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: *Native Girl Syndrome*

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# DECELERATION AS DECOLONIAL INTERVENTION IN LARA KRAMER'S *NGS: NATIVE GIRL SYNDROME*

*I'm concerned with what sensations I can incite and provoke; this is my access to my public, feeding sensations.*

—Lara Kramer<sup>1</sup>

**T**wo dancers, ANGIE CHENG and KARINA IRAOLA, are already swaying in place when blue lights flood the stage and brighten their movement. They stand at an angle with their backs to the audience; the fringe on their leather jackets rustles as they teeter to the low revving of

motorcycle engines streaming from the speakers. One behind the other, the two dancers appear unaware of each other, in separate orbits but in the same atmosphere. Antique prams are parked in front of them. Slowly, the dancers each outstretch digits to grip the prams' handlebars, steadying their involuntary sway; each looks on the verge of vomiting or falling

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*asleep. The combination of the droning sound and repetitive movement over a ten-minute period gives the audience time to observe minor details that might have otherwise gone unnoticed: the broken heel on one of IRAOLA's boots; the red string tied to CHENG's pram that drapes down toward the wheels; the beaded round pendant sewn onto the back panel of IRAOLA's black jacket; a dreamcatcher. Inside each stroller are plastic bags filled with accumulated things, such as shoes, nylons, T-shirts, and beer cans.<sup>2</sup> Then, sluggishly, IRAOLA attempts to straddle the handlebar on which a plastic bag of empty beer cans hangs from its center. As she grinds her pelvis onto the bag, gripping it with one hand and holding onto the handlebar with the other, her thrusts become increasingly more aggressive until the plastic rips open and beer cans scatter, creating an atonal symphony of solid floor meeting hollow tin.*

This is the opening of Lara Kramer's *NGS: Native Girl Syndrome* (2013), a one-hour dance piece that embodies the intimate haze and afterlife of drug use, sex work, and poverty through a dissociative and slow movement score. Kramer, a choreographer of mixed Oji-Cree and settler heritage, creates movement that confronts dispossession through aggravated and slow actions. Waste, found objects, and the detritus of self-medication litter the set of *NGS*. Sharing temporalities of decay, the choreography and the very nature of these discarded objects stage an embodied decomposition, a peeling away of the elements that constitute the performance as a whole. In the unraveling of embodied action, we see how trash transforms into possessions and how women's bodies become discarded within the structural violence of settler-colonial societies.

Informed by her grandmother's experience in the Canadian Residential Schools—a nationally organized effort to “kill the Indian and save the man”—Kramer draws her title from the vernacular diagnosis deployed among Residential School authorities (such as social workers, nuns, foster care administrators, among others) to pathologize obstinate behavior by young Native girls.<sup>3</sup> This was a syndrome, they determined, that would transform malleable and innocent Native girls into reckless prostitutes and drug users. By deploying this same term in the title of her 2013 piece, Kramer stages an embodied deceleration of another meaning for Native girl syndrome: a way of searching for presence in

the wake of overdetermination—that is, part of an aesthetic strategy of slowing down and stalling the momentum with which national narratives seek to assimilate First Nations people into Canadian settler-colonial life. In this essay, I show how the pacing and movement of Kramer’s piece activates decolonial deceleration as an interruptive force. The dancers in *NGS* are moved and transformed by the waste on stage—these are animate objects to which the artists respond and react, embodying a shared temporality of decay. Onstage, deceleration looks like bodies collapsing onto a vinyl floor and then waywardly, dizzily, trying to stand up, over and over again. This affective weight is the force through which audiences are asked to dwell in a space of ethical remembering of colonial histories, including past, present, and future colonial impact, rather than simply to think or know of them. Feeling this history emerges through witnessing the rough silence and stillness of embodied decomposition.

Drawing on the history of the title of Kramer’s piece, I turn to the 1983 semi-autobiographical novel by Métis writer Beatrice Mosionier, *In Search of April Raintree*, as one of the first literary uses of the phrase “Native girl syndrome,” to demonstrate the term’s powerful hold on subjectivity. The novel tells the story of two Métis sisters, April and Cheryl Raintree, who are taken from their parents and placed into the foster care system. The sisters are shuttled between multiple non-Native families, and the novel documents the abuse they experience from the Canadian state, teachers, and foster families. Moving away from this narrative-based expression, *Native Girl Syndrome*’s slow and nonlinear choreography of embodied movement reveals a disjointed and sensorial treatment of intergenerational violence.

I approach this essay at the intersection of performance studies and critical Indigenous studies, two fields that have robust debates as to what happens to the body over time, and what bodies can *do* with time. My work has been concerned with questions of what it means to be a spectator, what are the rouses and pitfalls of watching history on stage, and to what extent bodies in the audience are interpellated into this relationship.<sup>4</sup> As a writer and performance maker myself, my own questions around how to represent the difficulties of representation—of being a subject in a global landscape that has sought to erase Brown queer bodies—have concerned my creative work. Like many people, my relationship to time is unstable. Time under colonial capitalism blooms curious inconsistencies; “time” is a speed of operation (work) that dismisses intimate presence for

rushed transactions in the name of progress. In my own Ethiopian culture, the country follows a liturgical calendar that is seven years behind the Gregorian calendar, or Common Era calendar. These vast time differences make shared occasions across a diaspora difficult, but not impossible—just duplicated. My own obsession with time and its gaps began with this diasporic dissonance centered on repetition. I have never truly trusted

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*I have never truly trusted linear time.*

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linear time. The act of writing, making time to carve out a lyrical score of intimate memory, a record of what was and what still is, cracks open a space for presence. As a method, close reading for time’s jumps and leaning into the time study requires *is* a form of deceleration.

