicitly unique in her particular "tragedy." As Jo-Ann Episkenew suggests of Indigenous people more broadly, "[t]o settlers each one of us is a trope, a living synecdoche, in that one of us inevitably represents the whole" (*Taking Back* 79). In the case of missing and murdered women, Aquash stands in for the "sexual assaults, disappearances and deaths" of Indigenous women that "fail to capture the front-page headlines ... verdicts and penalties" (Backhouse B2), while *also* signaling (through commemoration) the formerly indescribable possibility of the public acknowledgment of her disappearance and death.

Aquash is thus rehearsed as exemplary, in *both* senses of the word: exemplary because she illustrates or represents the ever-present threat of violence (and of public indifference) in Indigenous women's lives, and exemplary because she is an appropriate or commendable victim of violence whose character in life, and whose circumstances in death, make her what feminist linguist Susan Ehrlich would term "legitimate or 'believable' victim" of gendered violence (20) likely to gain public recognition and remorse. Such victim, as normatively constructed as legitimate or believable (and thus *grievable*), find her legitimacy tied, with only rare exception, to the status of her victimizer as herself "legitimate perpetrators": these men are "strangers to their victims, carry a weapon, and inflict injury upon their victim" (Ehrlich 20) despite her unequivocal efforts to "resist to the utmost" (91).

The story of Aquash requires some discussion then, not only because of the attentiveness with which her "emplotment" (from life to death) is rehearsed in academic, activist, and literary sources alike, but also because of the way in which certain constructions of her story keenly naturalize her death as a necessary act of martyrdom: as if being murdered was itself an offering to an activist movement that, ironically, would not need a martyr to promote its cause, if women were not being murdered in the first place. Paradoxically, in this formulation, one's contribution to the activist anti-violence cause is *through death*.

In her foreword to popular historian Merna Forster's compilatory

“celebration” of one hundred Canadian heroines and their “extraordinary accomplishment[s]” (Campbell 13), the Right Honourable Kim Campbell reflects that the biographical stories collected therein constitute not only an important “contribution to our understanding of women” in Canada, but also a timely and much-needed “corrective to the standard histories” in which women are chronically underrepresented (15). Campbell suggests that “celebrating these one hundred Canadian heroines reminds us that Canadian women do amazing things, and it will be a loss to our whole country if we forget them” (15). Appearing among the one hundred women “recognized and celebrated” (19) for their “extraordinary accomplishments” is the Nova Scotia Mi’kmaq and American Indian Movement (AIM) activist, Anna Mae Aquash who “fought for the rights of Native people,” Forster claims that “until someone shot her in the back of the head” (31), and whose loss is figured as a “tragic” martyrdom (34) worthy of recognition and remembrance. When read against Campbell’s introductory remarks, it would seem almost as if it is “our... country’[s]” loss, “if we forget [her]” (15). That is, her remembrance becomes Canada’s gain.

Aquash is remembered in Yvette Nolan’s play, *Annie Mae’s Movement*: A one-act play featuring a single female character (Anna Mae), as well as a small cadre of male characters intended to be played by one actor. *Annie Mae’s Movement* chronicles the life of a “woman in a man’s movement” whose real-life fight for social change during the height of the 1970s Red Power movement was restricted not only by the challenges Indigenous people face in white North America, but also by the sexism Indigenous women encounter in their contributions to activist politics and decolonization.

In *I Am Woman*, Maracle suggests that sexism was “inherent in the character of the American Indian Movement” (107), and indeed this seems to have affected the way in which Aquash is remembered. For, against the noticeable circulation of Aquash as a romanticized martyr figure of the Red Power movement, we can also read for her equally conspicuous absence from some of the most canonical works on 1970s AIM activism. Devon Abbot Mihesuah proposes that Robert Warrior and Paul Chaat Smith’s book, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from*

*Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*, “mentions only a few women in passing (Anna Mae is mentioned once, and that is to tell us that she was married at Wounded Knee)” (12). In this way, a telling tension has emerged within the representational record through which Aquash has been connected to—one that, between the considerate rehearsal or erasure of her story, points to a broader problematic in gender politics as they relate to Indigenous activist movements. Nolan’s play seeks in part to address this problematic by making visible Aquash’s significant contributions to AIM organizing, fundraising, and activism, while also critiquing the “machismo” that characterized some facets of the AIM leadership (Jaimes 110), and which likely contributed to her murder.

