



REPRESENTATIONS OF MURDERED AND MISSING WOMEN INTRODUCTION

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There was such an enormous array of representations of murdered and missing women to respond to in this issue that two thoughts arise simultaneously. The first is that the social problem of violence against women is ongoing, perhaps even deepening (and this despite a good forty years of feminist activism in protest). The second is that representations of this violence are starting to proliferate like never before. We'd be hard-pressed not to draw connections here, even though we eschew any simple equation of representational violence with actual, material violence. Yet the relationship between representations of murdered and missing women and the ongoing murders and disappearances of women is urgently in need of our attention. This is our motivation for opening with Shawna Ferris' examination of the exhaustive repetition, in mainstream media accounts of sex work, of representations of "the lone streetwalker," a construction which foregrounds isolation and vulnerability. This representation is so entrenched as to have become a trope, one which stands in for the vast range of forms and practices of sex work. Ferris asks urgent questions about the possible effects of such tropic representations in relation to the notable increase in violence against sex workers in this country over the last decade.

In a tradition of reading the photographic informed by Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, Nicholas Chare looks to a photograph of a crime scene in Juárez, and provides a reading that understands the photograph as testimony, as a document of its particular historical moment, as a cultural artifact, and as a site which evidences and gathers up viewings. In documenting one policeman's aversion from the scene and his inability to look at the decomposed body of a woman at his feet, Chare finds what the "judicious gaze" of professionals cannot: a moment in which an atrocity is, in not being seen, both seen and felt.

While Chare offers a close reading of one representation of a woman murdered in Juárez, Paulina

García del Moral situates the murders of women in this city both economically and politically and looks at how public understandings of the women murdered here are shaped by the widespread "construction of the image of the socio-path" and categorization of the "young murdered women's character into 'immoral' or 'innocent'." She asks us to consider whether such representations are intimately connected to this ongoing material violence, enacting a kind of violence in and of themselves.

In reading of the murder of Dorothy Hammond first in the pages of a true crime pulp magazine, then in the somewhat less sensationalistic account of a newspaper, and finally, reflecting on her own academic writing on the pulp account, Michelle Denise Smith also traces boundaries between what is real and what is represented. Similar to Chare, Smith looks to representations that are muted and those that have a kind of punctum, textual in this case, that undoes the comfort of generic representation (in which "vicious details of the crime" are allowed to overwhelm the victim's "significance as a human being"), and through a stripping away of the distance inherent in language, creates a site from which it is possible to recognize the horror and the brutality of what was represented on those pulp pages.

Sarah Dowling's five poems are excerpted from "Keepness," a booklength manuscript in progress. While the poems incorporate details of the media coverage of Tamra Keepness' disappearance, Dowling consistently evades the documentary, preferring to trace resonances, touching down on an image, a detail from a narrative line, or even simply a name. In this way, her poems offer up serial interpretations and inflate "moments" that, in media coverage, remained flatly an increment of the news arc. Her language reminds us of just what is at stake when someone, in this case a child, goes missing; of time, measured by "the distance covered in one breath."

Several contributors offer succinct analyses of a diverse array of visual representations of murdered



and missing women found in memorials, performance art, visual art, film, video, theatre, photography, and even advertising. We've collected up a series of such images and paired them with response pieces. While in some cases, the image might be simple, might document a moment in a performance or a memorial site, in other instances, for example in the stills taken from Margot Leigh Butler's *'Other' Honey*, a more deliberate arrangement is apparent. There, in consultation with the artist, we arranged a layout that was suggestive (but not mimetic) of Polaroids; in part, this rearrangement of space allowed us to interrupt the gridding effect that might otherwise have organized our representation of the work. Too, interspersed with the stills are a series of blanks or implied stills, which suggest hesitancy, time, a pause. The blanks disrupt the grid: an organization of space that is dominant in visual representations of missing women and is suggestive of criminalization (i.e. mugshots) and is reductive (the repetitive placement of headshots amounts to little more than a visual statistic; the women are not seen as individuals, but visually, aggregate as a group, or a human archive; there is also no room in such reiterative headshots for context (a room, friends, family, lovers) to either be gleaned or simply suggested).