Although it is not *this* history that I had on my mind when I first witnessed Kramer’s *NGS*. As a participating artist in the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics’ 2015 *Encuentro* in Montreal—a transnational meeting of artists, activists, and scholars in the Americas—I saw the opening of this performance’s opaque drawl, and I was captivated. The sound of revving motorcycle engines transitioned into the chilling cadence of a cover of Bruce Springsteen’s *Fire*, prompting the dive-bar atmosphere that often facilitates sexual coercion: “I’m pulling you close / You just say no / You say you don’t like it / But girl I know you’re a liar.” After the performance, audience members around me shared reactive retorts: the dreamcatcher is offensive; this isn’t representing Native people; why is it called “syndrome.” And yet the elements of performance detailed in this chatter index intentional aesthetic decisions on the part of the choreographer. Since this performance was only an excerpt of the complete performance, I wanted more time to understand what Kramer was doing with it. In collaboration with fellow faculty and graduate students at Brown University, we invited Lara Kramer to perform a full production of *NGS* with us. This essay is, in part, both a response and an attempt to unravel the complexity of Kramer’s choreography through a decolonial optic. By meditating on the affective power of slowing down movement, a decolonial strategy flourishes as a way to address grief wrought from colonial violence.

Herein, I suggest that aesthetic enactments of deceleration, such as the moments of stillness that occur throughout the piece, accumulate the memory of settler-colonial violence, and thus refuse to figure such violence as past. *NGS* animates

rage through the atomization of difficult scenes of despair and dejection. Kramer describes her performance practice as a way of enduring the time that is felt, an enduring grief that lasts generations and refuses the narrative of healing through linear time. She is invested in altered states of the body through a choreographic method based on ecologies of affect rather than the decidability of movement. The slowness of Kramer's choreography offers a theorization of how to mourn the weight of violent history, with a very specific focus on Indigenous women in Canada. In doing so, her work launches a critique of the overwhelming discourses that deny the verifiability of women's stories of abuse, violence, and murder in Canada specifically, as well as violence against Indigenous women in the Americas more broadly.

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## DECOMPOSITION

Returning to the scene with which I've opened the essay, the dancers in NGS continue to move as if no one is watching. I was an audience member at the full-length production of NGS at Brown University, on Narragansett lands, in a settler-nation that has yet to reconcile with its own history of the Indian Boarding Schools.<sup>5</sup> After Iraola grips the pram in front of her, she grinds into a plastic bag of beer cans hanging from the handle. She moves so aggressively that the cans explode onto the floor, and she collapses with them. In this live iteration of the performance, Iraola writhes so violently on the floor that she cuts her hand on the sharp metal edge of a crushed beer can. In an accidental but painfully telling coincidence, these were empty cans of Narragansett beer, a Rhode Island-based brewery named after the land's tribal nation.<sup>6</sup> Iraola slowly crawls to a blue plastic tarp hitched to the stage wall, smearing blood on the floor, plastic bags, and beer cans in her transit. She drapes the transparent plastic tarp over her head and body, emitting a ghostly light about her now that the



**Figure 1.**

*Iraola's body encased within a plastic bag. Photo credit Frederic Chaise. NGS: Native Girl Syndrome Premiere with Tangente at Studio Hyrdro at Monument-National, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. November 2013. Image courtesy of the artist.*

blue spots reflect against the sheen of the plastic. She is both in and overcome by the plastic sheet, while her dance partner—a satellite a few feet away from her—settles into her own orbit as if magnetized by the metal cans. Cradled by the plastic (formerly trash and now a holding space), Iraola slows her movement inside the plastic to follow the internal vibration of the object itself. In doing so, she does not place her body within a hierarchy to the plastic, but moves alongside it, attuning her embodiment to its own rhythm.

Iraola squats down and begins to roll, starting from stage right. The plastic entangles her, and she cannot move without moving the plastic; or perhaps the plastic moves her. In one long slow turn, her body undulates, like a wave, and moves toward center stage. She is still perceptible as a body but transforming into something else; the details of her body are foggy through the semi-opacity of the plastic. On the subsequent turn, the crown of her head, draped by her long dark hair, emerges from a hole in the plastic bag, her head crowning from

a plastic birth canal. Next, her head retreats back into the plastic passage, an amoeba shying away from exposure. Then, rolling, she continues to wrap herself tighter into the plastic tarp, merging skin, plastic, and hair, until she goes limp. The plastic-body-woman is still.

Moments pass as Iraola lies still on stage. I begin to feel time, its weight heavy in the room with the image of disposability laid out before us. And then, the piece is interrupted with a voice. The first time we hear words is more than halfway through the performance. In a low growl, Cheng, now pulling a Canadian history textbook out of her stroller, begins to spew negative epithets about First Nations women to the audience. Both the moment of speech and the derogatory language are jolting to witness, even when placed within tableaux of inebriation, destitution, and rejection. Her growl becomes a shout that overcomes her entire body and she falls to the floor over and over again, oscillating between landing onto her upper left and right thighs as she struggles to stand. Cheng makes Kramer's difficult choreography appear easy and fluid, as if falling repeatedly, even tailspinning, onto one's sides is a dance with gravity.

As depicted in these scenes, wooziness, leaning, and falling describe key movements in Kramer's choreography. Stillness and slowness thus interrupt our understanding of choreography as an active, moving genre of performance. Cheng and Iraola inhabit states of repetitive difficult movement, and then other moments of complete stillness. Embraced by the waste on stage, the dancers' erratic movement between glacial gestures and rapid thrusting stages a manic affective experience, one that mimics the ways in which settler colonization normalizes unknowing; that is, a deliberate disavowal of embodied ways of being in and of the world as

a minoritarian subject.<sup>7</sup> When filtered through a decolonial optic, then, *NGS* juxtaposes the debris of colonial violence (humans and objects figured as waste) and the slow engagement as a way to destabilize not only linear narratives of progress, but even how we are emotively meant to feel or interact with the aftermath of settler-violence. Sitting with the difficult scenes of *NGS*, facilitated

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through slow movement, is the effect of deceleration as a decolonial intervention. Kramer's atmosphere permeates the feeling of settler-violence, even if audiences want to look away.

