Representing and Remembering Murdered Women: Thoughts on the Ethics of Critique

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> [C]ritique is not equivalent to rejection or denunciation … the call to rethink something is not inherently treasonous but can actually be a way of caring for and even renewing the object in question.
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> *Wendy Brown*
> **Edgework**

Annette Burfoot and Susan Lord, eds. *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence.* Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006. 380 pp. $38.95 (paper).

Cultural Memory Group. *Remembering Women Murdered by Men: Memorials Across Canada.* Toronto: Sumach Press, 2006. 272 pp. $28.95 (paper).[1]

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[1] The Cultural Memory Group includes Christine Bold, Professor of English at the University of Guelph; Sly Castaldi, Executive Director of Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis; Ric Knowles, Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph; Jodie McConnell, Human Rights and Equality Advisor; and Lisa Schincariol, doctoral candidate in Communications and Culture at York University.

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These two important texts on women and violence were both published in the few months leading up to the first trial of Robert Pickton (who is accused of killing twenty-six women in total, making this Canada's largest case of serial murder), as Vancouver (and the rest of the country) prepared to learn the details of what happened to Sereena Abotsway, Marnie Frey, Angela Joesbury, Georgina Papin, Mona Wilson, and Brenda Wolfe, the first six women for whose murders Pickton was to stand trial. Although this may be one of the strange coincidences of the publishing world, these are nonetheless very timely texts. In fact, both of these books make reference to murdered or missing women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood in their first few paragraphs. Undoubtedly, the violence directed at women from the Downtown Eastside has provoked new attention, both popular and academic, to the problem of violence against women and to questions about how such violence ought, or ought not, to be represented and remembered. I count myself among those whose attention has been caught by stories of "missing women," by the representations of women's lives (and sometimes of their violent deaths) put forth in these stories, and by the questions they raise about the relationship between cultural memory and social justice. These two texts also arrive at a moment in which questions about how and why we remember (or fail to remember) particular victims of violence or murder are garnering significant attention across a wide variety of academic disciplines. Those of us whose attention is drawn in this direction, particularly those of us attempting to respond to these acts of violence from within the academy, negotiate difficult ethical and political terrain. What is the relationship between representation and violence? Between violence and remembrance? Between representation and cultural memory? For feminists taking up these questions in our intellectual or political work (or both), these two similarly themed but very different texts will undoubtedly prove to be valuable resources. But while both texts ask us to contemplate the ethics and politics of representing or remembering acts of violence against women, they also raise some important questions about the ethics of critique. I will argue that both texts might, as a result, benefit from some further reflection on how critique might best be formulated when it attempts to respond to violence, murder, loss, and the suffering of those left in their wake.

Burfoot and Lord begin their introduction to the collection of essays in *Killing Women* with reference to the recent rise in attention to the disappearance of potentially more than five hundred indigenous women in

Canada. They juxtapose coverage of this story on the CBC's website with in-depth coverage of rape in Darfur, asking:

> What is it that one wants of representation in such situations? What would a just representation be? Is the representation of violence drawn so heavily from genre and gender codes that even the most horrific realities are destined to become "stories"—normalized and folded into the everyday racist and sexist ideologies that form our senses of belonging to a nation, a gender, a race, an ethnicity, a class? (xii)

The essays in this collection take up these compelling questions in an effort to draw links between a contemporary fascination with women who are the victims of violence and with women who *commit* violent acts. The collection is thus a unique attempt to demonstrate similarities between representations of women as victims of violence and those of violent women, and by doing so the editors offset the risks of symbolically conflating "woman" with "victim."

Killing Women is divided into three sections: the first, "History, Memory, and Mediations of Murder," contains five essays examining representations of "real" instances of murdered or murderous women, ranging from the women murdered in Montreal on 6 December 1989 to the four hundred or more women murdered in Ciudad Juarez in Mexico, and from women in prison for killing violent husbands in Canada's past to contemporary women on death row in the U.S., to representations of Karla Homolka, likely the most notorious woman ever convicted of murder in Canada. The second section, "Techniques and Technologies of Representing Violence," is composed of five essays that take up problems with murdered or murderous women-as-spectacle, from the spectacular representation of women—inside and out—in early wax medical models, to representations of raped and murdered women in art and photography, to the portrayal of violent women on screen in Hollywood and in feminist media. The final section, "National Trouble: Gendered Violence," contains essays that draw connections between women, violence, and nationalism through examination of Chinese martial arts films, Italian cinema's relationship to its women's movement, the female "psycho-killers" of American horror movies, vengeful rape victims in Hindi cinema, and the vast differences in representations of Palestinian and Israeli women fighters. Each essay in the collection confronts difficult, thought-provoking questions about women and violence, even when the connections between essays are not always made evident. Several of the essays contain photograph stills of the films or art installations they examine, and these are interspersed with a collection of photographs of unnamed women prisoners at Kingston Prison for Women between 1900 and the early 1960s (the bulk of which come from the mid-1950s).

