

Turning our ears to our soft pulsating bellies | By Joëlle Dubé, May 2024

Somewhere amongst all these strands, we are weaving our imagination.
Dreaming for hard loving and future journeys. Transporting in soft gorgeous tongue.
—Lara Kramer

Ji zoongde'eyaang (2022) was a collaboration between Lara Kramer and her mother Ida Baptiste, artist, and retired Ojibwa language teacher (Member of Berens River First Nation, Manitoba, Treaty 5). Together they created a series of bright jingle-adorned trade blankets, one of which inspired the 2024 performance by the same name: *Gorgeous Tongue*.¹ The title refers to the violent interruption of Indigenous language transmission, one of many of the many acculturating strategies deployed by the Residential Schools that Ida Baptiste attended.² Whereas Baptiste was dispossessed of her language, Kramer was brought up without her mother tongue, Ojibwa; for that reason, the nonverbal and the body became rich vectors of communication for her. But the words “gorgeous tongue” also read as an invitation to reconnect with the primordial knowledge held in our guts: raw, visceral, intuitive, beautiful embodied and incorporated knowledge we—in the Global North—are taught to repress and quiet. In *Gorgeous Tongue*, all that originates in the mouth is brought forth at once: speech, breath, cries, moisture, taste, thirst.

In preliminary writings for the performance, Kramer recounts dumpster-dived bread, sugar-dusted doughnuts, and dented tins of soup, to the stench of goodwill clothes. Food memories and pungent smells are seared into our minds, creating a sensory collection that is barely held together by our corporeal vessels. These sensations also contaminate each other over time. Still, this murky jumble of sensory memories/knowledges is radically inalienable. Although

¹ For more on the history of trade blankets, go to Dazibao <https://en.dazibao.art/dazibao-satellite-lara-kramer>

² Indigenous Foundations, “The Residential School System,” *Arts UBC* https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_residential_school_system/ “The system forcibly separated children from their families for extended periods of time and forbade them to acknowledge their Indigenous heritage and culture or to speak their own languages.[...] Residential schools systematically undermined Indigenous, First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures across Canada and disrupted families for generations, severing the ties through which Indigenous culture is taught and sustained, and contributing to a general loss of language and culture.”

this untidy sensory archive is most radically ours, it is still rich and vibrant when shared. We simply must turn inwards and reconnect with our guts: a highly efficient transportable device. For Kramer, “our gut is our interior technology that allows us to connect to different portals and universes,” always accessible from within.³ It is a matter of carving out space for listening to what our guts are telling us, what we can learn *from/with* them, and this is exactly what *Gorgeous Tongue* achieves. A temporary space is created where we can collectively rest ourselves and direct our attentiveness toward the voice of our digestive systems.

Performance Scholar Lilian Mengesha aptly notes how deceleration is leveraged in Kramer’s work as a tool for decolonisation.⁴ This temporal gesture also fosters deepened introspection on the part of the performer and the audience, which help carve out a space for listening to the wisdom of our intestines. *Gorgeous Tongue* cycles between slowed-down quasi-meditative motions and what Kramer calls moments of “friction” performed by Jeanette Kotowich, a mixed-settler and Nêhiyaw Métis performer (from Treaty 4 territory Saskatchewan). Void, silence, and Kramer’s mixed minimalist sounds take turns with one another, creating a muted sonic environment that accompanies Kotowich’s decelerated movements without overshadowing them. The friction that permeates *Gorgeous Tongue* fluctuates in intensity, from infinitesimally small and almost imperceptible to loud and generous. This friction is also manifold: at times material, sonic, and sexual. Anishinaabe/Métis/ Norwegian scholar Melissa K. Nelson (Member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians) perceives sexual friction and sexual relief as gestures that can help us “get in touch with a deeper sense of being—some

³ In conversation with the artist, May 2, 2024.

⁴ Lilian Mengesha, “Deceleration as Decolonial Intervention in Lara Kramer’s *NGS: Native Girl Syndrome*,” *ASAP/Journal* 4 (n°3: 2019): 577.

would say, a larger sense of self; an ecological or even cosmological self.”⁵ Getting attuned to eco-sensuous frictions can also help us strengthen and expand our cosmo-genealogical connections to all life forms. Navigating decelerated and friction-induced moments, Kotowich takes on the persona of a traveling spirit who has embarked on a cosmic voyage.