Audience responses to the performances in Montreal and Vancouver have been reductive, yet when thought through the lens of deceleration, the performance reviews read otherwise. Cecilia Lu, in the *Vanity Buzz*, titled her review "*Native Girl Syndrome* is a Weak Appropriation of 'The Streets,'" opening with the hyperbolic statement: "that was the longest 60 minutes I've had to sit through."<sup>8</sup> This review, though, confirms the success of the deceleration in some ways. Kramer was able to make the piece *feel* much longer than sixty minutes, and, in truth, the settler-colonial ramifications of the Residential Schools exceed the bounds of time: an abusive act that happens in seconds can reverberate for a lifetime. Another reviewer borrowed heavily on the language of theatrical performance, casting the dancers as characters, claiming that "Karina Iraola and Angie Cheng play two native women"—and yet they do not.<sup>9</sup> Rather, they inhabit what Kramer has called states of movement. These are paths of a trajectory that are not intricately scripted but instead determined through an embodied meditation of difficult affects. In talking about her recent piece *Tame* in an issue of *Dance Current*, Kramer describes how her choreographic method is grounded in "the physicality of the body":

The relationship to the internal state and vibration is what carries the life of the characters. Everything is felt and experienced through the physical impulses and reactions of the characters. The decor, textures and sound elements in [*NGS* and *Tame*] are a part of the extension of the body. Structurally the work is carved by the value of duration of time that is felt and lived through the characters.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Kramer builds on a long genealogy of slow movement aesthetics "carved by the value of duration of time." Kramer's states of movement not only refute the critical response about character, but they also frame a response to colonial duration, where the felt history of settler-violence lives and remains present within the body. If Kramer crafts an Indigenous choreography that is manifest through physical impulses and reactions, then we can consider the discarded objects (what reviews have called "crap" or "trash") as animate reactors for the dancers. In other words, if Indigenous-centered ways of knowing figure environmental life as part of a living, breathing relationship, then Kramer also

stages discarded things as part of a living, breathing relationship that departs from colonial capitalist principles celebrating use-value, waste, excess, and disposability. Thus, part of deceleration as staged by Kramer also requires slowing down in order to fully absorb and see discarded objects in a space. In doing so, this principle carves out durational movement to feel, for example, every inch of a plastic tarp. These things deserve time and embodied reaction and, simultaneously, *script* the embodied reactions on the part of the dancers.<sup>11</sup>

A number of global performance forms embrace slow movement, and, in particular, the midcentury development of Butoh correlates with Kramer's work. A dance theater form originating from Japan, Butoh takes its inspiration from Kabuki and Noh theater while incorporating drawling extensions and slouching forms of movement: atomizing limbs at the joint, shrinking down the body, drawing out stiff facial expressions of disgust or inconsolable frowns. At any moment, bodies appear as if they might collapse. The two founders of Butoh, Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo, responded to the devastation of the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in addition to the import of Western materialism, with a slow and abject movement form—*ankoku butoh*, meaning darkness. Why hide devastation with virtuosic extensions? In comparing Butoh with Western ballet, dance philosopher and Butoh scholar Sondra Fraleigh explains that Butoh “does not purify and sublimate; it is muddy and often ugly, but it seems to understand that ugliness wakes up beauty. Meanwhile, it is not a progressive art; instead, it looks back and takes stock. Its direction is not upward and outward as in Western ballet, but more downward and dissolving.”<sup>12</sup> Absent of grace, and heavy with the weight of historical violence, the slowness of Butoh and NGS alike is deeply embedded in upending how colonization has lived within the body. As Fraleigh writes, “Hijikata wanted to rescue the Japanese body from colonization after the war.”<sup>13</sup> Taking Butoh as one performative precedent that takes stock in bodily experiences of pain illuminates how grief

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can turn minutes into hours. Decelerating the body has a genealogy of slowing down time in live performance in order to reckon with the swift devastation of colonization (an atomic bomb, the snatching of a child). Kramer's rubric of movement has a unique imperative: she encourages dancers to feel the dance rather than mimic set movement, as in specific choreography.

In both the Butoh and NGS contexts, the body negates a one-to-one representation that has a tendency to correlate the body of the performer with a representative figure in everyday life. Kramer describes a felt ecology of the dancer's motivations, how the soundscape and scenography of the space choreograph the movement of the dancers rather than the other way around. Kramer's choreography falls in line with Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million's "felt theory," a proposal that Native women writers feel colonial histories as well as think them. In her analysis of a number of First Nation women writers who express the history of abuse and violence enacted upon Indigenous women, Million asks: "Where, for instance, would the felt experience of being raped by a priest at ten years old be expressed for whose knowledge would this experience be important? If the child has no words to name it or if her silence is enforced discursively and physically, did nothing happen?"<sup>14</sup> Kramer's attention to the "duration of time that is felt" speaks to a much broader understanding of time, a felt time that was passed from her grandmother, to her mother, to her, to the performance of NGS, and now, *to the audience*. In the world created by her performance, Kramer crafts a leaky environment, one steeped in the debris of temporary highs in the dimly lit, sticky, and blurry space of trying to tell a story of what happened to the carriers of "Native girl syndrome."

