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Jassem Hindi and Peter James perform Lara Kramer's "Windigo." Photograph by Frederic Chais  
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## Lurking Within

*Lara Kramer's "Windigo"*

Performance  
Lara Kramer's "Windigo"

Place  
Dancehouse, Melbourne, Victoria, May 10, 2019

Words  
Gracia Haby

Max Porter's novel *Lanny* begins with Dead Papa Toothwort slipping "through one grim costume after another as he rustles and trickles and cusses his way between the trees."<sup>1</sup> He is the Green Man myth of decay and renewal, of chaos growing into hope; "he pauses as an exhaust pipe, then squirms into the shape of a rabbit snare, then a pissed-on nettle into pink-strangled lamb. He plucks a blackbird from the sky and cracks open the yellow beak. He peers into the ripped face as if it were a clear pond. He flings the bird across the forest stage, stands up woodlot bare, bushy, and stamps his splattered feet." He is tree bark and discarded Western rubbish. He changes form. He is unfixed and without end. He pauses, roughly the size of a flea, to listen to and gargle the fizz of human sound.

And I am reminded of this shapeshifting ability each time I enter Dancehouse not knowing where I will go and what the space will be, pausing, in my own way, as an exhaust pipe before mutating into a flea. I am especially reminded of this as I enter the upstairs theatre space for the white-cell artifice and confinement of Lara Kramer's "Windigo," were performers Jassem Hindi and Peter James wait.

Hindi and James are two sunken forms, slouched into (and possibly becoming) two mattresses. They continue to mark time as the audience fills 'their' space, their no-man's land, and assume it for their own: that's the one-sided deal, right? They are wasting time, in a wasteland of debris and mattresses. And they are in a way, jangling in their "various skins, wearing a tarpaulin gloaming coat . . . . tingling with thoughts of how one thing leads to another again and again, time and again, with no such thing as an ending."



Jassem

Hindi and Peter James perform Lara Kramer's "Windigo." Photograph by Frederic Chais

In turn, I am both my own version of a hungry Dead Papa Toothwort and I am the embodiment of the human sound Dead Papa Toothwort needs to gobble up. Unfixed.

Kramer's "Windigo," like Dead Papa Toothwort, is worked from "what is in [her] gut."

"I fill what has been empty, I fill it with sound. Raw sounds of movement, breath, sweat and warmth. It is within my artistic process that I have further connected to my Aboriginal roots. I work with storytelling within my creative process as a way of exploring how the mapping of stories from my family's history resonates in the body and how it can be transferred symbolically in my work connecting the past, present and future."<sup>2</sup>

Kramer cracks open the yellow beak of the bird and creates from "a place of exploring trauma, lateral violence and the aftermath of Indian residential schools."<sup>3</sup> Researching the "colonial impact on First

Nations in Canada, exploring the radical changes in governing systems, relations to land, treaties and family structures,” Kramer works with a “heightened awareness to things like the taste of one’s mouth, the heat of one’s throat, the vibration of the inner and outer body,” in connection, always, to the spirit world. “Windigo,” presented by Dancehouse in collaboration with YIRRAMBOI First Nations Festival, is no exception: you can hear it, even when it is silent; especially when it is silent. I hear myself swallow. I can hear Hindi as he cuts into the mattress and stuffs a chunk of its foam body into his mouth. I can hear him spit out. And the plastic owl that is meant to scare possums from the urban garden, I hear it too, as it is smothered by a plastic sheet. Earlier the owl with the white masked face served as a limb for the Mattress Man that Hindi grew into and was consumed by. An owl, and a raft of meanings. Hollow nourishment and fake nature, dead nature, fragmented. All of it.

“The Windigo is the legendary monster of our Anishinaabe people . . . you can feel it lurking behind you,” writes Robin Wall Kimmerer, in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, “with arms like tree trunks, feet as big as snow-shoes, it travels easily through the blizzards of the hungry time, stalking us. The hideous stench of its carrion breath poisons the clean scent of snow as it pants behind us . . . . The more a Windigo eats, the more ravenous it becomes. Consumed by consumption, it lays waste to humankind.”<sup>4</sup>

The Windigo is the ravenous part within all of us. A “traditional upbringing was designed to strengthen self-discipline, to build resistance against the insidious germ of taking too much . . . [to]see the dark, recognize its power, but . . . not feed it.” The “Windigo” before me now is also the world “turned inside out, the dark side made to seem light.” A consumer-driven world, now gnawed hollow at its core, where the “indulgent self-interest . . . once held to be monstrous is now celebrated as success.”

The sound of a siren somewhere in the street below lays over the sounds gathered long ago and today from Ontario's Far North, and I lose my bearings. With one hand James animates a pink rabbit with a coil for a body. In the other hand, a jumble of red cables. Hindi and James, are "survivors killing time and boredom, spewing out and sublimating their pain and suffering"<sup>5</sup> in a contemporary ceremony. Symbols shift to be heard. A mattress is the land. A pink-strangled rabbit is hope. And the human spirit is ripped open with a pocket knife wielded like a claw.

1. Max Porter's *Lanny* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 2019).
2. Lara Kramer website <http://larakramer.ca/#>, accessed May 11, 2019.
3. Lara Kramer website <http://larakramer.ca/#>, accessed May 11, 2019.
4. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).
5. Lara Kramer, "Windigo" notes on Lara Kramer's website <http://larakramer.ca/portfolio/windigo/> accessed May 11, 2019.