The Cultural Memory Group's *Remembering Women* focuses primarily on women's victimization by violence and, more specifically, on feminist efforts to keep murdered women in living memory. The authors have gathered, for the first time in one text, a rich history of numerous distinct memorials to women murdered by men across Canada. The bulk of the memorials they report on remember the women murdered in the event that is now commonly referred to as the Montreal massacre,[2] but the book includes discussion of the scant few permanent memorials dedicated to murdered and missing women from Downtown Eastside Vancouver; of a handful of memorials for individual women murdered by strangers, co-workers, or former partners; and of two memorials to Marlene "Shaggie" Moore (the first woman in Canada to be labeled a "dangerous offender" by the state), who died in Kingston penitentiary for women in 1988. The book is organized by place: with the exception of a final chapter titled "First Nations Women Remember," the text traces the presence of women's memorials by starting in Vancouver and winding its way east across the prairies, through several cities small and large in Ontario, and on through Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. These authors also pose many compelling and important questions in their introduction, such as: "[W]hat political and pedagogical work is done by the inscriptions which accompany memorials …? [W]hen and how does a memorial run the risk of serving as a palliative instead of a provocation …? [And] what is the relative effectiveness of a memorial that takes the form of an event … compared with that of an object?" (17).

These questions are complex, thought-provoking, and impossible to definitively answer, inviting readers to start contemplating the ethics and politics of memorializing right from the outset. Rife with photographs of the various monuments they discuss and written largely on the basis of original interviews with the individuals responsible for bringing those monuments into being, the text is itself the culmination of painstaking, detailed research. As such it will prove to be, in turn, an indispensable tool for researchers theorizing about cultural memory, and about feminist memorializing in particular.

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[2] See Sharon Rosenberg's essay in *Killing Women*, page 30, for a discussion of problems associated with this naming of the event.

What ethical issues arise, though, when one sits down to write a critique of well-intentioned representations, memorials, activism, or other forms of cultural production that respond to the acts of violence these two books examine? This question seems to haunt these texts (as well as my own efforts to analyze representations and remembrances of murdered women). There is a way in which *any* critique of such representations or memorials might appear unethical, since these cultural practices are so often performed or created by (or hold special meaning for) those with close proximity to the losses they often mark. A handful of challenging and at times quite painful conversations with friends or family of some of Vancouver's disappeared women about the merits (or lack thereof) of my own critiques of a few of the memorials and cultural productions also discussed in these texts have left me with many unanswered questions about the ethics of this kind of critical practice. As a humanities scholar, what I am trained to offer in response to an event, any event, is critique. I have spent the last ten or eleven years of my life honing this skill. Yet, as much as I value the practice, I also find myself becoming increasingly dissatisfied with straightforward critique, particularly as a response to the terrible suffering and violent loss of human life that books like these take up. Critique is beginning to seem limited by its tradition of remove or distance from its objects of investigation, as it is precisely a tendency to distance ourselves from the suffering or violent erasure of others that I want my own practice of critique to work against. Critique is also dissatisfying to me because of its usual tendency to position itself as authoritative, foregoing uncertainty and tentativeness in its pursuit of definitive knowledge and academic expertise. Yet the more I delve into this area of study, the less I feel that I have anything very authoritative or definite to say. As a result of my own research into stories of violence, murder, suffering, loss, and injustice, I find myself feeling much more unsettled and uncertain than when I began. Uncertainty and hesitancy have become characteristic of my reaction to the material I am critiquing. In fact, the only thing I seem sure about at this point is that too much certainty seems itself to do a kind of injustice to the stunning complexity that surrounds such representational practices. As such, I intend to make a case here for a practice of critique that importantly retains its critical capacity but is nevertheless something a bit different from how critique is conventionally thought and practised.