The dancer's deceleration invites the breakdown of progression, reconsidering impulses toward linearity, progress, communicability, and uniformity. Within Canada's settler-colonial and white supremacist heteropatriarchal culture, Indigenous women, among other subjects of difference, are controlled outside of their own consent, their bodies are often overdetermined as dependent on government welfare systems and a burden to the Canadian national project. This history shapes the legacies of intergenerational violence, and Kramer's embodied practice aims to slow down the temporality of abusive and traumatic events through embodying the ways in which this abuse *still acts*.

In this slowness, Kramer's choreography embodies what Rob Nixon describes as the "slow violence" of global capitalism: "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."<sup>15</sup> While Nixon's theorization of slow violence particularly focuses on environmental destruction as it relates to the world's poor, this also inextricably implicates First Nations women in Canada, who face some of the highest rates of poverty. Furthermore, Indigenous lifeways are some of the most immediately and irrevocably impacted by climate change—driven by colonial capitalism—as we have seen recently in the Brazilian Amazon. Slow violence reorients time, as the violence is not necessarily the direct occurrence of a wound followed by an immediate injury, but one that worsens over generations. The Canadian Residential Schools are a prime example of such slow violence. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the Canadian government, alongside various denominations of Christian churches, made attendance to church-run boarding schools compulsory for First Nations children. In these schools, children were denied the right to speak their Indigenous language, wear their customary clothing, or maintain long hair. Effectively, the Residential Schools instituted generations of cultural genocide, in addition to the loss of hundreds of children due to disease, abandonment, and running away from schools. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada broadcasted testimonies of survivors, and yet it is a herculean task to fully convey the enormity of this intergenerational pain; a hardness reverberating through Kramer's choreography that lands with each weighted step, each head swaying with eyes closed, or heard in the loud silence after a dancer collapses into an unmoving pile.

Indigenous women in Canada are already in a position of double dispossession—often removed from their land and, in some contexts, denied of their Native identity or their autonomy. Feminist decolonial studies scholar María Lugones describes this as the "colonial/modern gender system" where, building on the work on Anibal Quijano and Paula Gunn Allen, she names the global precolonial gendered relationships across colonized groups as a structuring, heterosexist colonial force. The appearance of First Nations and Indigenous women as sex workers or drug abusers is not coincidental but rather part of totalizing, though "slow, discontinuous, and heterogeneous processes that violently inferiorized

colonized women.”<sup>16</sup> Inhabiting affective states of transformation in performance, rather than mimicking behaviors of sex workers, dead women, or drug users, produces a situated cohabitation between audience and performers that illuminates the conditions of a colonial/modern gender system. Kramer does this through arresting the body in states of abjection, repose, and grief.

Similarly to the founders of Butoh, Kramer encourages her dancers to inhabit affective states rather than specific choreographed movement. Calling these performances “decolonial” marks a processual, nonlinear envisioning rather than a fixed future aspiration that will resolve wounds of the past through a representation of resistance. On a material and economic level, decolonization requires the return of Indigenous land and resources, yet intellectually and affectively there are resurgences of Indigenous ways of knowing. While this goal has numerous and insurmountable challenges, a decolonial process of envisioning relations emerges in Kramer’s work, where they transform the results of physical and institutional violence into raw material for practicing alternative forms of affective and collective relations. In framing her work as decolonial through this temporal frame, Kramer’s aesthetics work alongside Rosa-Linda Fregoso’s redefinition of decoloniality: “Decoloniality means thinking beyond the provincial understanding of *human* and *rights* as inscribed in law, and unsettling the standard claims around universal and transcendental human rights.”<sup>17</sup> This requires not only an attention to ecological life, but an attention to animacies for which we cannot easily account: spirits, ghosts, and hauntings.

Kramer asks audiences to not only witness but also feel the body in pain by holding tableaux of exhaustion and gendered violence in extended time; this includes scenes of women wrapped in body bags, or women stumbling into a hanging tarp or a shopping cart in an effort to orient home. Through her choreography’s portrayal of swaying and inebriated bodies in incredibly slow—and at times still—movement, Kramer stretches the time in which we witness difficult images through performances that refuse an investment in uplift or change. Instead, her work embraces the abject condition of disposability and dispossession thrust upon First Nations women in Canada. Living under settler colonialism and the persistent aftermath of disaster capitalism, Indigenous women continue to be outside of a national discourse of security and safety.

The slowness of the performance evokes a blurriness and boundlessness. The slower the dancer's bodies move in particularly difficult choreography, the more they sweat, the more audiences sweat, the more our breath starts to fill the space with an accumulation of bodily excess. The wooziness described above is not cyclical but instead correlates to Kramer's description of cultivating a "relationship to an internal state and vibration." Paying attention to that internal vibration necessitates the body to remain still and slow, creating a staccato of interaction between internal and external forms of movement.

Kramer's choreography formalizes affect as a relationship of bodies in and toward time, as well as in relation to objects and discourses of abjection.<sup>18</sup> Her method, built on this relationship to internal vibrations, takes felt ecologies as the cause of decelerated movement, not the effect of it. Kramer and Million both describe ways in which physical impulses and emotions extend beyond our own bodily containment. Affect theorist Eve Sedgwick describes this as a freedom of the affects where

[a]ffects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects. Thus, one can be excited by anger, disgusted by shame, or surprised by joy.<sup>19</sup>

And one can be thrilled by wooziness, halted by speed, and become disoriented by directions. Iraola's movement inside of the plastic produces an ecstatic wooziness. Kramer's two dancers are dispossessed of physical homes, land, and security, all the while being surrounded by possessions (prams, sheets, blue tarps, sundry items). There is no safe place on the stage, or even in the audience. Being beside one's self is one kind of freedom of affect, a seeing of one's own grief. Time slows down in the pacing of *NGS*, the way one might feel immediately following or long after a gut-wrenching loss, as if everyone keeps moving on but you. The time it takes for Iraola to move from one corner of the stage to the blue tarp in the other corner forces us to question assumptions made about the *less* in homelessness through settler-colonial dispossession.

