

States of Insurrection in *Native Girl Syndrome*

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Can this being together in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused, this undercommon appositionality, be a place from which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question?

—Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*

On June 25, 2014, an excerpt of Lara Kramer's *Native Girl Syndrome* (NGS) was performed in Montréal as part of a program featuring choreography by Québec-based artists for the Hemispheric Institute *Encuentro*.¹ The opening minutes were met with confusion. Around me, spectators were standing up, speaking loudly to their neighbours, and, in some cases, walking out of the theatre. On stage, two women stood hunched over antique baby carriages filled with plastic bags, empty beer cans, and worn out blankets. They wore buckskin jackets, layers of busy prints, and duct taped cowboy boots. Heads lowered, backs to the audience, they teetered in place, supported by the buggies. Occasionally, they stumbled forward with tiny steps. But their movement was slow, and barely perceptible through the faint light. It stretched into time and seemed to stretch time itself. A looping soundtrack accompanied the movement. Low and loud, like a motorcycle engine revving over and over, it permeated the body in a steady assault. It was clear that something was happening, but unclear exactly what.

NGS stages the effects of cultural and physical dispossession, calling attention to acts of genocide, violence, and abuse. The work's durational aesthetics and portrayal of indigenous characters raise questions about the ethics of representational practices in political works of performance. Spectators at the *Encuentro* wanted to know how the political was acting. Is this a "bad" representation of indigenous women? Is it okay for artists to stage "bad" representations if they have "good" political intentions? What was the work trying to *say*?

This essay proposes that NGS mounts an insurrection at the level of feeling. Dancers Angie Cheng and Karina Iraola enact this insurrection through a practice of inhabiting bodily states. Their performance, which plays with overdetermined signs and indeterminate movement, unmoors us. Unmoored and disoriented, we are forced to deal with the discomfort of being left in the lurch, unable to fully make sense of the experience of watching. In the lurch, the work invites another set of questions. Through what techniques and practices can performance engage politics? What are the terms of the engagement? And how are these terms shaped by our experience and training as spectators of dance? This essay draws on my experience of watching the work as a settler-Canadian, conversations with the choreographer, dancers, and spectators, theorizations of the body, and texts from the fields of dance studies, performance studies, and critical race theory.

By examining how NGS evokes feeling, this essay "stands with"² works of performance and scholarship that question the political benefit of staging reconciliation between indigenous and non-

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indigenous people as the cathartic result of an empathetic or sympathetic encounter.³ Anishinaabe theatre scholar Jill Carter notes that in these events, reconciliation is staged as catharsis, which is reached through an empathetic or sympathetic encounter between the speaker and the listener. These encounters are beneficial to the nation-state because they create a happy “we” that effaces centuries of colonial violence and its ongoing effects.⁴ Writing about events associated with Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Stó:lō music scholar Dylan Robinson explains that “reconciliation” really means “the elimination of negative emotion. . . . The burden here lies with First Peoples to ‘get over’ our resentment and other negative emotions in order for reconciliation to occur and to make room for renewed friendship with the settler Canadian public and nation-state” (2014, 286). In its bid for reconciliation between First Peoples and settlers, the TRC both erroneously suggests that there was such a “friendship” to renew and relegates violence against indigenous people to the past.

NGS calls attention to an *ongoing* legacy of colonial violence against indigenous girls and women in Canada. “Native Girl Syndrome” is a term that Kramer came across in her research, which refers to the likelihood that female survivors of Canadian Indian Residential Schools would suffer from addiction, enter into abusive relationships, and end up imprisoned or living on the streets.⁵ Kramer, who is Oji-Cree, began research with the story of her grandmother, a residential school survivor who battled addiction as a young woman while living on the streets of Winnipeg. Recent reports from the United Nations Human Rights Council (2014) and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2015) attest to the persistence of these effects. The reports conclude that Canada is violating the human rights of indigenous women by failing to investigate why they remain such frequent targets of violence.⁶ Although *NGS* is inspired by history, the work is also about the present.

NGS stages a desire for empathetic connection without allowing the audience to feel the pleasure of catharsis. Instead of providing release, the work prompts a durational experience that dwells in the negative and the difficult. A desire for connection—whether between the audience and the dancers or the dancers themselves—is frustrated by the dancers’ work of inhabiting bodily states.

