

WHO IS LARA KRAMER?

APRIL 11, 2016 COMAN POON

At the start of 2015, I began a series of conversations, unified by the shared titling of :”WHAT IS _____?” in order to diversify and re-centre the community dialogue around issues in the performing arts in Toronto that felt underaddressed in the printed media. Initial conversations convened with leaders in the field (curators, producers, directors) who were part of the collective effort behind launching the inaugural Progress Festival, which purports to cultivate a new/different international conversation within the local performing arts ecology of Canada’s largest city. This evolved to include conversations with emerging choreographers and dance-makers about their practices, culminating in a call-to-arms conversation with established choreographer Peter Chin about the lack of media literacy around non-EuroAmerican-centric dance forms.

With 2016, I continue this inquiry with a series that will share the title of: “WHO IS _____?” but shift the focus to offering dialogic profiles of dance-makers, choreographers, artistic directors and producers. I dream that by intentionally cultivating regional, national and international conversations with Indigenous and culturally diverse artists and arts leaders that these parallel and somewhat intersecting worlds may begin to see themselves in each other and in turn, offer a more fully rounded perspective on performance culture in the post/colonial space we share/occupy.

Coman



A selfie by Lara Kramer

March 30, 2016: conversation with Lara Kramer

Coman Poon (Coman): Good morning, Lara.

Lara Kramer (Lara): Good morning.

Coman: Thanks for taking the time to chat with me. Let me introduce myself.

I am a Cantonese-Chinese settler. I immigrated to Canada in 1980.

Born in the former British colony of Hong Kong and from a maternal ancestry I can trace back 22 generations to the village of Xin Hui (just outside of Guangzhou in the People's Republic of China).

Lara: Wow, that's incredible. The history and access to it. Did you always have this link to your lineage?

Coman: No. In fact, knowledge of this unbroken link has only surfaced recently through my maternal grandfather's research and the work of my retired uncle (my mother's younger brother) who travelled around the world and pieced the lineage together. As a result of email contacts gained, I am grateful to have the opportunity to connect to my 22nd generation cousins spread out across the UK, Canada, USA and Asia. Prior to this, I knew only of my great grand parents on my mother's side and only my grand parents on my father's side.

As you may imagine, growing up away from my birth city and living in another (colonial) culture, I felt disconnected to my ancestry. I often wondered where my ancestral lands were and who my ancestors were but had to come to terms with not knowing. This is what drew me to dance, as an attempt to access cell and blood memory. How do you connect to your ancestry?

Lara: It's great when there is family keen to dig into history. My mom became more of an advocate in piecing together our family history somewhere in my teens. And other family members I have met along the way have been able to fill in other gaps and connections to our history.

Coman: You descend from Ojibwe and Cree maternal ancestry...I seem to recall reading this. How does this impact you as an artist?

Lara: I think in a very practical sense, or it feels practical to me. Since the birth of my daughter who will be three this month, I have initiated a connection with family in Lac Seul and Sioux Lookout, Ontario where we can go back eight generations and a bit further through the history of the name Wesley.

My great grandfather Robert Wesley (my mother's grandfather) was chief for twenty years in Lac Seul, Ontario. His family name can be traced to Scottish bloodlines. There is land in around Lac Seul named after the family, Wesley Bay. I don't have the period when the Scottish immigrated and procreated with the Cree and Ojibwa, but over time the Wesley name became Nishnawbe.

And by 'practical' I mean spending time in the north with family, cousins [and] my great aunt who have access to the family's lineage. Access to the history of the land, the changes of the land. Know the history of the impact of broken treaty, implementation of the welfare system, reserve, residential schools...

Placing myself in the context of where the history is, past, present and future allows me to be present with my lineage, my ancestors.

Coman: I often struggle with being away from my birth city, from the South China Sea and being so far away from my ancestral land...it has, in many ways subtle and overt, informed my art and social change practice. I often wonder how I would be if I hadn't settled on Turtle Island. You live and work away from Lac Seul and Sioux Lookout...is this important?

Lara: I've always been driven to put myself in the context of space and land that carries my history. For instance, when I was researching the Indian Residential Schools of Canada - specifically my mother's- I spent time inside and around the land of the two schools she attended in Manitoba. It's life experience and well I have called it for myself [as] a kind of field work.

The body needs to be immersed in an environment to better understand the impact of an event, situation, history, a story, circumstance, etc. You tap into many layers...sounds, sensations, images, visual landscapes, interactions, relations, stories unfold and are told from the people of that land, relationships develop and deep connections can be made. All of this becomes what makes discovering your cultural roots rich. It's so important personally. And well, this then impacts my relationship to my art.

The drive is always there to connect. When a history has been displaced, fragmented from the impact of Residential Schools, the breakdown of family lines and connections, the imposition [of] colonial systems, the hunger to understand and piece it all together is vital in discovering cultural lines.

Coman: There is much knowledge and wisdom that lies in and outside of the body. I often think of what you refer to as ‘field work’ as body-to-body communication, between my bodies and the larger ‘bodies’ of land, history, transgenerational and cultural memory. This seems to also mark the territory of your artistic journeys. Did you already know or intuit this before attending Concordia?

Lara: Prior to Concordia I wasn’t actively feeding an artistic journey. At least I didn’t think of it that way. There was always inside of me that desire to connect to ‘field work’, to understand my history on a personal level.

Coman: What did you give and receive from the experience of being in a dance program in a vibrant arts-filled city like Montreal?

Lara: I received it as a privilege, an opportunity to soak in what otherwise wouldn’t be an opportunity to invest in a personal journey, to connect with the body. It was also very removed from what I had known, experienced socially and artistically in London, Ontario.