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Colonization is a violent process of varying speeds. On some levels, structural oppression happens quite swiftly: taking children from their Native families; cutting one's hair that has cultural significance; swapping moccasins for laced boots. While these actions happen quickly, education is a slow indoctrination over time and through generations. Colonization, in collaboration with global capitalism, is a violent process that steals time. It steals time from practicing and being in one's cultural and ancestral space in service to stultifying, rigid, and orderly practices of Judeo-Christian orientations of time and place.<sup>20</sup> Kramer's ability to slow down time—what I have been describing as a decolonial deceleration—is an embodied refusal of the speed with which settler-colonization strips away the moments to pause, remember, and feel. This is what Mark Rifkin defines as “temporal sovereignty” built on Indigenous duration that “operates less as a chronological sequence than as overlapping networks of affective connection (to persons, nonhuman entities, and place) that orient one's way of moving through space and time, with story as a crucial part of that process.”<sup>21</sup> Deceleration in Kramer's piece is precisely motivated through “networks of affective connection” crisscrossing from intergeneration, between dancers in *NGS*, and across audiences and performers. Slowness becomes a way to enter into knowing violence otherwise—not as the blow from trauma, but rather the aftermath of reckoning with injury and maintaining recovery.

Iraola's movement invites audiences to know violence otherwise. Iraola drapes the plastic veil over her head and body, a ghostly glow about her now as the blue spotlights reflect against the sheen of the plastic. She is both in and overcome by the plastic bag, with her dance partner a few feet away from her, deep in her own orbit of trash, disillusionment, and beer cans. Iraola's dance with the plastic bag draws upon aesthetic vocabularies of women seen as refuse and waste.<sup>22</sup> As she is birthed from the plastic bag, the thing that was meant to be thrown out, discarded, and made redundant, leaches out and breathes in the plastic—she laminates life-giving and life-taking forces. The plastic layer is a second skin meant to both protect and conceal her, protecting her from the elements but also bringing her closer to danger. She is both distinct from and integrated into the plastic, at moments becoming an amorphous enigma with the material itself. *NGS* embraces—rather than challenges or critiques—the abject and difficult circumstances of poverty, alcoholism, and homelessness. Slow engagements with plastic in *NGS* disrupt complete disclosure of the



**Figure 2.**

*Iraola shifting within and alongside the plastic across the dance floor. Photo credit Frederic Chaise. NGS: Native Girl Syndrome Premiere with Tangente at Studio Hydro at Monument-National, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. November 2013. Image courtesy of the artist.*

body to the public and delve into obscurity, discharge, and waste as the site in which grief is felt and dispersed.

Staying with Karina Iraola's extended movement inside of this luminous plastic tarp, her stillness is both disturbing and poignant. Still "is the moment when the buried, the discarded and the forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness like life-supporting oxygen. It is the moment of exit from historical dust," writes cultural anthropologist Nadia Serematakis in her study on sensory memory.<sup>23</sup> In the fast-paced movement toward the contemporary, toward modernity, toward reconciliation, toward "moving-on" from trauma, slow moving and arresting performance offers a necessary rupture in that rapid momentum—a dancer's embodied pause to let rise a past from the "historical dust" that is not truly past. Staged stillness approximates more what audiences do in traditional performance spaces rather than the often active and vibrant movement of the performer.





**Figure 3.**

*Iraola stretches out a hand to the edge of the plastic, gesturing towards the audience. Photo credit Frederic Chaise. NGS: Native Girl Syndrome Premiere with Tangente at Studio Hyrdro at Monument-National, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. November 2013. Image courtesy of the artist.*

### **SYNDROMES REVISITED**

If we can think about *feeling* the dance rather than knowing it, what redefinition of “Native girl syndrome” might Kramer’s choreography suggest? The slowness of the choreography extends the gravity of embodied historical consciousness, as opposed to merely its symptomology. Rather than prescribing sex work and drug and domestic abuse as individual adolescent crises—as denoted in the singular “girl” in the phrase “Native girl syndrome”—Kramer’s decision to choreograph states of emotion between and across *two* dancers, in front of live audiences, redefines this syndrome as a collective social issue spurred through genocide, land dispossession, Residential Schools, and cultural and linguistic violence. For example, when one dancer is still, the other takes the stillness as a starting point for new movement. Once Iraola collapses in the plastic, Cheng begins to slowly strip down to her sports bra and underwear. She arrives at a microphone and, in a drunken slur, begins to take on derisive language of

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***Rather than prescribing sex work and drug and domestic abuse as individual adolescent crises [ . . . ] Kramer’s decision to choreograph states of emotion between and across two dancers, in front of live audiences, redefines this syndrome as a collective social issue spurred through genocide, land dispossession, Residential Schools, and cultural and linguistic violence.***

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onlookers. “Ffffuckin red . . . white indian, you know what you are, you’re a fucking half breed, that’s what you are,” she slurs. Cheng’s words are partially inaudible. Iraola begins to stand up inside the plastic and replies with a mumbled “fuck you, bitch,” but it is unclear if the address is to Cheng or to the audience. Cheng escalates until she is screaming, “they should have killed you,” at the audience. She falls again and again onto the sides of her thighs, and when she rises, her arms convulse over and over again. Made aware of our own bodies sitting still, stunned, shouted at, we are still with them, and that is part of the performance, it seems. The oscillation in the dance is reminiscent of performance scholar André Lepecki’s invocation of Henri Bergson’s definition of the timeliness of action, where any act, “as long as it continues generating an effect and an affect, remains in the present.”<sup>24</sup> Dragging the effects of the Residential Schools into the present, NGS enacts what Lepecki calls an “ethical remembering” cultivated through stillness:

