

Contending with the histories that we contend with

Tanya Lukin Linklater in conversation with Robin Simpson

In November of 2019, Tanya Lukin Linklater read from her first book of poetry *Slow Scrape* at Discourse in Motion – the final event of *An Annotated Bibliography in Real Time: Performance Art in Quebec and Canada* – organized by Emmanuelle Choquette, Barbara Clausen, and Joana Joachim and presented at Artexte and Arprim in Montréal. Edited by Michael Nardone and published by The Centre for Expanded Poetics and Anteism in 2020 (with a second printing in 2021), *Slow Scrape* lives at the interstices of performance, the body, memory, and relationality. For the reading, Tanya selected works for camera to be screened as she read from the book. This was not rehearsed in advance and she had never read some of the works aloud prior to this performance. There were moments where text, image, and voice collided, and this collision will perhaps only ever exist in that moment. The reading was followed by a conversation with Robin Simpson, a cultural worker and educator based in Montréal. In the spring of 2021 as they edited the conversation for clarity, Robin posed additional questions that arose from the transcript and Tanya – at times partially – responded.

Robin Simpson In 2016, you performed *A glossary of insistence* at what was then called DHC, now Phi Foundation, as part of a program curated by Barbara Clausen. After the performance, I asked you if you could send me the scores so I could read them over again. And you refused [laughs], politely telling me that they were intended for a book. Then, three years later, I received your manuscript. It's been a real pleasure to read your texts closely and to anticipate this performance today.

Slow Scrape assembles written works initially emerging from and intended for a range of contexts, among them exhibitions, catalogues, and performances. One through line between these texts is the practice of patterning and re-notation. Patterning emerges through memory and recollection. At times it is embodied and at other times it points to wayfinding. It's there in the description of techniques and it shows up in the formal makeup of the page. Can you tell me more about patterning and patternmaking in your work?

Tanya Lukin Linklater I think about patterning first in relation to "The Harvest Sturdies," a long poem that's in response to Chief Theresa Spence's six-week hunger strike or fast that began in December 2012. I wanted to respond to what felt urgent to me at the time, but I didn't know how to address her political action. I thought it was incredibly significant. It was embodied. It was an incredible sacrifice for a principle that she deeply believed in—treaty. This actually became, subsequently, a series of projects that I've investigated in relation to treaty since. It began with this particular action on the part of Chief Theresa Spence, but I couldn't, as I said, address it head on. Instead, I undertook a number of interviews with some of our extended Omaskeko Cree relatives in James Bay. Theresa Spence is the former Chief of Attawapiskat First Nation, which is located near James Bay.

I called women relatives, Marlene Kapashesit, Agnes Hunter, and Lillian Trapper, who are very knowledgeable about tanning hides, sewing, and beading. I had grown up seeing women bead and sew in Alaska and had deep respect for it as an art form, a way of life, and I consider hide-tanning as a way of being in relation to the land. I asked these women relatives questions. The work became a combination of documentary poetics, where I was directly quoting our relatives at times and visual poetics as I cannot sew or bead, but I can write. I also included Cree language in the poem and worked with relatives on the translation. This became an investigation and a way to gesture towards the beautiful work that these women are undertaking.

They started to speak about their lives. I asked them, “What do you think about when you sew, bead or tan hides?” I learned through this process that I was asking them about the ways in which they cultivate a deep inner life. You can hear it in one of the poems quoting Auntie Marlene Kapashesit. She speaks about this whole way of being when she’s sewing and beading. She thinks about her family, about the women who have taught her. She says she is praying. She is with God at that time. Agnes Hunter refused to answer this question. I thought, “I love this. This is such a great moment where she is not answering me, and she keeps that for herself. No one else can access it; it only belongs to her.” I also did not include all of their responses. I made what I consider to be ethical choices about what to include and what not to include.

I realized that one of the ways that I cultivate an inner life is through walking. Early on in the book I reference walking. When I was in elementary school, I walked five miles to school one way with my little sisters. These walks became a shared space that only ever existed between my sisters and me, and that no one else will ever have access to or memory of. It was a daily practice, and it was a repetitive practice of putting one foot in front of the other as we made our way from one part of town to school. Walking is a meditative practice that I continue to return to today.

