

**Past is Prologue:
20 Years of *COSMOSQUAW*
A Reply in Three Parts**



Lori Blondeau, *COSMOSQUAW*, 1998. Still from performance documentation.
Courtesy of Western Front.

By Samantha Nock & Salia Joseph

Samantha Mock:

Thank you to the Western Front for opening up their archives and introducing this amazing performance piece to me. A special thank you to Kristy Waller and Allison Collins for creating this opportunity, and of course, thank you to my co-organizer Salia Joseph.

Working with *COSMOSQUAW* was an unexpected exploration in self discovery and resilience. Lori Blondeau's career and body of work explore so many topics that are integral to me as an Indigenous woman. Being able to find myself in only a small fraction of her work, and being able to share that, was amazing.

Indigenous women face insurmountable pressures that are tied in with colonial racism, white supremacy, and the patriarchy. Seeing Lori, with her cheeks that look like my mom's, her beehived hair, and pink party dress just existing on stage gave me hope.

Salia Joseph:

I want to thank Kristy Waller and Allison Collins for bringing Sam and I in, for being very flexible and supportive of where Sam and I wanted to go with this event.

The context of the event is exciting because it gave us the time to really consider the power of archives, to think of them as memory, as history and to consider who gets to decide what goes into an archive and what doesn't. These are some of the compelling questions that put my dear friend Kristy Waller on her path as an archivist. We need good people with critical

minds in all spaces, Kristy moves through her work with dedication, generosity and advocacy. She has a specific set of skills that she has generously offered up at any time to me and my family for art, language and stories. It was special for me to have an invitation from her to step into her world and share what I can.

Western Front has a deep archive that acts as an artistic memory for this city. It was exciting to have the opportunity to look through these works. I got to watch footage of Dana Claxton, Rebecca Belmore and other pieces by Lori Blondeau. Performance art is a specific form of resistance that offers its own set of unique techniques for story telling and ultimately the power to represent oneself, in a society where we, in this case Indigenous women, are often being pushed into boxes and having our stories told for us.

It was an honour to sit with *COSMOSQUAW*, watch it, read about it, have it on in the background while Sam and I considered where we saw ourselves in it, what reminded us of our aunties, of our kin, and what remains uniquely Lori, inseparable from her, grounded in the prairies. *COSMOSQUAW* is an offering, a gift for Stelmexw people to feel genuine, to laugh, to be beautiful and sexy. So often the work of native people is created as a teaching tool, built for the education of non-native people. Such works can serve as important resources for creating tolerance. Anything that helps native people walk through the world a little safer, perhaps a little more seen, is ultimately welcome. However, when I watch *COSMOSQUAW* I see myself, and I know that it was created with me in mind; laden with small gifts for Indigenous people, for Indigenous women to see themselves. It gives me the room to see whole parts of myself, im-

perfect, humorous, big cheeked and all.

Stories of native people are so often written about us, not by us. In these stories we are rarely afforded dynamic identities, let alone humanity or dignity. The story of Indigenous women is even more finite, we are “princesses” or “squaws”. We are either highly promiscuous, backwards degenerate women who cant take care of ourselves, or wise, beautiful, colonized princesses who will do anything for our superior white prince. Particularly if it means helping said prince acquire native land, white people love that story. They also love to tell the story of the native man, the wild ones, violent, untamable, the ones with no morals or intelligence. *COSMOSQUAW* gives us a breather, a moment of calmness as we get to see brown people on stage loving each other up. We get to see them dance, be gentle, and tender with one another. Seeing Lori and her gentleman caller dance together, as brief as it is, makes it startlingly clear how little of this we see. Indigenous couples have enough working against them, we are told individually that we do not have value, and told regularly that we don't belong with anyone let alone each other, so it is medicine to see that we do. Even if just for a brief moment.