The play thus chronicles Anna Mae’s life as an activist, and is concerned with the time immediately leading up to and encompassing her participation in major AIM-led activism; its early scenes depict Anna Mae’s work as a teacher in the community-run Survival School in Boston, and recount her decision to join the siege at Wounded Knee. Tracing her subsequent rise to power in AIM leadership, *Annie Mae’s Movement* balances an otherwise realist portrayal of Anna Mae’s activist work (from her fundraising activities, to her work in opening a West Coast office in L.A.) against a surreally embodied masculine threat which hovers on the edges of the staged action as the “*Rugaru*”—“the lurker on the other side” (32), whose presence believed by some characters to be “a sign that things are gonna change for Indian people” (7). Significantly, the *Rugaru* is to be played by the same male actor who plays the activist allies and foes Anna Mae knew in life, as well as the staged personifications of the “FBI” and the “Law” whose interrogations of Anna Mae in the latter half of the play make her increasingly vulnerable to the mistrust and accusations of AIM leaders who suspect her of being an FBI informant. Anna Mae is thus targeted for interrogation and aggression by both AIM and the FBI as she becomes inextricably caught in the ongoing male-dominated conflict between these organizations. Notably, AIM’s mistrust of Anna Mae is expressed in gendered terms, and her execution in the play’s final scene likewise underscores the gendered nature of the violence carried out against her: Anna Mae is raped and then shot by a composite figure who embodies male characters of both organizations, as well as the malevolent *Rugaru*.

Nolan's play is thus devoted not only to commemorating Aquash's life, but also to analyzing how Indigenous women's activism is circumscribed by colonially-derived patriarchal norms that shape the remarkable terms on which women engage in, and are remembered by, in activist movements.

With a scene titled "Beginning," Nolan's theatrical rendering of the life (and death) of Aquash opens much as it ends: "*Lights up to reveal Anna Mae, curled in a foetal position [centre stage]*" (3). The play closes—with a "gunshot": "*She falls, curls into a foetal position, the good red road emanating from her. Blackout*" (53). Thus, book-ended, as it were, by the simple image of a woman's body curled impassively on its side, Nolan's play performatively engages the seeming ubiquity of a trope now well-rehearsed in the repertoire of material (both artistic and expository) dedicated to the living memory of this activist figure—remembered most often, perhaps, for how she died. As Anthony J. Hall recalls, "the frozen body of this much beloved pillar of AIM [the American Indian Movement] ... was found in February of 1976" ("Imperialism") when, on a remote corner of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, a cattle rancher spied what Devon Mihesuah terms "a small indigenous woman [who] lay curled, sleeping it appeared, at the bottom of an embankment" (123). Authorities are notified, and the body is recovered. Following a cursory autopsy that infamously reported the as-yet unidentified woman as having died of exposure, the body is hastily buried in a local Catholic cemetery (Brand 15-16).

There, as poet Daniel David Moses imparts in his elegiac "Report on Anna Mae's Remains," "[h]er body sleeps the sleep of the abandoned" (361)—until it is disinterred, some ten days later, at the behest of Aquash's belatedly notified family. A second autopsy is then performed, promptly revealing that she had in fact been shot at close range in the back of the head, and moreover, that she had been raped (Brand 20-21; Mihesuah 124). Along with this, Shirley Hill Witt declared, the women of the Red Power movement had "sadly been given a martyr" (17). "Anna Mae lived and died for all of us," Hill Witt wrote in the commemorative biographical sketch she penned for *Akwesasne Notes* later that spring: "The executioners of Anna Mae did not snuff out

a meddlesome woman. They exalted a Brave Hearted Woman for all time" (17).

More than dedicatory, Hill Witt's remarks would appear also to have been predictive; far from forgotten, the *life* of this Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq is rehearsed in mainstream reportage, in alternative and Indigenous-authored periodicals, as well as in literature, performance, and film with attentiveness matched only by that which is afforded the story of her *death*. In her discerning biographical treatment, Choctaw scholar Devon Mihesuah reflects that the "life of Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash *demonstrates* what it means to be a modern Native woman aggressively fighting racial, cultural, and gender oppression" (115). Thus, Aquash's death, an event undeniably material in its circumstances and effects, demands nonetheless critical consideration as to its place in the representational enterprise of memory and history. For instance, in one biographical profile, Forster opines: "it is her death that brought great attention to the causes Anna Mae lived and died for" (34); according to another, "it was her dedication that eventually caused her death" (Gillis C4).