According to the Anishinaabeg creation story, spirits are born amongst the stars. There, they are entrusted with a detailed foresight of what is to come. They are shown what their embodied experience on earth will look like: the hardships, the joys, the challenges, the bliss, and everything in-between. Only then are the spirits asked: “Knowing all that you now know, *do you still want to go?*” If the answer is yes, the spirit begins its earthly journey. Speaking to this creation story and to *Gorgeous Tongue*, Knowledge Keeper and Anishinaabe Elder Emerson Nanigishkung (Chippewas, member of Rama First Nation) writes that this cosmic question “is the question of futurity, metaphorically a star is born traveling through time and space as well as in real life our souls.”⁶ The star-born spirits are privy to a precious foreknowledge that might sporadically resurface throughout their earthly voyage ; experiences of *déjà vu* are instances of our spirit remembering the cosmic foresight that guides and orients the spirits. At its core, the question— “do you still want to go” —is an invitation to heed a futural, cosmic call. French philosopher Jacques Derrida too unfolds an account of the call of the future.

Drucilla Cornell, a renown Feminist theorist and philosopher, comments on two of the ways Derrida perceives the appeal of the future. On the one hand, it is a guiding alterity in that “the future ‘to come’ is the other already with us—inscribed in our hearts, as [it] is in mine, as a

⁵ Melissa K. Nelson, “Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures,” in *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies*. Edited by Joanne Barker. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017: 230.

⁶ Emerson Nanigishkung, Anishinaabe Elder of Rama First Nation, *Reflective Thoughts on Gorgeous Tongue*, May 2024.

debt that can never be repaid but must always evoke our thanks.”⁷ Much like the Anishinaabeg creation stories, there is a recognition that the future is always within us, “inscribed in our hearts,” as an inexorable promise, which can never be fulfilled. On the other hand, the future is also an opening, writes Cornell, “that calls to us in the form of an appeal.”⁸ The future propels us forward and it asks of us that we wonder where to launch ourselves next, to keep in line with a cosmic lexicon. Where and how do we set ourselves in motion? Where to next? The stars already know.

Once on earth, the star-born spirits are dressed in flesh containers. This envelope is akin to an ever changing, metamorphosing vessel; a snake shedding skins. In *Gorgeous Tongue*, this is echoed by the multiple layers of clothes in which Kotowich is dressed. At times they obfuscate her face and body, at times revealing both. As the performance progresses, her material assemblage is continuously rearranged: parts are discarded, others are repositioned, while new elements readily accessible on stage are brought into the mix. Each reconfiguration emerges from Kotowich wrestling with the materials that surround her, at times soft, light, or heavy and cumbersome. But as the performance unfolds, the materials are sculpturally reshaped, creating ephemeral cosmic installations. “As the vessel peels away layers though struggling a new vessel is transformed to continue on the journey to the path that lays ahead,” writes Baptiste, circling back to the cyclical and repetitive nature of the spirits’ journeys.⁹ Witnessing Kotowich shedding layers, transforming, is akin to a vessel in metamorphosis that reinvents itself anew as it progresses along its futural path.

⁷ Drucilla Cornell, “Derrida: The Gift of the Future,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 16 (nº3: 2005): 68.

⁸ Cornell, “Derrida: The Gift of the Future,” 69.

⁹ Ida Baptiste, Anishinaabe language teacher and artist (Lara’s mother), *My reflective thought on Gorgeous Tongue*, May 2024.

Towards the end of *Gorgeous Tongue*, performer François Bouvier walks onto the stage, repeating the motions and transformations Kotowich performed at the beginning of the show. The cyclical quality of this gesture evokes the cosmic spirits' journey, but on a micro level, conjuring the endless motions of our digestive system—our interior technology. *Gorgeous Tongue* invites the audience to come onboard as Kotowich travels through many cosmic stations through a temporarily convoluted time-space. We are asked to turn our ears to our soft pulsating bellies, replete with celestial knowledge.