



## Season 1, Episode 4: We Rise Together – with Lenora Lee

Lenora Lee: I guess that's the way I look at life and time and timeline and generations is that we live history, and we live in the present and there are always going to be similarities in the future of experiences. And rather than seeing time as separate or seeing ourselves as separate from previous generations or future generations, how can we break down those lines of time, the lines of color, the lines of economic status? How can we work together knowing that we respect one another and we're so much more together rather than having to draw lines all the time?

[music]

Michelle Lin: I think it would be good to begin with the current project you're working on, Lenora. I think it's the "And the Community Will Rise."

Lenora Lee: Yes. Mm-hmm.

Michelle Lin: So, maybe we can talk a little bit about that in the beginning.

Lenora Lee: Okay. So, I'll talk a little bit about this current project, "And the Community Will Rise," where we're working on it in collaboration with the Chinatown Community Development Center who are now in charge of managing the Ping Yuen apartment buildings in San Francisco, Chinatown. And we've developed a partnership with them over the last few years, but Asian Improv aRts, who I also work for, has had a long-standing relationship with them and various other organizations in Chinatown.

Francis Wong and Vinay Patel are, you know, staff at Asian Improv aRts. We got grant funding for this project, which was supposed to be about the history of the Ping Yuen apartments. I had the opportunity to interview former and current residents there as well as staff members to talk about the activism that occurred during a certain period of time, but also, you know, ongoing through the current day, fighting for tenant rights, fighting for still affordable housing in Chinatown, fighting against gentrification, and that's the basis of that particular project. We were supposed to mount it inside the central Ping Yuen building. We wanted to create an immersive work that spanned through the back courtyard, their community room, up into a couple of apartments, along the corridors, and to project video on the back of the wall, back of the building.

Then COVID hit, the pandemic hit, and after one in-person rehearsal we had to shift to Zoom rehearsals. So, we did Zoom rehearsals for about two and a half months trying to create work, still maintain a sense of



community, we tried to learn each other's material through Zoom, generate, improvise, work with the interviews as sources of inspiration for movement, still create the soundtrack. And I think what ended up happening due to the death of George Floyd and all that, that that sparked throughout the nation push for equity and justice and racial equality, we just knew that at that particular time we needed to take a break and to support the artists and the dancers in whatever way we saw best fit at the time.

At this point we're still working on the research part of it, we're still working on putting together the audio sound score for it. It's just that the final product or the outcome is still yet to be determined. Some of the things that we were thinking about was creating a film version of the project, but we really wanted to be able to film sections inside the Ping Yuen when it became safe, for the residents, for the artists, for everybody involved, but we just don't know when that's going to be. You know? We could do minimal one dancer, two dancer shoots, but you know, there's still a part of me and other members of the project who are holding out hope for an outdoor performance someday.

We entertained the idea of ooh, should we pick a different location? Do something outdoors in another location? But that really went against the kind of mission of the project for it to be place-based and about art making within the community. And that was one of the major components of the project, though, it would be in a Chinatown residence.

Michelle Lin: I think all three of us were curious if you could talk a little bit about your process working with people in the community as you create your dances and performances.

Lenora Lee: Sure. I grew up in San Francisco and oftentimes we had various different programs that my brother, sister, and I went to in Chinatown, and one of the organizations that we grew up in was Donaldina Cameron House. It's a multi-service organization which now has, and has had, support services for cancer survivors. They have a bilingual after school program. They have youth group programs. Services for those who are facing domestic violence and trafficking. And so, we attended different youth group programs at that time. And part of their mission was to build leadership through community.

It's a faith-based organization, but what I really came out with was this understanding of the power of collaboration and of community and knowing that we can achieve much more if we're all on the same page as a group working together, bringing out all our strengths to understand how to actualize our potential as a group and as individuals.



So, from an early age we were encouraged to volunteer, to give back, to care for others, to support one another, to be unconditional in the giving and in working together. And I think that was a strong foundation when in college I ended up, you know, starting to learn more about the arts, that was through dance and through music, and really felt a pull in that direction and felt like I could communicate things that I couldn't communicate through words.

So, through that, growing up in the Asian American community, I saw various different challenges that people faced both trying to assimilate into American culture; trying to deal with injustices; trying to deal with living amongst two different cultures, whether that's a traditional family, culture, background, where our parents or grandparents have different sets of values and ways of functioning in life; then the individualism of American society. So, you're dealing with a strong emphasis on individualism coupled with this kind of expectation of putting the family and community first. And how do you grapple with the two and succeed in ways that you feel are suitable for you and not feel pressured by family or others around you?