Our shoulders get heavy with the continual weight of representation. Always wondering how what we say, do, and produce will be interpreted and how this interpretation will then affect native bodies and land. Representation is alive, it directly affects how people think about us and treat us. How do you get an entire country, government, policing body to ignore the disappearance of thousands of Native women, queer, trans and two-spirit people? Tell a story for long enough, on enough platforms about how they do not matter, and their bodies can be

for the taking, without consequence. The pressure on Indigenous people is real to be better, smarter, and more put together so as to not fit into anyone's preconceived boxes, so as to not sit in the depths of stereotype and racist assumptions. Lori makes brave decisions to resist this burden, to let *COSMOSQUAW* be her true damn self and not worry about how that looks or what people might think. *COSMOSQUAW* gets to drink wine, and smoke, she sings loud. This is no small resistance. To make something for you, for your people, and not concern yourself with the baggage attached to our bodies, is medicine.

It was a gift to sit so closely with *COSMOSQUAW* and feel its layers unfold and hold us with care. Lori brought Sam and I together to make each other laugh, think critically and engage an audience to interact with her beautiful piece. Huy chexw a for inviting us to be here.

Samantha Nock:

"I'm interested in the images of native women - especially women of the plains. We have been stereotyped to death."

- Lori Blondeau

When Lori broke the scene to tell a story of her love of Vicks, it cemented her performance in my own family stories. I don't know if this is a Prairies NDN thing, but I grew up with my kookum wiping Vicks on everything; it was her cure all. She would take giant globs and rub it on the bottom of our feet when we

had a cold, and cover them with grandpa's big wool socks. This would take our cough away. Every night she ate a scoop, claiming it'll cure her cough. The smell of Vicks brings me back to sitting beside kokum on her couch, fragrant fumes of eucalyptus mixing with her favourite perfume: Elizabeth Taylor's White Diamonds.

When you hear our stories, the stories of Indigenous women from the Prairies, you only get the sad. You only see our traumas flashed on screen, only see our deepest pain for white settler consumption. There's a lot to be said about the exploitation of Indigenous trauma for settler empathy, but that's a different essay. You are rarely gifted a chance to see our inner lives. You are rarely blessed with a chance to see us dance with our loves, cheek-to-cheek. You rarely get to see us relax, drink some wine, maybe smoke a cigarette; read Cosmo. You don't get to witness childhood innocence of us sticking a Vicks tub to our lips, trying to smell the menthol smell deeper. Rarely will you have the chance to see us laugh with our kin, big cheeks obscuring our eyes, cackles echoing over flat prairie fields. You haven't lived until you've been in a room of aunties, laughing so hard they can't breath, slapping their knees: tears gathering in the corners of their eyes.

Indigenous women are forced into a dichotomous existence: we are either hyper-sexualized or desexualized, and both of these existences end with the immediate or pending threat of violence. Our representations push us into either extreme. *COSMOSQUAW* gives us more territory to take back. We can be young, beautiful in our own ways, love other Native people, and have presence outside of the colonial parameters we are given.

At the end, all Lori has accumulated on stage is taken away from her. The fun she was having is over. This pressure, this reality, that as an Indigenous women everything you have can feel so temporary that it might be taken away, speaks so deeply to this pressure of being. *COSMOSQUAW*'s performance works so well because it shows what is and what can be. It roots us who are in this story in remembering that what we have, we have fought for and have to continue to fight to keep. It tells those who are only witness to this story that what we have lives in a realm of temporality. Beyond what we have seen on stage with *COSMOSQUAW* there is a continuing story about what happens after everything Lori has got taken away: the story of having resilience, of rebuilding. the story of having the resilience of rebuilding. Indigenous women, two-spirit and queer folks have strength in understanding the temporal; when our realities and representations are so hard earned and so delicate, we learn to continue to weave ourselves back together again and again and again after we have been undone. To someone witnessing this continued metamorphosis, it could be sad, but it is the opposite: we continue to build, and rebuild, and with each rebuild we become stronger, learn more, and build more resilience.

