

INSPIRING TALKS

CINARS BIENNALE 2018



LISA NDEJURU

Concordia University/Researcher, psychotherapist and militant
(Montreal/Canada)

RESILIENCE THROUGH THE ARTS

*kuba, kuba-ho, kuba-na**
Being, being here, being with

An interview with Lisa Ndejuru, by Anne-Laure Mathieu

April 7, 2019 was the 25th anniversary of the genocide committed against the Tutsi people in Rwanda. Over the course of 3 months, more than 1,000 000 Rwandans, mostly Tutsis, lost their lives in the most harrowingly fast-paced genocide in the history of humanity.

Last November, we invited, as part of the CINARS Biennale 2018 conference, the artist, researcher and psychotherapist, Lisa Ndejuru. Having immigrated to Quebec with her parents in the 1980s, Lisa was in her twenties when this tragedy occurred. At the time, struggling and searching for meaning were already an integral part of her story.

She was a part of a family in exile, a people in exile, had a grandfather who was murdered and another grandfather living in a refugee camp.

Impelled by a search for identity, as well as an existential quest, she has blended science and religion, psychotherapy and art, in order to find paths that lead to transformation. She has since offered her support to the Rwandan Diaspora, as well as to refugees from various background, Jews, Cambodians and indigenous peoples. They are, in her own words, "the wounded of history". Her goal is to help them find the paths of resilience through the arts.

Being: Experiencing beauty qualitatively alters the sense of being alive.

“My research asks how we can reach a state of well-being, even if we’ve been dislocated from the inside. It all started with an existential quest, but also with a desire for us to feel better in my community and in my family. There were several levels of struggle: being elsewhere, being racialized in the West, having trouble putting down roots, dealing with what I consider consequences of colonization, Christianization and language. As well, as a series of internal contradictions I had no answers for, which were overwhelming. I was seeking to organize these elements so that I could make sense of it all. Art or creative practice has multiple aspects that allow us to reach an understanding. Firstly, there is the writing and the reframing of what happened. One goes from being a subject to being an author. This entails a change of position, where one can take a stand and use one’s voice. One can make choices and not just be subjected to those made by others. Art also allows us to get closer to our true selves. Indeed, in the act of creation, you intend to get somewhere, to transform something. You wish to be transformed. Being is a vital energy. You are here for a reason. The arts allow that explorations and self-expression. The experience of beauty can qualitatively change your sense of being alive”.

Being here: staying authentic in a modern society

“The process of creation and the postures of surrender, trust, attention and intention, are to me the antidote to the poison of violence and fear. An interesting challenge that comes up when you come from “elsewhere” and a culture that is imagined as “traditional”, is to stay authentic in a modern society (that is if modernity is exclusively a Western concept). You need to be rooted in the past to keep a part of who you are. You need to be connected with those whose culture you refer to, or a common language.

I explored these tensions through traditional Rwandan dance. Creation can become a space for the possible and for the future, and yet it is a language that connects you to the ancestors and the sacred. It is challenging to experiment change without breaking the connections to meaning. I feel indigenous people share similar challenges. And, I have found that performance and writing can connect me to the possible.”

Being with: becoming a sounding board to reveal other stories

“All the disciplines I have studied: religious studies, psychotherapy and the arts, have to do with connection, a desire to connect. I have been particularly interested in the art of dialogue. There is an aesthetic to dialogue, the culture of the spoken word.

In the case of trauma, there can be issues of mental health, as well as social and political dimensions that are beyond the individual’s scope. Specific stories and the uniqueness of each experience are important and essential, but their meaning can be amplified in the context of other stories. Listening deeply to all these stories allows us to reach subtle dimensions, so that we can weave a fabric that helps us better understand. That’s collective intelligence.

We are woven from stories, even within our own bodies. Art allows us to shake up these stories, to put things into motion, to remove the dust from them and to perceive them more clearly. Once it is properly shaken out, this tapestry reveals an instrument, a sound box that in turn allows us to amplify and reveal other stories.”

** Abbé Alexis Kagamé*

La Philosophie Bantu-Rwandaise de l’Être (1956)



Anne-Laure Mathieu
[Innovation strategist](#)