I felt like I witnessed a lot of people dealing with various different issues, and when I started creating dances and artwork and having had really incredible mentors like Francis Wong and some of my dance teachers, Victoria Marks, they both really pushed us exploring our voice through the art and allowing us not to be afraid to share about our experiences and lived experiences of not only ourselves but others around and integrating that into the work. You're given tools, right, but what do you do with those tools if what you're learning is a Eurocentric or Euro-based form?

Through their encouragement and the exploration of integrating stories from myself and the communities, my family, the things that I felt were really important or oppressing, or I felt compelled to explore, that's how I got into it. So, it was very I guess natural and naturally encouraged. And I feel, you know, incredibly fortunate to have had the push from the people that I studied from and my mentors because had I not witnessed them working as artists, you know, not only creating their art but teaching it, being in the institution, juggling so many roles, not only in order to survive but doing it well and having a voice, being an example for the next generations, and to be able to see that this is possible. Like if I had not had that kind of support, I don't think I would've pursued it, honestly, because a lot of the folks in my family, out of all of them, I think some of them have studied art, but I don't think any of them have followed it as a profession.



Yeah. So, I would have to say that it started in college in terms of doing research, ancestral research, research on immigration, my grandparents' immigration to the U.S., and then it continued in that respect once I came back to San Francisco from UCLA. I danced for different groups, created solo works. But then the largest piece that really kind of opened up the doors was in 2010 when I created a piece called "Passages" at Dance Mission Theater and that dove deeper into the research on my maternal grandparents immigration to the U.S., that they were separated for 10 years and they didn't know if they were going to see each other again. My grandfather was trying to devise different ways of bringing my grandmother over. Sometimes not having any place to sleep, sleeping on the street, and hearing about those stories which were commonplace. You know? So, once we put that piece up, we realized that it was really just an example of the experiences of hundreds of thousands of people, you know, who leave, who flee, and try to reunite with family, try to make a living, try to survive and do better for the next generations. Provide a foundation, provide support. Yeah.

Kazumi Chin: Yeah. Thanks for sharing that.

[music]

I think something we were interested in was like how do you go from talking to people and getting their stories, to making a dance that incorporates that?

Lenora Lee: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I've had the opportunity to work and interview with various different populations. And I'll just list them briefly so you can get an idea of the various different populations that I've been able to be a part of through this process if I haven't been part of them continuously over the years.

But I would say in 2012, I was doing more research on the history of Cameron House and the work that was done there to have a kind of a safe place for Chinese women who were trafficked over during the Chinese Exclusion period, which was between 1882 and 1943. And the missionaries that worked at Cameron House really were there to try to pull these women out of their trafficked situations and to provide job skill training, education. [indiscernible 12:00]. They were wanting them to become Christian. That was just part of it. But they were trying to help in ways they felt were positive.

And then in 2013, I wanted to see if New York Chinatown had a similar history of trafficked women and I got in touch with a man named Larry Lee who was the director of the New York Asian Women's Center at the



time. Similar to our Asian Women's Shelter and they provide services for survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking, and his grandmother was actually trafficked to New York and had to live as a servant and wasn't paid for two years, and then she ran away and escaped. So, I interviewed him extensively about his grandmother's experience, and then we created a film and a performance project based on her.

Then in 2015, I worked with a woman who was doing research in Madison, Wisconsin. She had interviewed many, many different Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans about their experiences and compiled a book. So, I was able to work with her to be able to integrate some of these stories into this performance project called "Fire of Freedom" and that was performed at Fort Mason's General's residence. That had a collage of different stories of veterans. Also, it dealt with violence within the military and sexual assault in the military.

That I would say was a difficult one to deal with. I felt like a lot of the documentaries I was watching in order to do the research, they were really hard to handle because of the severity that the women -- I guess they would be reprimanded for coming forward and talking about assault and it was such a taboo topic and I felt like it was challenging to bring all these different stories into one performance piece. But it was important as well. I think it was important information to put out there in a performance type setting.

And then in 2016, we went deeper into the Cameron House research and actually set an immersive piece inside Cameron House.

2017, we came back to the Chinese immigration theme and I did get to interview a few people for that, but also had access to immigration records of other folks to integrate both visually and into the sound score as text, which was played during the project.

In 2018, I interviewed a gentleman named Carl Irons about his experience of being incarcerated for 25 years. He was sentenced to life in prison. So, I got a chance to include parts of his interview and his story in there and formed an underwater performance piece inspired by his experiences.

