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Women and Alcohol in *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*

My aim here is to briefly examine alcoholism and its consequences in the play *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, by Marie Clements, a contemporary Canadian Métis writer. While there is a whole body of texts by contemporary indigenous women writers that would be very pertinent for looking at this topic, I believe Clements's text is the one that most clearly exemplifies a different approach to the issue of alcoholism, which I want to explore. This issue, by the way, is not addressed by Western literary texts—not canonical ones, at least—in the same manner, and therefore its effects are different.

The Unnatural and Accidental Women is a quite experimental play combining elements or references to different worldviews. It uses visual and auditory effects, plus combinations of the two in multimedia presentations, and mixes indigenous rituals and beliefs, ecological concerns, film, song, dance, performance, news reports, and several literary genres, such as dramatic monologues and dialogues, poetry, storytelling, and more specifically, Elizabethan revenge tragedy.

It debuted in 2000 in Vancouver, a city that has spearheaded the struggle against gender violence. Its printed introduction (2005) states that it "is a play based on a true murder case in Vancouver that involved the deaths of at least ten women and many more 'mystery' deaths of women in the East Hastings Street area. All of them were found dead with a blood-alcohol reading far beyond safe human consumption, and all the women were last seen with Gilbert Paul Jordan, a local barber who frequented the bars preying on primarily middle-aged Native women." Nevertheless, "The coroner's reports listed the

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cause of death for many of the women as 'unnatural and accidental'".

To effectively examine the play, it is important to look at it from two different angles, although with the understanding that the two are closely linked to each other. Briefly, the first is knowing more and better about one aspect of a specific reality: alcoholism among the Canadian indigenous population. This is a vast, complex topic and above all very problematic given what it implies: for example, deciding if it should be up to the state or the communities to take the initiative and implement measures to deal with it. The figures are high, and in some provinces such as British Columbia, very high. The statistics also show that it increasingly affects young women and that it is linked with a series of other very serious problems such as drug use, prostitution, and feminicides. The city of Vancouver is the most noteworthy example of this pressing problem, crisscrossed from beginning to end by gender-based violence. While some projects and initiatives do exist, mainly created by women's collectives such as, for example, Walking With Our Sisters, dedicated to trying to deal with this situation, the issue continues to require a great deal of attention.

The Unnatural and Accidental Women is made up of a series of scenes built around the alcohol-overdose-related deaths of ten women from Canada's most vulnerable social strata: the indigenous population. From the beginning, it emphasizes the almost inevitable vicious cycle involving the enormous economic precariousness, social vulnerability, and emotional loneliness that women find themselves in: alone in sordid hotel rooms, unsuccessfully looking for non-destructive relationships with partners, children, and families, and finally resorting to alcohol and falling into the clutches of Gilbert Paul Jordan. Clements's bases this real-life, grisly story on the murders over thirty years of women, not by beatings, strangulation, knifings, etc., but by the voluntary and/or forced consumption of alcohol; this shows more clearly than many statistics and studies both the public and private causes and consequences of this issue.

The second angle I want to mention allows me to examine in greater detail how Clements approaches the issue of alcoholism, but not according to the canons. It involves the presence of an indigenous universe all its own, the product of an ideology, which, while it does not exist in a pure state, contains a series of interesting markers that combine ancestral legacies with more current elements, the product of interactions with other ideologies and contemporary ways of life.

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The different scenes in the play's two acts undoubtedly reflect the harsh reality of these women's lives today. However, it is important to emphasize how this reality is not handled—or solely handled—as a valiant and necessary testimony of these events. Rather, it is intertwined with clearly contemporary indigenous visions and beliefs. In the first place, her conviction is clear that these people are part of a broader reality, not only on a community level, but also even on an environmental level, which includes forests and rivers. This characteristic in turn is linked to a philosophy that insists on the opening to and a dialogue with the non-indigenous other, even at the extremely high price that may have. All of this happens without ever abandoning its basic beliefs, which are simultaneously "translated" and incorporated on their own terms into this Western theater. One example of some of these specific issues that can be mentioned are the scope and strength of community life, the existence of other dynamics and systems, the co-existence of several temporal and spatial dimensions, the importance of storytelling, the reach of the spoken word above that of the written word, and the presence of humor.

All this gives greater depth to our understanding of and the value we give to the play. Despite the horror, Clements makes solid connections among these indigenous women, alive or dead, and their extremely harsh stories in a relatively unrealistic ending (for a Western audience), in which these women unanimously decide to take justice into their own hands killing Jordan and then sit down to a celebratory First Supper. In addition, here, it stands out that all of the above happens within a broader social and legal structure governed—in this instance, yes—by Western logic. The latter is visibly unjust, and in the end

is forcefully questioned when shown in contact with other more inclusive ways of thinking about the world.

The exercise of narrating or telling us about something is another big issue. The fact that each woman tells her own story, which is repeated and strengthened in the following story, in addition to acting as a powerful testimony, underlines the healing power of talking about the past. In addition, it makes visible the importance of being able to communicate it so that it can give rise to new versions and possibilities, including the revision of what we understand as justice, particularly if we think about Jordan's specific case. Equally important is the fact that the chain of testimonies by the women themselves and their relatives is positioned within the indigenous social structure, which practices other forms —much more human forms— of getting justice. Finally, we should see how all this is linked to the fact that it happens live on stage, so the audience members, both men and women, can cultivate their capability of responding to and being responsible for what is going on. They do this in an exercise that does not seek to entertain and perhaps does not even aim at informing, but above all, tries to involve us personally as an audience to go through processes of transformation, growth, and maturation by establishing a solidarity-based contact with other lives and realities. VM

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