At the beginning of the work (and throughout), Cheng and Iraola act as if disconnected from the reality of their surroundings. They show little interest in the world beyond the immediately proximate: themselves and their buggies. A trembling, which seems to happen on the insides of their skins, propels their movement through space. The inwardly focused intensity of the tremble sometimes spills out of the body, which stumbles before gaining temporary equilibrium with the buggy. While it may appear that their chief task is regaining balance, the dancers are in fact allowing themselves to be pushed out of equilibrium through the practice of inhabiting a bodily state. The dancers ride these states—and the states ride them. Their intensive bodily labour frustrates desires for intimacy and legibility. Spectators may feel discomfort as they are forced out of their settled positions and into apposition. In doing this, *NGS* proposes ways of touching and feeling without the need to grasp what the performer is trying to say. This mode of touching without grasping alters relationships between performers and spectators by making it possible to experience feelings next to others without feeling *for* them. Rather than inviting the audience to feel for the dispossessed, the work asks us to dwell in uncomfortable feelings of dispossession, alongside others. In *NGS*, bodily states are the vehicle that generates the potential for decolonial world making within the space of the performance.⁷

The Limits of Kinaesthetic Empathy

Ever since I first saw a dance performance I have wondered why it is that I am sometimes fascinated and touched by some people moving about on a stage, while at other times it leaves me completely indifferent.

—Ivar Hagendoorn, “Some Speculative Hypotheses about the Nature and Perception of Dance and Choreography”

The TRC attempted to perform a national act of catharsis. Testimony by residential school survivors was not meant only to heal the victims and their communities, but also the entire nation, through our ability to empathize with their trauma. The TRC website states: “The truth of our common experiences will help set our spirits free and pave the way to reconciliation” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission n.d.). The statement creates a national body politic as a shared “we” based on common experiences that are transmitted through performance. The TRC’s statement highlights a problem with empathy: it assumes that there is such a thing as universal human experience and takes that experience as “truth.” The statement fails to account for difference: varying reactions to representations of trauma, or how disparate feelings might arise depending on the background and experience of the spectator.⁸ The assumption of universal human experience also undergirds modern dance theories of kinaesthetic empathy, which attempt to explain why we are “moved” emotionally when watching dance.

Recently, researcher and choreographer Ivar Hagendoorn has looked to neuroscience in order to solve the mystery of being “fascinated and touched” by a work of dance. In his article “Some Speculative Hypotheses about the Nature and Perception of Dance and Choreography,” Hagendoorn combines scientific theories regarding mirror neurons with Kantian aesthetics to explain the connection between feelings and movement. He speculates that when watching dance, the viewer “internally simulates” the movement of the dancer (Hagendoorn 2004, 92). The feelings that arise when watching dance are thus explained by the symmetry or asymmetry between the movement occurring on stage and the simulation occurring inside the viewer’s body. Too much symmetry makes the movement boring, while too much asymmetry makes it incomprehensible. Dance that “fascinates and touches” the viewer does so by triggering an experience of the Kantian sublime. This happens when the subject becomes aware of “the ‘presence’ of something that exceeds ‘representation’” and also realizes that “it can conceive of it as such” (99–100). Being “fascinated and touched” are thus physical manifestations of a process of assimilation, in which the viewer absorbs slightly unfamiliar movement into their existing dance knowledge.

Although Hagendoorn draws from neuroscience rather than dance studies, his speculation shares much with dance critic John Martin’s theory of “metakinesis” or “kinaesthetic sympathy,” developed in the 1930s. Martin proposes a process of “inner mimicry,” described as “the externalization of emotional states in terms of physical action” (quoted in Franko 2002, 61). In metakinesis, the movement of the dancer will trigger particular feelings in the viewer, who is then able to understand what the dancer is trying to say. For Martin, the process conveys what the dance artist believes to be a universal truth that transcends conventional language. This “truth” is delivered to an audience through the dancer’s individual movement expression (Franko 2002, 61–62).

Kinaesthetic empathy offers a way into thinking about affective transmission in dance. However, it has also been critiqued for the way that it produces the universal experience that it purports to

reveal. Dance scholar Mark Franko has argued that what metakinesis takes to be universal is in fact grounded in shared nationality. “Without (shared) nationality,” he writes, “there can be no empathy” (62). In the theories that I’ve outlined here, *recognition* is the mechanism through which we become “fascinated and touched” by movements that are never too unexpected. Because recognition is a prerequisite for a work’s “success,” theories of kinaesthetic empathy fail to make sense of radical difference. A work that is illegible to the viewer therefore risks being dismissed because it *fails* to move them. This failure has social and political implications when it is read as incapacity on the part of the dancing other. In *Choreographing Empathy*, Susan Leigh Foster describes how the British used empathy and sympathy in order to justify practices of settler colonialism by establishing a difference between settlers on the one hand and indigenous populations on the other (2011, 129). In this scenario, the scripts of the settled define the parameters of legibility. The settler (or settled spectator) feels for the other only when they see enough of themselves reflected back. This creates a situation in which the other must perform in the language of the spectator in order to be recognized as human. The connection made between the spectator and performer through recognition is key to the experience of catharsis, which allows the viewer to leave the theatre feeling good, even though they may have cried. Watching *NGS*, however, does not “set our spirits free.” Rather, we are forced to endure the task of witnessing distressed bodies, without necessarily understanding what we are feeling. This non-cathartic structure of feeling is generated by the practice of dwelling in bodily states.