It is the very notion of present as [a] series of forever lost “nows” that can no longer be sustained. For *the present is to be found in whatever still-acts*. The activation of all that is not properly supposed to be there at the moment of its assigned temporality, the expansion of presents towards the past and the future, their coexistence, indexes the possibility for an ethical remembering necessary for a politics of the dead, for accessing the endless motility of absent presents.<sup>25</sup>

The stories of abject subjects, such as sex workers, drug users, and inebriated Native women, is certainly an activation of what is not “properly supposed to be” looked at and expanded upon within the highly theatrical staged event. Classical dance’s imperative to both show and represent grace, effortlessness,

and skill is actively interrupted in the presence of bodies of color engaged in improper acts.

Part of these “improper acts” occur when Cheng confronts the audience directly. As the song “These Eyes” by the Canadian rock band The Guess Who infuses the room, (ironically, we cannot see either dancer’s eyes because their hair covers their face), Cheng falls out of the designated spotlight and approaches the front row of the audience with a low mumbling growl. It is difficult to comprehend her speech, but, like any snarl conveys, she is defensive and the audience is at the heart of why she feels attacked. Cheng growls and stares at the audience for an uncomfortably long amount of time. As a piece that embraces rather than rejects the abject debris of cultural genocide, Kramer’s deceleration wipes away the saccharine layer of hope that might detail optimism to reveal a plan of fumbling, crawling, and scratching one’s way through the chaos of what is given. And this crawl is one way of playing with time, or, in Cree scholar and artist Karyn Recollet’s words, “jumping scale.” Building on Laura Harjo’s work, Recollet writes that jumping scale is a way of manipulating settler time:

As a decolonial gesture, jumping scale allows for a reconfiguration of power through a somatic spatial and temporal repositioning into different realms or world(s) where we can create different narratives and alternative possibilities. Basically, jumping scales describes the process of transcending beyond settler geographies. Time travel achieved through jumping scale carries the capacity to propel us into a futurity where, to borrow a phrase from Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice, “our complexity continues.”<sup>26</sup>

Jumping scale in Kramer’s choreography quite literally embodies jagged movement that interrupts a seeming linearity that might lead to extension, transition, and smoothness—a reconciliation. The cropping up of pain, grief, and the affective duration of an emotion reveals linear time’s fallibility, its inconsistencies, and inability to truly capture an Indigenous-centered felt bodyscape.

NGS emerges within a recent field of narrative testimony that details colonial violence, particularly Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report issued in 2015. The TRC collected testimonies from over six thousand survivors of the Residential Schools who were willing to share their stories.

Because sexual violence is often beyond the capacity for speech, as Elaine Scarry has detailed in *The Body in Pain*, the burden of self-representation, of speech, of telling one's story, can teeter into another iteration of force.<sup>27</sup> The TRC muddies the relations of responsibility through the appearance of neat boundaries of affective engagement. National projects of reconciliation cannot be the standard for unsettling extreme violence, or for claiming the truth of a violent event. Working within the somatic and nonverbal, such as Cheng's growls at the audience and Iraola's sweaty intimacy with a plastic tarp, NGS contends with what it means to exist in a marked body, one pathologized as a social problem and a national burden. While many turned to the testimonial format to share their story in a documented and public way, others turned to forms such as dance and jump scale, which offer a sensory means for engaging with the history of the Residential Schools, and colonial violence more broadly, including its terrifying persistence in the murders of Indigenous women.

Since the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report was released in Canada, the settler-nation has eagerly tried to make documentation of the Residential Schools available to the public in an effort to pause—however cautiously—in that forward momentum of reconciliation. Residential Schools' efforts to “civilize” children through strict, holy evangelism produced the conditions for which the negative and demonizing terminology of “Native girl syndrome” emerges, a term that Kramer redefines throughout her piece. There is motion in the pathologization of a syndrome—it is often a collection of backward-seeming, abnormal symptoms that leads to a diagnosis labeled as a syndrome rather than a singular root cause of a disease. *In Search of April Raintree* offers a particular scene of pathologization of Native girls using this exact term. When April, the main character, is placed in a non-Indigenous foster family, she experiences antagonistic and violent teasing from her foster family's biological children, who insult her with names like “stupid,” “half-breed,” and “Indian.” After numerous incidents of being bullied by the DeRosier children, April and her sister Cheryl decide to finally stand up for themselves with tricks of their own, which inevitably leads to *their* punishment rather than the disciplining of the white children. They are taken to the office of their guidance counselor, Mrs. Semple. In the following description, quoted at length, the details of April and Cheryl's meeting with the guidance counselor, who narrates their futures, is illustrative of the state's fine line between speaking up and lying, self-defense and entitlement:

Then Mrs. Semple gave us a little speech about what she called the “Native girl” syndrome.