I also think about patterns in relation to historical, colonial, and intergenerational violences. It is also good when we upend patterns rather than making copies of difficult moments and experiences. One of the women I interviewed spoke about working through grief by tanning the hide of a moose, which takes a year to do in her description. I thought that this was a beautiful way of speaking directly to what I’m trying to speak about right now: what we choose to hold onto and what we choose to let go of. There’s also a quote in the book centred on the idea of not letting go of some things.

RS In what ways has your long poem “The Harvest Sturdies” informed the projects to follow? How have you transposed or developed further the documentary methods first employed here to other mediums?

TLL I consider both documentation of rehearsal and works for camera that I’ve generated over time in relation to this question that you’ve posed, Robin. I’ve documented performance projects in process, in situ, in rehearsal, as I know so few people attend performances produced and happening in museums or galleries. This is a way for me to archive the work, to build a history that is viewable online to wider audiences.

While conversation is a mode or method in much of my work, I've documented some of these conversations in a performance piece titled, *you are judged to be going against the flow because you are insistent* (2017). This work arose out of my interest in Maria Tallchief. I asked dancers to reflect on the structure of their dance education and dance lineages (often situated within teachers or schools that arise out of a choreographer's practice—their movement language and approach to the making of a choreography). Four dancers, Ivanie Aubin-Malo, Ceinwen Gobert, Elisa Harkins, and Hanako Hoshimi-Caines, participated in this project. The works for camera are both silent and include narratives—the voices of the dancers regarding their lived experiences in relation to dance. It is quite stunning to listen to at times. I learn in unexpected ways when people share their lived experiences.

RS With your event scores you often present a meeting of two parts—a speaking subject and an audience. Can you speak to the positions at play there and the structures behind them?

TLL I'm undertaking my PhD with supervision by Dylan Robinson, who is doing important work in relation to cultural belongings, sound studies, and repatriation. I was enrolled in a course on Indigenous and settler relations, affect, and writing in 2016 organized and taught by Robinson. We read event scores, and I produced a number of event scores at that time. As I look back on these, I notice that the event scores are spoken through Indigeneity as a lens or a voice, potentially by a visible performer. This does not perhaps allow for the nuanced forms of refusal that I have subsequently employed in some of my work.

RS This brings to mind a text by M. NourbeSe Philip titled "Journal Entries Against Reaction," where Philip speaks of seeking a place from which to write outside the scope of reaction—reaction understood as an extension of the control that spurred it. It's looking for a "position of statement," which she calls the "first statement." How do you understand the relation between refusal and response?

TLL I understand refusal partly to mean the ways in which some knowledges are only intended for specific peoples. Within some contexts knowledge is earned through specific processes. Knowledge also has work to do in the world. Refusal may mean that we refuse certain kinds of labour for settler audiences or readers. In this way we allow for agency to determine our centredness.

I frame response as my choice to look, listen, and be in relation to works generated by Indigenous artists, dancers, and writers. Again, agency comes into play here. I choose which works to be in relation with. In the past this has included works by Maria Tallchief, Rita Letendre, Sonya Kelliher-Combs, and Beau Dick as well as cultural belongings by unnamed makers. In this way, I work to centre Indigenous peoples, our work, our thought, and affective worlds. Like M. NourbeSe Philip, I do not want to be always implicated in resistance to or against “definitions” built through oppression, violence, and settler frames. We cannot ignore our context but, as M. NourbeSe Philip proposes in this text, language coupled with imagination can perhaps offer ways to centre ourselves.

One of the challenges that I have seen over time in spaces where Indigenous people are speaking is a response by white audiences to re-centre settler subjectivity, to make it about their experience of reconciliation, their guilt or shame. That is not really my concern. It is my position that I do not need to, nor should I be, solving these affects for anyone. What I am more interested in is bringing forward moments connected to personal, familial, and larger histories unfolding in my thinking.

I also do not get home enough to Alaska to make work. This is a way for this work to go home. The book as a kind of object that can be held in someone’s hands, that they can have a relationship with. I don’t know if Alutiiq people or Alaska Native folks will see themselves reflected in this, but they are foremost my concern within the work.