The trope of a woman's body curled on its side not only aestheticizes the moment of death—what Moses calls that "last jet of breath" (361), it also assigns a terminal necessity to Aquash's death. "[H]er path was clear and true," Ellen Klaver avows in her dedicatory poem, "So they shot her down and left the body lying in a field" (vii). Her premature death immortalized as part and parcel of her activism in life, this figure of resistance would seem, like the colonial figure of the "vanishing Indian," to be exalted in her demise—visually "preserved" in eternity on the threshold of certain disappearance. And so begins (and ends) Nolan's play, *Annie Mae's Movement*—with that solitary image of Anna Mae curled in a foetal position, centre stage. To the extent that this eponymous character revolves through a figurative cycle of death and life with each performance—the seeming *inevitability* of her end having been coded into the very structure of the play itself—Nolan's drama would appear at first to re-inscribe, rather than overturn, the ubiquity of this visual trope.

Anna Mae is the sole female character to embellish what Jerry

Wasserman, in his review, calls an otherwise nearly “unadorned” stage—a simplicity he finds “crude,” yet suiting to the aims of this “passionately direct ... telling of a sad ... aboriginal story” (C2). Nevertheless, for all its apparent formal efficiency, I want to suggest Nolan’s play as enacting a rather complex intervention into the representational record through which this individualized martyr figure has circulated, and as moreover troubling, through its very aesthetics, the too-easy equation sometimes accorded the relation between visibility and recognition, between commemorative representation and resistance. *Annie Mae’s Movement* takes up the task of remembering Aquash, differently. Nolan deploys this figure not only in the service of exalting a “brave-hearted” woman in death, but also as a means to query the very terms on which the missing and murdered are committed to memory in the first place. Indeed, far from a mere rehashing of past events, or even a “timely” revisiting of this case in light of new evidence, arrests, and trials (Mitges B2), *Annie Mae’s Movement* inescapably addresses the present problematic issue of violence against Indigenous women in Canada. In a contemporary moment characterized not only by ongoing gendered and racial violence, but also by what Anne Stone and Amber Dean note as the proliferation of representational treatments of this violence (Stone and Dean 9), Nolan’s play arguably speaks to the possibilities and pitfalls of visually or textually marking one figure’s demise, and posits the likelihood that some forms of individualized visibility might reify, rather than resist, the problematic politics of representation.

For instance, in counterpoint to that omnipresent image of the fallen Anna Mae curled on her side, Nolan’s character instead “*awakens, begins to crawl, then to walk*” (3) livening her limbs as she makes ready the first of her monologues. “It’s so easy to disappear people in this country” (4), she remarks: “They disappear them by keeping them underfed, keeping them poor, prone to sickness and disease. They disappear them into jails ... They disappear our kids, scoop ‘em up, adopt ‘em out, they never see their families again” (3). These lines establish a context for the systemic “vanishing” of Indigenous people via the broader machinations of ongoing colonial policy—they also render conspicuous the conditional simultaneity of the reality of violent *disappearance*, on one hand, and the heightened visibility with which

this character is imbued, on the other. In this sense, the opening monologue reflexively queries the resistive feasibility so often afforded the thrust to counter invisibility with visibility, and puts pressure on the emancipatory promise often ascribed to political or artistic commemorative expression.

When reflecting on gendered colonial violence and Indigenous invisibility more broadly, Nolan recalls of one of her earliest plays the “very full and attentive audience who had,” she says, “come to see a Native woman killed” (“Selling” 99). This expectation she surmises from the audience’s frustrated reaction when, following the production, some spectators expressed their surprise and displeasure at having watched a play that, contrary to their expectations from a Native playwright writing about gendered violence, had taken up the matter of a murdered white woman. To Nolan, these viewers had rather ironically missed the point—that this play was in fact very much concerned with the *invisibility* of actual Indigenous victims of violence, even while a theatergoing audience had, she says, “paid for Native blood” (99). With *Annie Mae’s Movement*, Nolan reflects, the audience is at last given that image of a “Native woman killed”—but to rather different ends than might have been expected—that is, not merely as a means to memorialize the figure of Aquash, but also as a means to critically interrogate the sentimental desire to see this individualized figure meet her end.