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For insight on how to explain my concerns with critique as it is often practised, I turn here to Irit Rogoff, a theorist of visual culture, who, in an essay titled "Looking Away," advocates that we move

> from criticism to critique to criticality—from finding fault, to examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic [...], to *operating from an uncertain ground* which, while building on critique, wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis; other than one of illuminating flaws, locating elisions, allocating blames. (119, emphasis added)

Here, Rogoff explicitly moves us beyond critique to a new notion of "criticality," a critical practice that requires "operating from an uncertain ground" (119). While the practice of critique remains important here (indeed, for Rogoff, criticality crucially *builds on* critique), Rogoff is looking for something more.[3] I am particularly compelled by Rogoff's description of criticality as a practice of uncertainty. No doubt this is a way of writing critique that is unnerving and unsettling, disrupting as it does a set of conventional and frequently shared beliefs about what critique is and how one produces it. Nonetheless, I have come to the conclusion that such an approach offers a way of writing critique that explicitly engages with ethical issues, which seems particularly important for critique written in the wake of the sorts of violent acts being examined here. Despite their important contributions, both *Killing Women* and *Remembering Women* might benefit from some further reflection on their approach to critique and on what a practice of criticality might be able to offer in the wake of the stories of violence and murder to which each text responds.

In *Remembering Women*, the members of the Cultural Memory Group make a number of provocative claims about the ethics of critiquing memorials or submitting them to academic analysis. In the introduction to their book, the authors outline the importance they have come to stake in a practice of "remembering responsibly" as academics (23). Initially, this sounds like a concept with great potential for staking out an ethical approach to scholarship on this topic, one that might well be consistent with Rogoff's notion of criticality. But for the Cultural Memory Group, remembering responsibly primarily means remaining "true to those who have given us access to [their memorial] processes, not betraying their trust by an unrealistically purist, overly critical or unrelentingly interrogative analysis" (23). While they are certainly not suggesting that all forms of critique or analysis automatically equate to betrayal, this assertion invites what I would argue is a too-easy slippage between critique and betrayal, one intended to advance the political aims the Group desires to support, but which nonetheless requires further scrutiny.

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[3] For an important elaboration of Rogoff's notion of criticality, see Sharon Rosenberg's essay "Facing Losses / Losing Guarantees." Many thanks to Sharon for first drawing my attention to this passage from Rogoff.

"Remembering responsibly" seems, in the pages of the Cultural Memory Group's text, to apply primarily to those memorials created by the family members of murdered women or by grassroots collaborations among feminists, for the Group does succinctly critique how some institutionalized memorials (such as those found at universities across the country to commemorate the women killed at L'Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal in 1989) serve as a "palliative instead of a provocation" (see page 64 and especially pages 111 to 113). This willingness to critique certain monuments but not others posits what for me seems like a false (and overly simplified) dichotomy between institutionalized versus grassroots (family or feminist) memorializing. Hence several of the institutionalized memorials are treated with a thoughtful, critical analysis that is not in turn applied to other memorials, which are more likely to be carefully described and celebrated even when they seem to cry out for more critical reflection. Several of the memorials that the Group writes about, for example, collapse many of the vast differences (of racialization, of class) between women who have been murdered, differences that are important markers of the many ways that vulnerabilities to violence are so unevenly distributed and lived. Yet *Remembering Women* seems to frequently gloss over the problematic ways that many of these memorials eclipse or diminish these markers of difference.

Perhaps in anticipation of this line of criticism, the authors acknowledge in their introduction that the "bottom line" of their analysis "is support for feminist memorial-makers" (18). This is an important political stance, one that I take seriously, and one that is on many levels highly commendable given the lack of support generally proffered to such groups. It might in fact be read as a strategic assertion of certainty made in response to widespread opposition to the work of feminist memorial-makers.[4] Thus it is not so much the fact that the Cultural Memory Group has set this particular bottom line that concerns me; it is more the conflation of critique with betrayal that their introduction repeatedly invokes. While I agree that critique as it is conventionally practised has limitations, support and critique need not be positioned as antithetical. I tend to agree with feminist political theorist Wendy Brown when she urges us, in *Politics*

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[4] Consider for example the national furor over the creation of "Marker of Change," a monument to the women murdered at L'Ecole Polytechnique on 6 December 1989, documented both in the Cultural Memory Group's book and in Moira Simpson's documentary *Marker of Change*.

Out of History, to cultivate a "spirit of shamelessness about intellectual inquiry shaped by political concerns but unmoored from an obligation to specific political entailments" (15). Brown insists that "we do no favor … to politics or to intellectual life by eliminating a productive tension … in order to consolidate certain political claims as the premise of a program of intellectual inquiry" (41). I am uncomfortable with the often too-easy equation (which Brown points to in the epigraph above) of critique with rejection, denunciation, or even treason. It seems to me that critique *can* be a way of caring for, or enriching, or expressing concern for one's subject, as Brown insists, perhaps especially when it is formulated more along the lines of Rogoff's notion of criticality. In fact, it seems to me that this is precisely where the question of ethics arises: whether a critical practice is ethical or not might have much more to do with its form than with its content or its capacity to be critical.