Fiona Jeffries and Charo Neville write about the memorial work of performance artists Claudia Bernal and Rebecca Belmore, each asking important questions about this impermanent form of memorializing murdered women. Responding to Belmore's performance, *Vigil*, and subsequent video installation, *The Named and the Unnamed*, Neville wades into the debates about who is "authentic enough" to represent the Downtown Eastside community. Noting Belmore's "unique ability to extract the essence of an extremely unfathomable reality and interpret it using her body," Neville nonetheless believes that this work will require further showings, outside of gallery space and in the Downtown Eastside, in order to "truly function as a vigil." In her response to Bernal's

Monument to Ciudad Juárez, Jeffries unintentionally casts a thread of connection to Belmore's work when she suggests that Bernal's performance "draws the spectator into the role of witness through its slow pacing, drawing our attention to each urn to signify the recognition of each woman and girl, the named and the unnamed, who has lost their life in Juárez since 1993." Here, the named and the unnamed, of Ciudad Juárez and of Downtown Eastside Vancouver, are memorialized in ritual performances made richer by Neville and Jeffries' reflections on them.

Questioning the hard-held distinction between permanent and performance-based memorials, Adrienne Burk reorients our understanding of a monument as physical to a performance that is temporal, slowly unfolding. She reads resonances of the memorial boulder at Crab Park, its availability as a place to gather mourners, as well as its ability to pronounce, like a "stone newspaper," its permanence and resistance to erasure; the piece, too, is aware of multiple audiences and uses: those specific to the stone as marker or proximate gravesite, and those encounters which are accidental and geographic.

Burk's reading of the memorial boulder dedicated to Vancouver's "missing women" is nuanced by Sharon Rosenberg's concerns about how local history is eclipsed by a nearby circle of fourteen stone benches, designed primarily to memorialize the fourteen women killed at L'Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal in 1989. In Rosenberg's essay, one important undercurrent is how thinking and feeling can happen at once in the face of the unspeakable; how one can deeply feel that which is remembered in an academic practice which demands crucial questions be raised, because one wants not just to remember, but to "remember for change." And while these markers are important, as Rosenberg points out, it is not stone "that hold[s] memory, people do." Her text also has us consider the question of whose deaths constitute the kind of "social rupture" that would have us publicly grieve, and whose deaths do not. Here, in



Rosenberg's formulation, we see how monuments to those women constituted as "grievable" ultimately come to be haunted by the women who are *not* constituted as such.

The Cultural Memory Group's essay adds to Rosenberg's piece on *Marker of Change* through reflection on another memorial for Vancouver's "missing women," this one located in the far off city of Montreal. These two memorials, located nearly 5,000 kilometres apart and each memorializing women murdered at the other side of this distance, suggest that cities, like people, possess an unconscious and are subject to its hauntings.

Two writers, Lora McElhinney and Caffyn Kelley, each reflect on the memorial march that happens in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside every Valentine's Day to remember the women who have disappeared from here and to protest ongoing disappearances and violences against women living and working in this neighbourhood. Kelley suggests that this is an event which establishes a "dialogical space," one which "allows us to keep talking, but also to keep counting," while McElhinney considers the relationship between the (ever-changing) space of the Downtown Eastside and the people who occupy it, offering a sense of what it is like to "be there," to occupy this space on 14 February.