“. . . and you girls are headed in that direction. It starts out with the fighting, the running away, the lies. Next come the accusations that everyone in the world is against you. Then there are the sullen, uncooperative silences, the feeling sorry for yourselves. And when you go on your own, you get pregnant right away, or you can’t find or keep jobs, so you start with alcohol and drugs. From there, you get into shoplifting and prostitution, and in and out of jails. You live with men who abuse you. And on it goes. You’ll end up like your parents, living off society. In both your cases, it would be a pity Miss Turner and I knew you both when you were little, and you were remarkable youngsters. Now, you’re going the same route as many other Native girls. If you don’t smarten up, you’ll end up the in the same place they do: skid row.<sup>28</sup>

Mrs. Semple describes a kind of antiprogressive move, backward in time, where the girls would “end up like [their] parents.” Coded as “smartening up,” Mrs. Semple’s racist fortune-telling gives the sisters only one option to move forward: assimilate. State caretakers like Mrs. Semple, who are reportedly meant to care for young Native children, in fact preserve a sense of white Canadian wholeness (as in, there was no imaginable scenario in which the DeRosier children could have caused such bullying to elicit physical harm from April); they work to institutionalize racism and assign a lack of believability to nonwhite children. This is what Michel Foucault calls the mask of power, because power is the “multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization,” so that Mrs. Semple, the social worker, verifies what the DeRosiers, the foster family, has believed all along about the sisters.<sup>29</sup>

The first-person narration of the text, in contrast to the antilinear and non-narrative form of *NGS*, maintains a reader-protagonist intimacy with the physical and emotional pain inflicted on April and the deep frustration in her ability to protect her younger sister. When April explains how the DeRosier children tried to kill Cheryl by leading her into a bull’s pen, Mrs. Semple considers April’s outrage ridiculous, out of line, and bogus. Again, we encounter a problem between what happened and what was communicated in speech. Within the frame of the civilizing mission of the Residential Schools, Native

children already existed within the frame of disbelief, so when Cheryl is abused and bullied, she becomes pathologized as unruly, wild, and destined for self-destruction.<sup>30</sup> As detailed in Mrs. Semple's "Native girl syndrome" diagnosis, it is not the Residential Schools, restrictive policies continued through French and British colonialism into Canadian parliament, dispossession from their land, or structures of disenfranchisement that prevent April's parents from supporting their children, but rather it is the fault of Native girls. The widespread problem of social and sexual violence against Native women becomes a singular rather than structural issue.

Kramer's choreography redefines "Native girl syndrome" through a nonmimetic and antilinear (meaning, it does not culminate, or reconcile itself) truth-telling based in the body rather than in speech.<sup>31</sup> Kramer's NGS does not debate the truth of what happened to her own grandmother, but instead communicates the feeling of complete abjection—an atmosphere of a subject made into trash, waste, excess, and refuse. Rather than negating the story of Native women as inhabiting these difficult positions as sex workers and alcohol abusers by offering a narrative of resistance, Kramer draws audiences *deeper* into that world with the slow duration of the dance movements, the sound of motorcycles revving, the scenography of trash.

In the same energy with which the words "queer," "bitch," and "fag" have contextually specific connotations that indicate either inclusion or threat, Kramer repurposes the phrase "Native girl syndrome" through what Foucault would call a "'reverse' discourse." Note that reverse is a time-space directional, to move backward and to flip an action. He writes:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.<sup>32</sup>

Foucault's key example of the introduction of nineteenth-century "psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature" created discourses of sexuality and perversity while also creating a "'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged, often

in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.”<sup>33</sup>

We can also think of reverse discourse as a form of deceleration, as a way of reducing a rate of progress. By naming her dance piece *Native Girl Syndrome*, Kramer uses the same language and terminology once used to “disqualify” the choices and autonomy of Native women. To borrow Foucault’s phrasing,

“Native girl syndrome” begins to speak on its own behalf, specifically through the environment cultivated by the dancers inhabiting emotional states. As a First Nations woman, Kramer harnesses discursive fields of relation to approximate and obscure an understanding of what Native girl syndrome means: the vibrations of dancers, the internal state of the body, and the dizzying feeling of being beside one’s self with grief and loss. Cultivated dizziness interrupts normative time and mirrors the affective experience of living in a mad world shaped by the violence of settler colonization.

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”

By mobilizing a reverse discourse, Kramer reoccupies “syndrome” as a purging of hegemonic discourse from the physical body. *NGS* wrestles with cultural loss and mourning through enactments of stillness and slow movement that decelerate the colonial project by pausing in the results of extreme intergenerational trauma. Stillness welcomes another world into play. Anishinaabe performance scholar Jill Carter refers to this alternative articulation of remembering harm as “survival intervention,” a form of taking emotions and feelings of grief that do not negate the harm but work with and through it. Carter questions the implicit assumption of reconciliation as “a restoration of mutual respect between Indigenous people and the settlers,” which was never mutual. Instead, survival-interventions heal the wounds of colonization through “the mechanisms [Indigenous people] possess without looking to the state for either permission or aid.”<sup>34</sup> *NGS* is one such example of survival-intervention through Kramer’s use of a deceleration as a way of interrupting linear time that demands closure. Her choreography forges unresolved openings at every turn. Kramer’s usage of nonmimetic action and extended moments of stillness

intervenes on the historical framing that demonizes poor, Brown women and instead crumbles this mythology at its core. Taking time to embody moments of difficulty—a women’s body rolled up in plastic or lying among empty beer cans under a spotlight—Kramer interrupts atmospheres of processual and linear movement through a decolonial deceleration that refuses reconciliation, and instead embraces the time and slowness necessary to live with, and not beyond, pain.

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/ **Notes** /

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<sup>1</sup> Lara Kramer, Interview at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2019, *The New Current*, 2019, <https://www.thenewcurrent.co.uk/lara-kramer>.

<sup>2</sup> A recent review of a performance of *NGS* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival stated the “stage is filled with crap”—I highlight this pithy description because it is important to note the contexts within which the piece is performed and how reviewers describe the piece. Gareth K. Vile, “*Native Girl Syndrome: A Challenging Representation of First Nation Oppression*,” *The List*, 12 August 2019, <https://edinburghfestival.list.co.uk/article/110568-native-girl-syndrome/>.