I empathize with the Cultural Memory Group's concerns about critiquing memorials, particularly those memorials commissioned or created by individuals with whom we may want to show political allegiance. And yet I cannot help but wonder whether a refusal to critically interrogate the possible meanings or effects of a memorial might not also risk a form of silencing, because such a refusal makes it impossible for the Group (or presumably others equally persuaded that critique is a form of betrayal) to consider or attempt to account for the *many* possible effects of memorials, including the potentially counterproductive ones. The Group expresses concern that they "might feel the need to critique practices which were genuinely well intentioned and that perhaps represented the best possible outcome within the local circumstances," and one member writes that she "'was always conscious of the fact that we were going to be critiquing this memorial, and there was a possibility that we would betray their memory'" (27). The connection between critique and betrayal is made explicit here, but instead of interrogating this assumption it is taken for granted as foundational, as a truth.

But what if such an equation of critique with betrayal and such a prioritizing of support for memorial-makers, while politically laudable, might risk unwittingly keeping the claims of the dead at bay by staking political allegiance on a resistance to thinking deeply and critically about how we might best remember murdered women in ways that invite us to consider how their unjust pasts, pasts which remain unsettled, continue to operate in the arrangements and conditions of the present? In other words, the decision *not* to pose difficult or challenging questions about a memorial's form or effects might limit our ability to develop a deeper understanding about what exactly it *is* about certain memorials that makes them more effective than others or makes them more capable of calling us into relations of responsibility and inheritance with the women whose losses they mark.

By tying their bottom line to the political claims of the feminist memorial makers whose work they document, the Cultural Memory Group misses an opportunity to enrich this work through an intellectual inquiry which would raise questions about the broad range of potential effects and readings of the memorials they take up in way that might embrace more tentativeness and less certainty. Instead, as a result of the necessity of closing down meaning in the interests of maintaining and supporting political entailments, this text seems hardly able to imagine a future different from the present in which women are regularly murdered by men. As such, the "war on women" is evoked throughout as though it were a naturalized inevitability, perhaps troublingly re-inscribing this circumstance *as* reality even as there is a desire to counter it. Too much certainty about the necessary good of feminist memorializing leads the Cultural Memory Group away from a practice of criticality built on uncertainty (Rogoff), while their fears about "betrayal by analysis" risk silencing important opportunities for critical reflection. Although I admire their political stance, it seems to me that an ethical critical practice requires more from us.

The focus on documenting, instead of analyzing or critiquing, many of the grassroots memorials discussed in *Remembering Women* likely also relates to the fact that the volume overall is premised on a conviction that visibility (or re-presentation) is itself an essential catalyst for social change. Unlike the editors of *Killing Women,* whose compelling questions about the many possible effects of representation, cited above, establish the tone of their collection, the Cultural Memory Group seems willing to accept the equation of visibility with change at face value. In their introduction, the authors suggest that a significant aim of their research is to make formerly in- or less-visible monuments (more) visible to a broader public. As they explain, "We have taken literally the memorial-makers' emphasis on visibility: in the words of Jan Andrews, a member of Women's Urgent Action in Ottawa, 'The more public this issue becomes, the more visibility it has, the less men can ignore it'" (16). To this end, the text surely succeeds. But what makes the authors and the activist they cite believe that increased visibility automatically leads to action or change of a sort that is desirable? On what evidence do they base such assumptions? Is it not also possible that memorials which represent women as always already the inevitable victims of male violence might contribute to perpetuating cultural assumptions about woman-as-victim, even as they attempt to disrupt them? I found myself wishing that the authors of this text had opted to explore these questions, even if doing so led them to make the same political choices in the end.

But reading the collection all at once left me cold.