I was coming from a period in my life where I had put dance aside and focused on social issues in and around London, Ontario. I was hit hard by the [Ippeewash crisis](#), one of my best childhood friends violently lost her uncle [Dudley George](#). He was murdered by a London cop. This impacted my choices in my late teens and twenties, how I viewed First Nations relationships with dominate culture.

I had also been working at a grass roots homeless shelter and needle exchange clinic. Entering Concordia it felt sheltered from what I was use to, whom I was use to associating with. It felt like I was in this ‘dance bubble’ as I didn’t really discover Montreal until I graduated.

Coman: In your time at Concordia, did you have an opportunity to connect with or do field work on the land itself? If so, how did it impact you as an artist? I ask this because Montreal is traditional territory of the Mohawk and (if I am not mistaken) Western Abenaki.

Lara: When I was at Concordia I didn't dive into the field work until right after graduation. I worked predominately in the studio, reconnecting to my body as a dancer and taking in the influences of that institution. I really appreciated this time...it was a kind of indulgence. Once I graduated I wove together my work in my past with the body, began my artistic path incorporating, discovering my history through the body.

My understanding is that Montreal is traditional territory to four nations. Mohawk, Nipissing, Algonquin and Wendat. I know there is yet knowledge to be confirmed from knowledge keepers.

Coman: Thank you for the correction about Montreal. I did not know this.

Lara: It still needs to be confirmed, but it is what is being discussed, researched.

Coman: In a round about way, your experience has been from one city to another, from one territory to another and immersing from one set of cultural values to another. I can't help but think of the parallels and contrasts in the journeys your mother and your grandmother took. Does your journey strike you as a path of return through the arts?

Lara: A path of return to my cultural roots you mean?

Coman: Yes.

Lara: Yes absolutely. I think the arts have allowed me to make connections. Connect to my culture.

Coman: What is at stake in creating performing art works that are so personal and at the same time, culturally and politically urgent? Is there a tension between the two or do you experience it as a conjoined path?

Lara: Early on going into personal work, I was scared. I felt I had right to the artistic expression but was nervous of how it would be received by dominant culture. Talking about the Indian Residential Schools (IRS) while it was just coming out of the wood work, made me vulnerable. One of my research partners received many death threats for his work on the IRS. He made it clear associating with him was risky. I have been asked a few times if my work puts me in a risky situation. If I focused on that I'd censor too much.

We have the luxury as creators to go far in what we expose. The personal drive is what propels me to create and I'm not naive to the fact that my work is cultural and politically urgent. But this is not what gives me desire to create. I don't have an agenda to make something political or culturally reliant. I think they co-exist and yes there is a tension. When my personal relationship to my work shifts and I've emptied myself of a process and the work continues to have a voice culturally and politically, I can feel the dynamic. My relationship and role to the work changes, requires balancing and reflection.

Coman: Of the works in your oeuvre, which ones have surprised you in their wider impact (beyond a live audience's response)? I think of and imagine the ripples from the premier of *Native Girl Syndrome* in Vancouver when I ask this as well as the Edmonton performance of *Fragments* in the period of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's investigations...are there others?

Lara: *The Indian Problem* was around the time of Harper's apology.

Coman: I also think of health and wellbeing and its connection to colonial trauma, trauma to the transgenerational body/family and the terrestrial body/land. Do you see your expression in dance also a ritual of healing?

Is this somehow connected to the genesis of Camp 19?

Lara: I think of my work as a ritual, a process of understanding the trauma, lateral violence, effects of the IRS. If it's healing, that comes from the engagement and need to understand. There are so many variations, states of trauma linked to the impact of cultural genocide and it is something that is addressed in all of my work. The need and desire to connect to it is a result of the intergenerational effects of trauma. It's a process I have to go through and that is kind of a working ritual.

Camp 19 began as my first journey as an adult to my northern blood land. I think of it as a spiritual process, it's a sacred place to me where historical vibrations are strong. Where the old and new live. Healing yes, but more of a feeling of inherent right. It's my inheritance, close to the source, the life. I feel like it's a ritual of returning to a state of humility, a grounding. A few different personal and artistic processes have pulled me there. I think of Camp 19 as an on-going need in my career. A place to reset and find clarity in what's important.

Coman: Beautifully stated. Your work centres on an embodied 'channelling' that is both experiential and political. It seems that there is both a representational and a live element at play

in your choreography. This type of performance/live art work also asks a lot from individuals performing/living each moment. Audience impact aside, how do you address this (potentially triggering) impact on your body and the bodies of your performers?

Lara: I have not created a ritual or process of re-aligning the performer's body post living in 'states', performing. There is a lot of check in's and touching base of how the artists are doing, consideration for what they are taking on. When I was performing *Fragments* I had my own method/ritual of letting go, detaching from the experience and it was lengthy at times.

Coman: Chi Miigwech. I honour your process and your artistic offerings, Lara. I look forward to the premier of [NGS \(Native Girl Syndrome\) at Native Earth's Aki Studio](#) on April 21st in Tkaranto/Toronto.

Lara: Great thank you for the talk. It's been a pleasure to share.

LARA KRAMER is Artistic Director and Choreographer of Lara Kramer Danse, a company based in Montreal. Lara Kramer is an Oji-Cree (Ojibwe and Cree) choreographer and performer whose work is intimately linked to memory, often examining political issues surrounding Canada and First Nations Peoples. Her works has shown in Montreal, Ottawa, Peterborough, Rama, ON, Toronto, Regina, Edmonton, Banff and Vancouver, gaining her recognition as an important Indigenous voice in Canada.

www.larakramer.ca