The photographs and detailed description of Deborah Koenker's art installation *Las Desaparecidas/Missing* offer a sense of the rich layers of this project, from a snapshot of the residents of Tapalpa, Mexico, who stitched copies of their own fingerprints in memory and reference to murdered and missing women from Juárez, to the enlargement of these fingerprints on flowing banners of "factory cotton," to the names and faces of girls and women among *las desaparecidas*, captured behind plastic envelopes and placed alongside names of other girls and women, names which lack photos to accompany them. Koenker reminds us that the "skilled work of the hand," such as the embroidery performed

by residents of Tapalpa, has been largely replaced by "the anonymous machine work of production," carefully drawing our attention to an important link between the discourse of disposability which surrounds maquiladora work and the troubling disappearance and murders of women in Juárez, many of whom travelled there from villages like Tapalpa to find work in maquiladora.

Responding to Marie Clements' remarkable play (recently turned motion picture), *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, Sarah Banting captures the ineffable quality of reader/audience response theory with her palimpsest of absences of those who are projected as absent on the stage (the slant representations of murdered women), of those who are projected as present on the stage (audience readings of the racialization of the plays' actors), and of her own complicated absence/presence. (She is not directly present, but reading the performance through the accounts of others; and reading her own potential presence at the play in relation to her moment in history.) Banting's subtle piece unfolds a consistently questioned narrative of the theatre's razor-thin moment of presentation and of perceptions of that moment, which is "neither entirely sad, nor entirely familiar."

Both Larissa Lai and Pauline Butler respond to Margot Leigh Butler's *'Other' Honey*, a short filmic response to, on the surface, the singular appearance of a honeystand next to the Pickton property in Port Coquitlam. Lai's poem operates as an intertext, one that might be read aloud during a viewing of Butler's film. As an "incomplete" articulation of what it is we have to lose and what "we are made of/earth/breath/want", *Other Bees* offers up fragments, like breaths cut short. In these lines, we see a tracer of that filmic wave, that blonde arm on celluloid, "trying to say/sister/system." By turns associative and investigative, Lai's *Other Bees* rides the verge of collapse, and offers up not answers, but a series of momentary recognitions, as when—in a suggestive



and stark turn—“mysogyny recognizes meat.” Butling’s response is less a companion piece than a reassemblage and examination of the film’s seemingly simple elements (honey, a wave, etc.). In articulating the rich connotations of each element, Butling reveals hidden proximities and complex relations. Here, we witness the subtle ways that Butler’s piece maintains an admitted distance (an arm’s length) while it questions, hails, addresses and metaphorically investigates representations of the murders, without risking such representation itself.

Reg Johanson offers a site-specific reading of an advertising campaign, one that cannot help but be read in relation to its geographical and social placement. An advertisement for the television show, *Elimidate*,¹ featuring three dumpsters, ceases to be a surface metaphor when located on Hastings Street, and in the intertext between geographical location of the billboard and the ad’s text, becomes part of a problematic public discourse around gender, sex, and disposability.

Paul Ugor takes up the much-discussed *Heroines* photo essay, in which Lincoln Clarkes presents a series of portraits he took of women, many of whom, when pictured, were addicted to heroin and living or working in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Ugor offers an analysis of the class dynamics at work in this project that has, until now, been missing from the copious reviews and commentary Clarkes’ work has inspired. While *Heroines* is not a representation of murdered or missing women per se, some of the women pictured in this controversial book have since gone missing (Patricia Johnson, Sheila Egan, Julie Young, and perhaps others). More importantly, the issues raised by these photographic representations are ones that often come up in relation to representations of women missing from Vancouver’s Down-

town Eastside. Sachiko Murakami’s poem is also a response to *Heroines*, in which she lists the images “found” in the photo essay, and so doing, articulates visual sites that are mobilized into a larger commentary throughout (and sometimes on) Clarkes’ photo essay. Murakami’s poem is, in some ways, akin to Stan Douglas’ *Every Building On 100 West Hastings*: Murakami recreates the cityscape Clarkes pictures in his book, one that seems to form a backstory for the women the latter depicts in his photographs. In this poem, though, the sites Murakami evokes are ominously emptied of the women once pictured there.