In contrast to much of the writing in *Remembering Women,* most of the essays in *Killing Women* are intensely critical and analytical, so much so that it is at times difficult to determine what is at stake for the various authors in the critiques they put forth. As a result, many of these essays revert to an objective, scholarly voice that is also quite far from the practice of criticality that Rogoff describes above. Certainly, all of the essays in the collection offer some provocation for further thought about the relationship between representation and violence, even if one is unfamiliar with the exhibit or film being dealt with by close reading (as I frequently was). But reading the collection all at once left me cold. Perhaps this is the intended effect (the chilling, blood-spattered cover might lead one to believe so), or perhaps readers aren't intended to read these essays on a grisly array of violent acts one after another. I find myself returning to Burfoot and Lord's important introductory question, "What is it that one wants of representation in such situations?" (xii). Perhaps I want far too much, since I am dissatisfied with a lack of critique (or for that matter criticality) in *Remembering Women* and similarly dissatisfied with an overemphasis on critique (and subsequent lack of criticality) in *Killing Women.*

There is much to focus on in *Killing Women* that relates to the questions I have raised about the ethics of critique, but in the interests of time and space I have chosen just a couple of passages to discuss. In her thoughtful exploration of how we might respond as academics to representations of violence and murder, Zoey Élouard Michele proposes the following approach: [T]he most effective demonstration of the … researcher's empathy with his/her … research subjects is to dissolve the line that traditionally separates one role from the other—that is, to blur the boundary between Self and Other—without shrinking from the new political challenges to be faced in such a move (63).

By being "open to the pain experienced by research subjects, and the pain we may feel in empathizing with these subjects," we may, Michele argues, "keep the stories that we tell as free from externally imposed distortions as possible and … resist the tendency towards objectification" (62). This is a provocative reflection on how one might approach doing scholarly work in this area, but I wish Michele had gone on to discuss what these "political challenges" might be and how we might best face them. I am skeptical, for example, about the wisdom of dissolving the boundary between self and other too thoroughly, for it is that very boundary and the differences that constitute it that mark the increased vulnerability to violence of women from Juarez or from the Downtown Eastside in the first place. While I agree that blurring this boundary somewhat is likely essential to an ethical stance, blurring it too far, and thereby convincing ourselves that our analysis can somehow become unconstrained by "externally imposed distortions" (62), seems dangerous. It seems far more important, for example, to unpack and explore those distortions (and the sources of their imposition) in our own work than to imagine that we can somehow free ourselves from them.

Other authors in *Killing Women* explore the realm of ethics by asking how certain representations (such as photographs, art exhibits, or film) create a sense of implication in their viewers. This notion of implication seems incredibly important but is oddly under-theorized by those authors who take it up. In Margot Leigh Butler's work on photographs of murdered and missing women, for example, the concept is discussed primarily in relation to a woman named Megan who wanders in to a lecture Butler is giving in Downtown Eastside Vancouver and mistakenly recognizes herself in a photograph of murdered women from San Francisco. Her sense of implication in the San Francisco murders, therefore, seems obvious, but I wanted Butler to explain how implication in this instance might be related to justice or change. Is it women like Megan, who already have so much in common with the women who were murdered, that we want or need to feel implicated in these acts of violence? Is it not in fact those of us who believe our lives to be radically removed from Megan's that would benefit from a greater sense of our own implication in the social circumstances surrounding the murders of women being examined here? Similarly, Lisa Coulthard argues in her essay in the collection that the "recognition of violence in [the art of Abigail Lane and Jenny Holzer] is a slow process that implicates and involves the viewer" (135). But what is the ethical register of such a sense of implication? How might it potentially affect viewers of such representations in the short term? The long term? Does it accomplish more than to evoke a sense of empathy or compassion? Because I worry, as writer Susan Sontag argues in her important book, *Regarding the Pain of Others,* that "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers" (101). While these authors may see these questions as beyond the scope of their essays (and certainly they are also questions that have no definitive answers), to my mind any sense of implication resulting from encounters with representations like those discussed in these essays requires us to further theorize the relationship between implication and justice. I suspect that an approach to critique more along the lines of Rogoff's criticality, one that can tolerate—indeed requires—a bit of uncertainty might perhaps have allowed these authors to speculate further on what this relationship might involve.

To conclude, I would like to return to Wendy Brown's notion of critique as "caring for … the object in question" (2005, x) to suggest that I offer my critique of these two texts in the spirit of admiring and wishing to contribute to the important offerings they make to the burgeoning study of representations and remembrance of murdered and missing women. *Remembering Women* and *Killing Women* both make significant contributions to the literature on violence against women in Canada and will undoubtedly be valuable resources for my own research and that of numerous others. But I nonetheless still find myself a bit disappointed that the authors don't dwell longer on the complex questions that arise about the ethics of critique as they pertain to their chosen subject matter. For surely at this moment in our history, when radically different approaches to representing and remembering murdered women are beginning to permeate our culture like never before, we are sorely in need of approaches that necessarily build on critique but perhaps move us closer to something like the practice of criticality that Rogoff introduces.

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