<sup>3</sup> The Canadian Residential Schools were an expansive network of boarding schools designed to assimilate First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children into French and Anglo culture beginning in 1876 until 1990. Indigenous children were not allowed to speak their own languages, perform cultural rituals or practices, or wear traditional clothing. Many children were abused, and survivors of this government-sponsored cultural genocide continue to suffer from trauma. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of 2015 reports that an estimated 150,000 children were enrolled in these schools, and thousands of whom remain unaccounted.

<sup>4</sup> In my 2017 essay, “The Defecting Witness: The Difficulty of Watching Regina José Galindo’s *Pera*,” I describe the relationship to witnessing difficult art as a process of defecting, that is changing one’s allegiances and transforming one’s standpoint. See Lilian G. Mengesha, “The Defecting Witness: The Difficulty of Watching Regina José Galindo’s *Pera*,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 61, no.2 (Summer 2017): 140–57.



<sup>5</sup> Brenda J. Child, "Indian Boarding Schools," *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 13, no. 1 (2016): 25–27.

<sup>6</sup> Narragansett Brewing Company was founded in 1890 after the local area, and not after the tribe. However, after prohibition, Theodor Geisel ("Dr. Seuss") was hired to rebrand the company and created the caricature "Chief 'Gansett," a cartoon of a wood-carved cigar store Indian. Devoid of any relation to the Narragansett nation, the beer cans that cut Iraola and represent the debris of inebriation (theatrically rather than literally) connect the relation between one-dimensional and inaccurate representations of Native people to actual states of bodily and terrestrial dispossession.

<sup>7</sup> The term "colonial unknowing" is particularly useful here from a special issue of *Theory & Event* on the same topic. The authors describe colonial unknowing as a deliberate form of epistemic neglect: "Instead, this ignorance—this act of ignoring—is aggressively made and reproduced, affectively invested and effectively distributed in ways that conform the social relations and economics of the here and now. Colonial unknowing endeavors to render unintelligible the entanglements of racialization and colonization, occluding the mutable historicity of colonial structures and attributing finality to events of conquest and dispossession." Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, introduction to "On Colonial Unknowing," special issue, ed. Alyosha Goldstein, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Manu Vimalassery, *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4, (2016): 1.

<sup>8</sup> Cecilia Lu, "Native Girl Syndrome is a Weak Appropriation of 'The Streets,'" *Vancity Buzz*, July 11, 2014, <http://www.vancitybuzz.com/2014/07/native-girl-syndrome-weak-appropriation-street-culture/>.

<sup>9</sup> Pia Savoie, "Native Girl Syndrome Opens an Intimate Window on Urban Reality," *Bachtrack*, November 18, 2013, <https://bachtrack.com/review-nov-2013-native-girl-syndrome-montreal>.

<sup>10</sup> Lara Kramer, "Calm Amid the Chaos: An Interview with Lara Kramer on her New Work *Tame*," interview by Victoria Mohr-Blakeney, *The Dance Current*, October 17, 2015, <http://www.thedancecurrent.com/feature/calm-amid-chaos>.

<sup>11</sup> I am inspired here by Robin Bernstein's essay "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," wherein she argues that the historical archive of photography scripts behavior for those who encounter it. Bernstein uses script as an imperative delivered by things, where "Dances with things, too, are performative in that they constitute actions: they *think*, or, more accurately, they *are the act of thinking*." Robin Bernstein "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," *Social Text* 27, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 70; original emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> Sondra Fraleigh, *Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Dian Million, "Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History," *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 72.

<sup>15</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>16</sup> María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," in "Writing against Heterosexism," special issue, ed. Joan Callahan, Bonnie Mann, and Sara Ruddick, *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 201.

<sup>17</sup> Rosa-Linda Fregoso, "For a Pluriversal Declaration of Human Rights," in "Las Américas Quarterly," special issue, ed. Licia Fiol-Matta and Macarena Gómez-Barris, *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2014): 588; original emphasis.

<sup>18</sup> Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects* makes the argument that affect can be tracked and identified within cinematic structure, and is not, in fact, something that originates in the body. Here, I suggest that Kramer works within the inverse: the internal states and vibrations of the body are formalized within the choreography through decelerated movement. See Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy and Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

<sup>20</sup> See Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A 'New World' View," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford. (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institute, 1995)

<sup>21</sup> Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 46.

<sup>22</sup> Here, I am referring to the alarming lack of rights of Indigenous and mestiza women disappeared or missing through the Americas, particularly along the U.S./Mexico border and in Guatemala. See Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, eds., *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> C. Nadia Seremetakis, "The Memory of the Sense, Part I: Marks of the Transitory," in *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*, ed. C. Nadia Seremetakis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 12.

<sup>24</sup> André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (Florence, KY: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 127.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 130; original emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> Karyn Recollet, "Gesturing Indigenous Futurities through the Remix," *Dance Research Journal* 48, no.1 (April 2016): 94.

<sup>27</sup> See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>28</sup> Beatrice Mosionier, *In Search of April Raintree* (1983; Winnipeg, MB: Peguis, 1999), 64.

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol.1 An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1978; New York: Random House, 1990), 141.

<sup>30</sup> The term "Native girl syndrome" has similar connotations to the inferences drawn in the 1965 Moynihan Report, which pathologized Black single mothers as a social

hindrance to economic progress of the Black community. See Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, March 1965).

<sup>31</sup> Following Batchewana First Nations scholar Cheryl Suzack, literature and text offers another form of truth-telling against the law. Cheryl Suzack, *Indigenous Women's Writing and the Cultural Study of Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 100–01.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>34</sup> Jill Carter, “Discarding Sympathy, Disrupting Catharsis: The Mortification of Indigenous Flesh as Survivance-Intervention,” *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 3 (October 2015): 415, 425.