Two responses take up the work of Vancouver-based artist Femke van Delft, whose provocative installation, *Missing: A Guerilla Mapping Project*, has been exhibited in Vancouver, Toronto, and Edmonton, generating much attention and acclaim. In their response to the installation, Granzow and Dean ask difficult questions about an artist’s responsibility to anticipate potential (mis)readings of her work and to attempt to address these in the work itself. Van Delft’s work is also the subject of a short drama by Johanna Mercer, whose film *The Diana Project* tells the story of an artist’s obsession with responding to the disappearances of women from the Downtown Eastside. Van Delft herself takes up the challenge of responding to Mercer’s difficult and at times troubling use of her art, and her essay offers such a thought-provoking and insightful reading of the film that it ought to be required reading for those who plan to view it.

In “Rubbed Out”, Renee Rodin’s personal essay about the murder of her daughter-in-law, Chompoo-nut (Jeab) Kobram, Rodin traces the fallout of one woman’s death, across continents and years, a devastation that fails to translate into concern by legal officials in Kobram’s own country, Thailand, fails to evoke outrage in the country of her murderer, Belgium, and is not deemed story enough for the mainstream press in Canada, her family-in-law’s home country. Here, the question of how one is represented

¹ We asked, without success, for permission to reprint the image from the Vancouver-based ad agency, Palmer Jarvis DDB Inc., that created the 2002 campaign for the Bellingham, Washington television station, KVOS, that airs *Elimidate*.



is shadowed by another, more fundamental question. A disturbing nexus of how race, gender, and nationality influence the perceived value of lives emerges as Rodin traces first how her daughter-in-law is literally rubbed out, a more violent and visceral term than erasure, and finally, how her identity disappears as she is discredited and ignored, cast aside by a government whose collusion with privileged Western nations is meant to ensure the “untroubled” continuance of global exchange of currency. “Rubbed Out” is an important essay, and one which finds troubling analogies with the deaths of indigenous women from what amounts to, in many places, the “third-worlds” circumscribed within Canada’s borders.

Finally, there is the frame of the book itself. While the recently released *Killing Women*² favours a spatter of blood and a catchy title, we agreed early on to have a spare cover, no image, with only a simple description of the special issue’s focus. This choice signals our ongoing ambivalence about most efforts to represent murdered and missing women, even as we recognize that such representations are both inevitable and necessary. Still, the potential for such representations, especially when unaccompanied by text (just peering up off of covers from a shelf or magazine rack in a bookstore, for example), to be read in ways which reproduce so many of the stereotypical, tropic, narrow, and ultimately harmful beliefs about murdered and missing women, led us to opt for a blank cover, despite the array of images contained within the pages of the issue itself.

We come away from compiling this special issue on representations of murdered and missing women sure of only one thing: that too much surety seems to do a kind of injustice to the stunning complexity involved in creating and responding to representations of murdered and missing women. This com-

plexity invites sustained questioning, and we are reminded of some of the many questions circulated in our call for papers:

What ethical issues are involved in creating or critically engaging with a memorial? How is public memory related to a work of art or a text? What tensions exist between humanization and aestheticization, representation and exploitation? What other issues arise when that which is private is made public? When individual identities enter a larger discourse through trauma? What ethical questions arise around representations and critiques that take place in the immediate aftermath of such a significant trauma and loss? What tactics are taken in response to images/identities that are “fixed” by the mainstream media? What potential readings (misreadings) exist for a photo (or the revisioning of such photos; for example, the sketches and paintings done by various artists with the explicit purpose of presenting softer, more “humanized” versions of subjects)?

By dwelling on these questions, trying to tease out a complicated, thoughtful, politically, and ethically engaged response, it is our hope that the essays, poems, and responses collected here will offer you, our readers, a way into the debates, the tensions, the uncertainties, and the complexities of this issue.

—Anne Stone and Amber Dean, March 2007

² We refer here to Annette Burfoot and Susan Lord’s edited collection of essays, *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006.)