And then in 2019, we created a sequel to the Angel Island Project. The first one was "Within These Walls" and the sequel is "Dreams of Flight." "Within These Walls" won two Isadora Dunkin awards. And I would have to say that that really pushed our work out into the public eye, particularly because it was very moving to mount that piece inside the Immigration



Station and for it be immersive where people can walk around and follow the different dancers and their characters and watch the narratives unfold.

For me, I've been trying to walk on immersive pieces since 2015 and trying to strengthen that because I feel like, how can we impact people with the work that we do? And I really feel like people need to be personally touched. And how can we provide those experiences where, say for example, we lay out, you know, certain challenges and hardships that people deal with, but in a visceral way through movement and dance so that people can actually feel it? They can feel it vibrating in front of them. I think it's pretty powerful to see it in action.

[music]

Michelle Lin:

Hey, everyone. It's Michelle here. Thanks for tuning in to this week's episode. We're taking a little break so I can share the following announcements. This Thursday, April 22nd, from 4-6 p.m. Pacific Standard Time, we're partnering with the SFMOMA and Stanford University's Institute for Diversity in the Arts to co-present a free online conversation between our last episode's guest, Erina C. Alejo, and artist Adrian L. Burrell about their photography in the current SFMOMA exhibit, "Bay Area Walls." In these commissions, both artists respond to storefront murals and signage that have appeared in San Francisco and Oakland during the pandemic. Erina and Adrian L. Burrell will be in conversation with scholar Dr. Tiffany E. Barber and our very own Kazumi Chin.

And on Wednesday, May 5th, starting at 6 p.m. Pacific Standard Time, we're co-hosting a launch of "Imagine Us, The Swarm," a collection of essays and verse by Muriel Leung. Muriel writes about reconciling a familial history of violence and generational trauma across intersections of Asian American, queer, and gendered experiences. Written after the death of her father, "Imagine Us, The Swarm" contemplates vengeance, issues forgiveness, and cultivates a desire for healing beyond the reaches of this present life. This is a free Zoom event co-presented by the SF Public Library. We'll also feature readings by Truong Tran, Hari Alluri, Janice Lobo Sapigao, Angie Sijun Lou, and Addie Tsai.

We're also currently looking for folks to join the Aperture General Planning Committee. Aperture is our annual festival showcasing emerging APA musical, visual, literary, performance artists, illustrators, filmmakers, and more. If you want to get involved or learn more about these upcoming events, visit our website at [www.kearnystreet.org](http://www.kearnystreet.org). Be sure to follow us on social media everywhere, @kearnystreetworkshop.

[music]



Dara Del Rosario: When I think of your work, the first thing that comes to my mind is how immersive and site responsive, you know, your performance is and your pieces are. I was sharing earlier like I view your work as portals [indiscernible 18:28] parts of history because of its immersiveness. There's the disappearance between the audience, the performer, and the site and they all kind of collapse into one another and that pushes us as audience members to really engage with history. Right? To engage with these stories that we might not have known about or we're struggling to find the courage to face.

And, you know, as you were talking about your process with your different projects, so much about it is about, like, building connections and relationships with those you interview. And I wonder, what is that process of building trust with these folks? Because they're [indiscernible 19:08] vulnerable parts of their own history.

Lenora Lee: Absolutely. So, usually often put a call out for people. So, they contact us if they're interested in participating and sharing about their lives and their experiences. They step into it with the understanding that we're going to do an interview. It could be both audio and video recording of the interview and that most of the time, I will let them know that if any of their material is going to be integrated into the work or to the sound score, that I would share a draft of what we include prior.

That doesn't always happen, but I think those who know my work and decide to participate trust that I'm going to work with it with, you know, with respect and that sometimes also we will re-record some of the interview with another person's voice so that it becomes not anonymous, but if there's a preference for not having their name, you know, listed, you know, we won't go that route.

Oftentimes what happens in the sound score is that it's a collage of bits of people's stories. So, the content is there but it might not focus on one person in particular. Except for the one on Carl Irons in 2018.

Because there's such a breadth of experiences with the people that I've interviewed -- oh, I also created a piece in 2019 on cancer and I interviewed 33 people who either were dealing with cancer or they had loved ones with cancer or were health professionals. And that was the most I think moving for me because prior to that a lot of the work was historical in nature. And so, coming into the very present which was actually inspired by my sister getting stage four breast cancer in 2018, I just feel like that piece spoke to so many more people. Because everyone has been touched by cancer in one way or another. They know somebody who's been affected by it. Yeah.