RS For it to travel.

TLL For it to travel, for it to move beyond contemporary art spaces, the museum, or the gallery where a lot of Indigenous folks, my dad, my sisters, cousins, aunties or uncles rarely, if ever, visit.

RS Vision, looking, and image-making come up at other points in your work. “Not Like Us” makes reference to photographs, as you write: “I’m made and unmade in polaroids.” In another instance, a photograph fills in a memory when elements are obscure. This poem alternates between focused childhood recollections and shorter segmented phrases. Two of these phrases repeat the action of angling to the light—which I read as an act of exposing oneself to light, an act that is another form of photography of a sort. In the event scores, there is an embodied looking: “The audience looks only to follow with its body,” followed by: “The audience listens but does not look.”

In “Harvest Sturdies,” you write about “composing before I open my eyes.” For today’s reading you set up an exercise where you had audience members individually work through the instances where the text was grafted to the dancers’ bodies seen in the projected video by thinking about where the rhythm in your poetry might match or fall into dialogue with the rhythm of a moving body. All of this so that as we were looking, we had to gauge our role in the space between the silent footage and your reading. This complements the work you do in your writing and performances to resituate, reorient, or reassign vision in one way or another. Vision isn’t put aside, but it is moved in your work. There are points when vision is interrogated, and at the same time, you’re frequently working with it as a sense to be reactivated. I’m curious about vision and image making in your writing practice and how you see this in dialogue with your performance work?

TLL “Not Like Us” centres on moments I remember growing up. In one of the moments, I am told that when we were small people mistook my sisters (who are twins) and me for triplets. A repetition. In another instance I am told a story of a visit to Washington state away from our home village in Alaska. People were confused about us. They thought my sisters and I were mixed black and white, but they didn’t understand why our hair was straight. That is a strange story to grow up with, which speaks to a kind of simultaneous presence and absence, how Indigenous people are both hyper visible and invisible. I also consider how mixed-race bodies are read, and the ways people feel entitled to comment on girl children’s bodies, their hair, or the colour of their skin.

I am often concerned by, but also struggling with, what it means to be asked to make work as an Indigenous person. Am I instrumentalized within spaces? That is an important ethical question. I have gone through periods of time where I’ve chosen not to investigate cultural work due to my consideration of audience and whether this cultural work belongs in these spaces. I have shifted my focus and attention to historical moments, to critiques of structures at times. I address the colonial violence that creates this situation where I am in a space of durational grief as an Alutiiq person contending with the histories that we contend with. I struggle with my own visibility in this work and in these kinds of performances.

I hope for a shift in the way people look. Elements of my open rehearsals and performances within museums include a slowing down of time—an experience of being in relation and of being close to dancers. It’s my view that these elements shift the experience of the viewer kinesthetically in relation to a body exerting

force in the museum, which is different from the experience of viewing dance or performance on a proscenium stage. Within the museum context, people are not required to sit still and be good viewers, to discipline themselves physically and mentally, or to go through the ritual of what it means to attend a performance. Sometimes they encounter the rehearsal or performance and walk away. Sometimes they stop. I want the viewer to have some choice regarding how they come to be in relation to the performance. For the viewer to sense with the body; to listen in an expanded and enlivened way (Elwood Jimmy speaks to this).

I hope that through my work there might be a rethinking of the way that one looks at performance or art objects, but I don't know how possible that is. I certainly cannot know the outcomes of that particular intention, but that is where that intention lies. My work is often intentionally quite slow. I am gesturing towards this other sense of time, historical time, or this inner life that I described earlier. When we have access to that other kind of time, it can alter the way we are in the world. My work, I often say, is just a tincture; it is not a cure. It is a small moment that gestures towards this larger practice in one's own life, whatever that might be, whether that's walking, or... I don't know what that is. There's a space between the viewer and myself. I'll never know, necessarily, their experience of the work, but, from my perspective, the work is generous as a kind of request or an offer that people can choose to take up. I don't know if that gets to your question—it was quite expansive. ■