Bodily States

Midway into the work, Cheng climbs on top of her carriage and rides it. To the song “These Eyes” by Winnipeg rock band The Guess Who, she repeatedly thrusts her pelvis forward and up, releasing her arms into the air before falling back down onto the buggy. Eventually, her weight shifts too far forward and they both crash to the ground. Cheng remains there, still and sprawled, among empty beer cans and other debris. Read metaphorically, Cheng’s actions stand in for the high of a trip and the inevitable crash back down to reality. As her body lies discarded, Burton Cummings sings about the bad effects of broken promises: “I will never be free, no, my baby, no, no / You gave a promise to me, yeah / and you broke it, oh no” (1969).

Cheng’s act of riding also embodies the work’s choreographic practice. Kramer describes this practice as “the difference between thinking ‘well this comes next so we’re going to do it’ versus surrendering to ‘this might take me ten minutes tonight, when the other night it only took me five minutes to get from point a to point b’” (Kramer 2016a). Kramer recalls hearing Cheng say after a performance, “‘Wow, tonight it’s like I wasn’t sure where the character was going. She just pulled me somewhere.’ She still stays on the trajectory, but the way in which she gets there has its own voice; has its own intentions and reasonings behind it that [the dancers] keep discovering in performance” (2016a). *NGS* is scored with a set of improvised tasks that Iraola and Cheng perform on individual trajectories, in their own time. Kramer began development of the piece by generating movement and teaching it to her dancers. However, Kramer told me that she scratched that idea when she realized that the state she was trying to get to was best created by the material the dancers generated themselves. Kramer further developed the work by guiding the dancers through extended improvisational “experiences,” which allowed them to use their own research, histories, and movement vocabularies to enter into traumatic bodily states. These states constitute the choreographic material of the work.

A bodily state is a temporary condition, which changes as a result of interaction with another body or force. States are produced by interactions between bodies, which cannot be fully determined in advance. They therefore can be volatile and unpredictable. For example, you may think you know in advance what effect the cocktail you are about to drink will have on your body, but the state of intoxication it produces depends on a number of factors: the contents of your stomach, your mood, the precise ingredients of the drink, the altitude at which it is consumed, etc. A choreography composed of states is attuned to each body's capacity to affect and be affected by a multitude of bodies and forces—chemical, historical, social, environmental—in unpredictable ways. States come into being through the interaction of forces coming from inside and outside of the dancer's body.

The work of inhabiting these states is made possible by a practice of riding. Like surfing, hang gliding, and bull riding, improvisational experiences provide training that prepares the body for the contingencies that can arise when working with unpredictable forces. Riding requires a balance between control and surrender, and the ability to adapt to the momentum of something outside of oneself. Gilles Deleuze describes the effort involved in these kinds of practices as a “putting-into-orbit,” where “the key thing is how to get taken up in the motion of a big wave, a column of rising air, to ‘get into something’ instead of being the origin of an effort” (1995, 123). The practice of riding bodily states night after night keeps the choreographic process open so that it cannot be referred to in the past tense. It demands that the dancers be sensitive to changing local conditions: what's in the room, and what's in the body. By continually asking the question, “What can a body do?,”⁹ the dancers create the potential to move politically. For André Lepecki, “Moving politically is predicated on the need to be constantly reminded, daily, that whatever this moving accomplishes and brings into the world at any given moment will be always provisional and incomplete. Thus the necessity to start again, to insist, no matter what, on the urgent challenge posed by that endless *not yet*” (2013, 26). The work of inhabiting states in *NGS* emphasizes the need to act, again and again, in the face of ongoing violence and its effects. “To act” in *NGS* is to activate the senses. Acting means allowing oneself to move and be moved in unexpected ways, experiencing the vulnerability that emerges through this movement. Opening up one's capacity to affect and be affected is a political act that can reconfigure relations of power while calling attention to the limits of recognition.

These limits are further challenged by the performers' identities. Due to concerns about cultural appropriation, some spectators have questioned Kramer's decision to cast non-indigenous performers in these roles. While Kramer notes the lack of indigenous performers living in the Montréal area, she also emphasizes that the casting does political work through embodiment. As she puts it: “I would like all Canadians to be able to embody that state” (Kramer 2016b). Non-indigenous dancers must engage with questions of appropriation as they investigate how to embody these states without claiming identities. Cheng explains the dancers' process of embodiment as the following: “We're not trying to mimic anything. We're not trying to pretend to be anything. We're really just trying to get to the state of the body and what it might be going through and how it feels for this character and this person” (in Kramer 2016b). Her statement draws a distinction between mimicry and embodiment. Mimicry involves trying on an identity that isn't yours. In dance, it implies a linear transmission of movements from one body to another through imitation, without commitment. In *NGS*, embodiment involves riding the influences of many bodies, which congeal to produce a state. Like the process of “becoming” described by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, a bodily state “produces nothing other than itself” (2009, 238). Bodily states interrupt a linear logic of substitution (trading a copy for an original) by making clear the “false alternative” presented by saying “that you either imitate or you are” (238). While *NGS* incorporates some imitation, copying is one of many processes through which the dancers come to embody states.