So, it's been very moving to be able to hear the stories and hear what people have and want to share. And I try to keep the integrity of their stories and to pull out what I feel is most compelling to share.

I wonder, maybe, can you share some thoughts of the pieces that you saw or what you feel is very engaging -- might be engaging or interesting to you about the work? And maybe that'll prompt some ideas on how and why we do the things that we do.

Michelle Lin: Yeah. I remember seeing a video of "Passages." I think it might have been on a DVD that a professor handed to me, which is how -- this is how I learned about your work was through --

Lenora Lee: Oh, wow. Really?

Michelle Lin: -- a professor, Juan Filipe Herrera at UC Riverside during my undergraduate there, time there. But that's how I learned [indiscernible 22:27] told me about your work and I started watching videos. So, I do remember "Passages" and I know that so much of your dances are site specific, and I am just, like, wondering was that always there from the beginning? Like, did you know that you wanted to have audience also move through sites?

Lenora Lee: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Yeah. I would have to say that even in college we were encouraged to do performances out on the lawn, throughout the building. To take audiences on a journey. And I think, you know, once you get people up and walking and moving it becomes an active thing. You really do become a participant in various different forms and different degrees. And I think part of what makes our work multi-layered in that respect is that we integrate movement, various different types of movement. You know, I work collaboratively with dancers of different dance training backgrounds.

And for the last 11 years I've worked with Olivia Ting as our media designer. She mounts the video projection on many different surfaces. Indoors, outdoors. We love to look at and scout out new locations and think about the possibilities of projection and how that can add another layer of narrative to the story. When projection became popular in dance performance, we weren't interested in using it at an environment. You know, some people just wanted like -- I saw, at least what I saw at that time, utilized projection as background, as visual imagery, but not necessarily about a component to storytelling.

You know, we've been working with Francis Wong and Tatsu Aoki for music. I'm also starting to work with some of Vijay Iyer's music in a project. And I'm working, you know, with his agent on solidifying that.





I think what makes it very rich also with the research and the interviewees and all of the stories being integrated so that it really, you know, it's never necessarily about one person or about the artist or about the dance company. That's not the way I look at what we do. I just think about okay, what needs to be said? What needs to be said through this work and what is this work calling for? I try to think about separating myself from the work. I know it's difficult because when I get into it, it's just like all encompassing, but there has to be some kind of separation in order for you to let the piece breathe, for you not to try to control the outcome of it.

Yeah. So, I think the various different disciplines, the audio techs, the music, the visuals, the dance movement, the close proximity of dancers to audience members.

You know, in the last few years mainly starting with the Angel Island Project, we solicited, you know, audience survey feedback about what they felt was most important and people really felt touched from "Within These Walls" because some of the dancers were interacting actually, you know, holding people's hands or moving them from room to room, visually engaging with them, making eye contact. I know that people found that special.

So, when we remounted the work in 2019, that was one of the things people felt was the most powerful was we've amped up the interaction and we gave them little notes, we gave audience members notes, we brought them inside and let them make decisions for us. You know, sometimes people were so disturbed that they would step in-between two of the dancers and try to prevent what was going on. There were little kids that would come up to the interrogation table and stand right in the middle of the interrogation to witness what was going on and try to sort it out.

What people were telling us through the feedback was that it really challenged them to think about who they were, what was their role in witnessing, and what does this initiate or stir up for them to contemplate about their feelings on immigration? How do you look at people who are wanting to come to the United States in a different light as we rather than they? And understanding that we're not so separate. We're really not.

[music]

Dara Del Rosario: As you were talking about the level of audience participation, you know, of children interfering with different scenes or people stepping in-between dancers, I started thinking of Augusto Boal's "Fear of the Press" and how it's all like participatory, right? Like you have people acting out these scenes and audience members jump in as a way to reimagine how these



scenarios can play out. And you're left transformed by that interaction, right? Like after leaving the site, how do you move forward? Like your work is so much about like okay, how do we engage with the world after we leave this performance, or after we leave this site? Like what exists in us to inspire change and transformation? Or even research and learning.

Lenora Lee:

Mm-hmm. Yeah. I think those are really great questions. You know, I think in my earlier years I would always want to have this desire to maintain contact, some kind of contact, with people who come to the show because I feel like, you know, here we are. We're working nine months on a project, day after day, and we get one weekend, two weekends, to share it. And then what happens? It's gone, right? It's an experience and then that's it.