It is in this way, *Annie Mae’s Movement* can be considered as intervening into a broader problematic with respect to the narrativization of missing and murdered women. It incontestably makes visible and known some women’s stories. In the three decades since Aquash’s death, over five hundred Indigenous women have been murdered or reported missing in Canada. Nevertheless, the circumstances of Aquash’s life and death were specific; her embroilment in the internal politics of AIM, amidst a period of heightened tension and intrigue, is but one factor among several that would render her example exceptionally remarkable. Moreover, Aquash’s death marks a broader context of violence against Indigenous women. In this context, the heightened visibility of some victims of gendered violence—deemed appropriately “grievable” (McNeill 386) by virtue of the apparent specificity and “poignancy” (Mitges B2) of their victimization—is matched by the striking *invisibility*

or elision of others. Nolan's play effectively questions visibility as resistive politics; it is concerned not only with how best to grant commemoration to this activist's memory, but also to make visible others. And so, with a scene titled "End," Nolan's play brings Anna Mae's "movement" to a close—reflecting on this figure's end as traced by innumerable invocations of this case. With a gesture reversely reminiscent of Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore's performance piece, *Vigil* (2002), in which Belmore calls out the names of women violently disappeared from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, this final scene sees Anna Mae recite pieces of her own biography, as well as the names of those she leaves behind as the *living*:

You can kill me, but my sisters live, my daughters live. You cannot kill us all. Becky and Mary, Helen and Priscilla, Janet and Raven"—the list goes on—"You can kill me, but you cannot kill us all. (53)

Anna Mae documents the erasure of those unnamed in dominant memory; she labours to give us the names of those who "live" (53). Placing herself in relation to these names, she figuratively peoples the stage with those women who were missing from it. Nolan opens up a space which immortalizes Anna Mae: an exemplary figure of activism in life which symbolizes and presents other invisible women.

Thus, the closing monologue manages metaphorically to populate the stage with a living legacy of women who "cannot" all be killed (53), then Anna Mae notably stands in as their sole embodied representative; ironically, it is *through* her individualized persona as a martyr for the American Indian Movement, and for Indigenous women more generally, that she is able to evoke the names of others who will proceed her. Anna Mae emerges in Nolan's play as a legitimate or "believable" victim whose death can be solemnly celebrated for what it makes possible in the present: the enduring memory of a "brave-hearted woman" (26) that might then "inspire" others in the activist struggle against the "bitter injustices of racism" (Joachim 215). In this way, the character of Anna Mae seems designed, in the "End" scene, to both resist and resign to violence in equal measure. By this, I mean that the character both "resist[s] to the utmost" (Ehrlich 91), as the legitimate victim of violence must, and resigns to her fate as a gendered martyr whose death figures as

an act of service to the activist movement. This I see as one of the primary ways in which the play attempts to negotiate between accounting for Anna Mae's agency as a figure of activist resistance, and offering a satisfyingly fatalistic account of her life and death.

Anna Mae appears at the end of this play as an agential figure who struggles to her last, *and* as a figure resigned to her fate. Anna Mae's victimization is anxiously legitimized through the play's emphasis on her resistance to violence, and through the play's "positioning" of her character in "'respectable' societal roles"—that is, in the role of mother, daughter, and sister (Jiwani and Young 903). Her vocal resistance to her rape at the end of the play leaves no question as to her non-consent, while the subsequent verbal recitation of her daughters' and sisters' names re-centers the familial commitments she had "willingly give[n] up" for the sake of the movement (Nolan 25). For instance, Anna Mae resists the sexual violence that is carried out against her with "agitated, pleading, angry, [and] anguished" protest—repeating the word "don't" over and again (53). She is here the clear and unequivocal victim of violence, and her protest is unambiguous. Notably, her assailant is a composite of both AIM-affiliated characters and the "FBI Guy," in order to reflect the suspected historical collusion of both parties in Anna Mae's murder. As this masculine figure of generalized patriarchal malevolence approaches, her 'don'ts' become more "agitated"; and yet, "as he rapes her, she stops begging" (53) and begins instead the commemorative recitation with which the play ends: "My name is Anna Mae Pictou Aquash," she asserts, before going on to name her family members and all those "sisters" and "daughters" who will carry on—despite (or even *because* of) her death: "My daughters are Denise and Deborah. You cannot kill us all. You can kill me, but my sisters live, my daughters live" (53).