I wrote a poem thinking about this: thinking about our burden of representation as Indigenous women, but I didn't want to focus on the pain. I wanted to tell the stories of the little things I remember about the Indigenous women who raised me. My kokum's red lipstick, her Vicks, her perfume. I wanted to make you all witness the wonderful image of my mom and my aunties in their twenties, standing over the kitchen sink putting on the same red lipstick kokum wears. Permed hair teased big with hairspray. Gold hoop earrings, leather jackets with the fringe. They would go to the bar or go to Bingo, refusing to not have

fun even though we all lived some not-fun lives. In this burden of representation, our ability to have fun and be portrayed as having fun is taken away from us. We are given unreasonable expectations of responsibility. I know for some of you, thinking of my young mother getting ready to go out with her sisters while I watched them in awe, I know some of you might think they were being irresponsible. But I ask you, if you had that thought, would you think that if it was a group of young white women getting ready to go out? Would you feel something different because you're not looking at some of my favourite childhood memories through a lens that has been painted with stories of our traumas?

My favourite thing about Indigenous women from the Prairies, is that we know how to tell you our saddest story and then tell you our funniest joke. I think it's in that tension you fall in love with us, and it's in that tension you are weary of us. Lori tells us a beautiful and sad story, and it's in there I fell in love with her.



Vicks

By Samantha Nock

kokum says that vicks can cure all
she tells us this, as she takes her nightly dollop
right before she rubs our backs with it
and says the Lord's Prayer.

Lori, I don't think they know what it's like to
have everything only to have it taken away
stuck between the burden of representation
and the burden of wanting to be represented
what does it even mean, "to be a good woman"?

in kokum's purse there are old receipts
a half empty jar of vicks
a St. Christopher medallion
old phone numbers
and her sugar pills.

in kokum's purse there's no pressure to perform
expectations handed down from introduced standards.

Lori, dancing with Patsy is a traditional coming of age ceremony
that moniyawak don't understand.
you remind me of my mom and aunties, black leather jackets with the
fringe (of course)
with big teased hair, red lips, and gold hoops getting ready to go out;
go to the bar
go to Bingo
go be young women in their late twenties.
carrying the burden of being young
of being a woman
of being otipemisiwak from sakitawak in their pockets.

in kokum's purse she has the same shade of red lipstick that mom wears
she applies a heavy layer and kisses a tissues to blot
puts the tissue back into her bag,
red lips left like a fingerprint.

Lori, I think kokum has room in her purse for all of us.

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20 Years of COSMOSQUAW

Presented by Salia Joseph & Samantha Nock

@ Western Front

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Salia Joseph is from the Skwxwú7mesh and Snuneymuxw First Nation's on her father's side and is British and Jewish on her mother's. In 2016 she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in First Nations and Indigenous studies from the University of British Columbia. She recently graduated from a yearlong full time immersion program in her language, Skwxwú7mesh Sníchim at Simon Fraser University. Salia sings in a band called Añusáyum (Two Berries) as well as a traditional Skwxwú7mesh dance/singing group called Ta Na Wa Káwstem. Salia works for Kwi Awt Stelmexw, a Skwxwú7mes language and culture non-profit. In addition to this she has recently completed a curatorial internship at the Bill Reid Art Gallery. Salia is also committed to her continued learning journey of Salish wool weaving.

Samantha Nock is a Cree-Métis writer and poet from Treaty 8 territory in Northeast BC. Her family originally comes from Ile-la-Crosse (Sakitawak), Saskatchewan. She has been published in *GUTS Magazine*, *Shameless Magazine*, *SAD Mag*, *Canadian Art*, and others. Samantha co-organizes a bi-monthly community readings series called *Poetry is Bad For You*, and hosts *Heavy Content*, a podcast exploring representations of fat people in the media. She cares about radical decolonial love, coffee, corgis, and her two cats, Betty and Jughead.

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