But having poured in so much work in the development and also emotional work of like -- and creative work, you know, to make it, I used to have more of a sense of attachment of wanting to keep in touch with people. You know, wanting to develop some kind of connection or back and forth dialogue, and I realized that over time that that's not the nature of the way our performance is structured.

So, with the Angel Island Project, because it was so powerful in 2017, we were trying to think about bringing it back. Not only bringing it back, but how could we actually make it a recurring performance piece because so many people don't know about the history of that Immigration Station on Angel Island? And that could, you know, feed into tourism in San Francisco and we were trying to think oh, do we brand it as something where it can be on tourist websites and people can get notified that there's actually a performance on the Immigration Station occurring, you know, X number of months per year? Or seasonally, or every year, every other year.

The challenge with that, I know there are certain theater productions and other productions that have that capability, it's just finance -- is part of it is financing it, right? And if we were able to do something that was recurring or ongoing, then we could have much more impact because it would be accessible to so many more people. And I think a huge part is financing. There are productions, you know, the only place that I can think about in the United States really is New York. They were able to maintain productions for years, right, or musicals. Think about theater and musicals in particular. Musical can run for years, but they have a lot of financial backing.

So, what can we do at our level, is the question? And then on top of that, like we're dealing with COVID and trying to understand the long-term



impacts on the field. So, I think it's a big challenge at this point to know how are we going to need to transform the work that we do so that we continue to have impact and continue to have dialogue publicly? But also, not lose the integrity of the actual physicality and the work, the in-person work, that needs to happen still. And hopefully we'll come back in the not-too-distant future.

Michelle Lin: So much of this podcast is thinking around working closely with the people, putting people first, their stories first, and also in calling this podcast "A Living Archive" we are kind of pushing back against this notion of, like, what is archivable and like which stories are archivable and saying that we can create our own archives. And how history is always in flux, which I think comes up a lot in your performance and in way people experience it, too. So, it was really a treat to be able to listen to you talk about it.

Kazumi Chin: I want to add, too, that like when you said that you get out of the way of the work I, like, really understood what you mean. You know? Like I think there's something about what you do where it's almost like the building itself comes alive and, like, the people return and you're seeing, like, this collapse of history. And I do feel like, you know, when you said get out of the way of the work, something really magical happens and you're able to let this space be -- I really appreciate you coming and taking the time to talk with us.

Lenora Lee: Yeah. These are thought provoking questions and I'm so glad that you are putting this series together. You know? Because people can talk about their work, but I think we're trying to understand, you know, what is our place and how can we have broader access to one another and to our experiences and to not hide in the shadows? Not being modest about our experiences, or at least, you know, that we can step up and have a seat at the table and that we don't need to feel quiet about that. That we have done a lot of work and that we need to figure out, especially now, how to maintain this sense of community and a sense of strength not only within the community, but how do you generate leadership at this time? And what can we do to elevate the voices in the stories?

[music]

Michelle Lin: "We Won't Move: A Living Archive" is a Kearny Street Workshop podcast. Kearny Street Workshop is the oldest multi-disciplinary Asian Pacific American arts organization in the country. We envision a more just society that fully incorporates Asian Pacific American voices informed by our cultural values, historical roots, and contemporary issues.



We'd like to thank the following funders for their support of this podcast. California Arts Council, Fleishhacker Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center, and Grants for the Arts. We also want to thank the following donors who made a contribution to Kearny Street Workshop's yearend fundraiser, "We Got Us." So much thanks to Lisa Hunter, Lucie Pereira, Madeleine Pellegren, Malaya Tuyay, Maneesh Kenia, Marcia Bunkers, Mark Flores, marya krogstad, Maya Faith Chan, Melinda de Jesus, Melorra Green, Michael Cheng, Michelle Penaloza, Mike Kang, Mikkel Snyder, Miriam Zouzounis, Monica Ramsy, Muriel Leung, Nancy Hom, Niki Waters, Nina Asay, Nomad's Novelties, Oliver Saria, Paloma Concordia and Papalodown Agency, Pamela Ybanez, Parag Khandhar, Paul Ocampo, Philana Woo, Ploi Pirapokin, Priscilla Otani, Mike Yochum, Raina Leon, Rasika Kumar, and Ravi Chandra. We appreciate all of you so, so much and we'll continue to shout out supporters in future episodes.

If you would like to make a donation to help sustain this podcast and other KSW programs, please visit our website: [kearnystreet.org](http://kearnystreet.org) and stay updated on our events by following us on Instagram @kearnystreet. Take good care of yourselves and we'll see you soon.

[music]