The line with which the play in fact closes, just prior to the gunshot, re-inscribes the dreadful fatalism Nolan elsewhere seems intent on critiquing—and indeed Anna Mae has been moving toward this very moment since the beginning of the play: "You can kill me, but you cannot kill us all," Anna Mae says—and then, simply, "You can kill me" (53). As experienced in live theatre as an auditory effect, this line—"You can kill me"—would presumably sound as if it were cut-off, mid-sentence, by the sound of the gunshot that follows it. Nevertheless, when

read as plainly stated on the printed page, the line also comes across as a directive; it is declarative, more than anything—purposefully punctuated in the script by a period rather than a gunshot. Though a possible bid to characterize Anna Mae as agential to the last, the declarative statement creates the subtextual effect of *choice* where none exists, and likewise ascribes martyr status to Anna Mae’s death. For, when read against its qualifying phrase, “but my sisters live, my daughters live” (53), the directive, “you can kill me,” becomes an exchange of sorts—where one chooses death so that others might live. In its closing moments, then, *Annie Mae’s Movement* cannot sustain an analysis of this murder as part of the ongoing, systemic, and often state sponsored “disappearing” (3) of Indigenous peoples, though it was with just this sort of analysis that the play began. The focus becomes what this individualized and legitimately tragic figure can offer audiences in the present: the memory of a “brave hearted woman,” whose death is reassuringly unique, singular, and past.

To conclude, history is not past, but rather persists radically in our present. No one can deny the obvious eventuality of present injustices upon the policies of the past; that is the systemic displacement of Indigenous peoples in the so-called colonial “past” continues to make women vulnerable to violence in our colonial present. Thus, I have tried in this paper to reckon with violence against Indigenous women in Canada, not only as an ongoing material reality alternately evoked and elided in the temporalities of dominant discourse, but also in those seemingly less likely places, as in the ostensibly anti-violence rhetoric of remembrance itself.

In looking to literary works as a site for the production of knowledge about gendered colonial violence and the means by which it might be resisted, I understand creative cultural production as more than incrementing existing anti-violence scholarship and activism; rather, I see literature as itself a form of critical work, poised to contribute significantly to ongoing anti-violence debate. That its prospective contribution has been largely overlooked by anti-violence organizations and government agencies alike is perhaps not surprising, given the longstanding tendency to regard literature as an inessential form of cultural work, and of cultural critique. As Julia Emberley attests in the closing pages of *Defamiliarizing the Aboriginal* that it is:

[P]ossible to understand that cultural practices are as vital for their

transformation as legislative and economic acts. In the current climate of information-driven knowledge, the point cannot be made too clearly, that cultural politics and practices are necessary to decolonizing intimate violence in its representational and institutional forms. (258)

It is in part to this possibility that my paper is addressed—not as a means of naturalizing literature as always progressive or transformative in its representational politics, but rather as a way of interrogating creative work as speaking to, and as itself constitutive of, material contexts of debate.

I have examined in this paper the figure of Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash as remembered in anti-violence literature, legislation, activism, and policy critique and illustrated how Nolan's 2006 commemorative play *Annie Mae's Movement* both resists and subtly reproduces anew a problematic vision of this activist as a martyr figure whose death is accorded resistive meaning. Accordingly, focusing on the matter of storytelling as a means of remembrance, as a consciousness-raising tool, and as a prospective catalyst toward action, this paper has sought to grapple with the narrativization of material violence as itself a discursive process. It is considered to be a commemorative quest which grants a "human face to the mounting number of victims" (Withey A2), prioritizing for public remembrance the lives and deaths of women who "resist to the utmost" (Ehrlich 91), and who are thought not to have been "doing something to deserve it, something to bring it on herself" (Nolan, "Selling" 99). Thus, the paper has attempted to strike at the foundations of the ostensible transparency with which anti-violence initiatives employ the "grievable" narratives of missing or murdered Indigenous women toward the end of battling public indifference and raising awareness.

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