NGS complicates questions of appropriation through the labour of embodiment. Rather than disappearing, these questions are pushed to the foreground, demanding to be grappled with. For a settler audience, this labour perhaps offers a way of embodying minoritarian states without performing minoritarian identity. This kind of spectatorship would allow difficult and complicated feelings to emerge, without presuming knowledge of what it is like to be a minoritarian subject or undermining minoritarian experience by assuming that it's just like your own. When non-indigenous people inhabit (but do not claim) bodily states through performance, the location of the “syndrome” is shifted out of female indigenous bodies and into the wider frame of the audience, and the social.

“Undercommon” World Making

NGS incessantly poses the question of how reality might be remade through bodily states rather than nation-states. Displacing the audience from settled spectatorial positions, it asks us to make a world based on feelings of dispossession. These acts of unsettling create the potential for what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call “being together in homelessness” (2013, 96): a way of inhabiting indeterminacy that refuses to accept the permanence of the ground on which settler-colonial relations persist. Rather than demanding that indigenous, Black, and other dispossessed peoples assimilate into a broken system, *The Undercommons* calls for the system's dismantlement. It wants systems where use is determined by need instead of ownership, and where it is possible to touch without grasping. Harney and Moten's Black study aligns in these ways with Native feminist theories that do not assume the permanence of settler colonial relations and instead explore societal structures not reliant on the maintenance of a nation-state (Arvin et al. 2013, 16).

In Canada, where indigenous women continue to be murdered and go missing at a rate that constitutes a human rights crisis, the privilege of safety is distributed in radically unequal ways. The performance does not offer easy solutions. What it does offer is a way of “getting into” something, and through this process, realizing that we are all already in it. Judith Butler has suggested that a felt dislocation from “First World safety” might enact “an insurrection at the level of ontology” (2004, 33). An ontological insurrection would call attention to our shared corporeal vulnerability while illuminating how the most vulnerable bodies are made to disappear. Proposing an insurrection through feeling, *NGS* redistributes states of dispossession. Within the space of the performance, it makes a world in which vulnerability is shared, but not (yet) equal.

Appositionals

There is only one moment in the piece where the two dancers interact. Holding an open beer can and a crumpled bag of fast food, Iraola stumbles over to Cheng and sits down next to her. After forty-something minutes of watching these women move, next to each other but not together, this moment of proximity comes as a surprise. Iraola makes gestures in the direction of Cheng, sometimes brushing a hand over her hair or thigh. The meaning of these gestures is unclear. Is she grasping for some kind of intimacy? Or simply for the beer that Cheng has picked up off the ground and started sipping? The moment is loaded with both a promise of connection and a threat of violence, reminding us that intimacy and vulnerability come hand in hand. The moment may stage our desire for reconciliation, but it also denies the pleasure of an easy resolution. Instead, *NGS* asks us to remain in a state of emergency and to ride it out alongside others.

Notes

1. The *Encuentro* is a biannual conference organized by the Hemispheric Institute on the subject of political performance in the Americas.
2. See TallBear (2014).
3. See Carter (2015), Burelle (2014), Robinson (2014).
4. Carter writes: “The sympathy, then, enacted through such mea culpa–themed performances, serves the advancement of the settler-state, casting the Indigenous people as hapless supplicants, with hands forever outstretched in a desperate plea for sympathy and succor, as Canada gapes at the spectacle and awaits its catharsis” (2015, 417).
5. Residential schools were a compulsory educational program administered by the Canadian government that forced indigenous children from their families and communities. Overcrowding, poor sanitation, and inadequate health care resulted in alarmingly high death rates in the schools, which were also rife with physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. The violence committed against indigenous children during the century-long tenure of the program (from the 1880s until the last school closed in 1996) continue to have devastating effects on First Nations populations across Canada.
6. In August 2016, the Government of Canada announced the launch of an independent national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls.
7. José Muñoz states in *Disidentification* that performance “labors to make worlds” (1999, 195).
8. Dylan Robinson illustrates this point through his description of crying angry tears during the curtain call of *Beyond Eden* while other spectators were crying happy tears (2015).
9. For Deleuze, this is the defining question of practical philosophy, a concept he develops through the work of Spinoza. Deleuze writes: “*We do not even know of what affections we are capable, nor the extent of our power. How could we know this in advance?*” (1992, 226; emphasis in original).

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