

“I Write For My Family”

A Conversation with Tanya Lukin Linklater

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

TANYA LUKIN LINKLATER is Alutiiq and hails from the Native Villages of Port Lions and Afognak of Southern Alaska. Currently based in Northern Ontario, she is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice incorporates elements of choreography, dance, performance, video art, film, and writing. Linklater’s performative work redresses Alaska Native forms of expression within contemporary aesthetics to investigate themes of cultural loss, domesticity, and political resistance. Site-specific performances such as *Mapping Resistances* (2010) witnessed the artist respond to the Oka Crisis—the pivotal land dispute between Mohawk peoples and the township of Oka in the province of Quebec—by embodying the spirit of Alutiiq women and translating their presence through a series of actions, rhythms, and meditations. More recently, Linklater has further centralized the female body to explore the ways that Indigenous knowledge and experience inscribes itself across generations to produce cultural memory and renewal.

While her work often culls from visual art, language, and the physical body, one could argue that poetry and poetics is the backbone of her practice. These texts are often employed instrumentally to examine the ways that the human body expresses spiritual and emotional states of being. In addition to showing her work in venues such as Western Front in Vancouver, the Santiago Museum of Contemporary Art in Chile, EFA Project Space in New York City, and the Museum of Contemporary Native Art in Santa Fe, Linklater’s poetry has been featured in numerous publications (and exhibitions) including *BlackFlash Magazine*, *C Magazine*, and *Taos Journal of International Poetry and Art*. She was awarded the K. M. Hunter Artist Award in Literature in 2013 and has been

supported by the Ontario Arts Council and Canada Council for the Arts. This year, she is staging performances at Remai Modern Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Phi Centre and DHC/ART in Montreal, and the Belkin Gallery at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, in addition to installing new work at Art Gallery of Alberta as part of a two-person exhibition with her husband and Sobey Art Award winner, Duane Linklater (Cree). I interviewed Tanya to ask her about the politics surrounding her work and the cross-pollination between writing and visual art.

I’d like to begin by discussing your educational training and background. You earned an undergraduate degree in the arts from Stanford University, where you were awarded the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship and Louis Sudler Prize in Creative and Performing Arts, a master’s degree in education from the University of Alberta, and are currently pursuing a PhD in cultural studies at Queens University. Can you discuss what your dissertation topic engages and how it is reflective of your earlier education, if at all?

As you mentioned, my undergraduate degree is in English, and my research at Stanford University focused on Native American women’s poetry, poetics, and performance. At University of Alberta, I focused my graduate course work on Indigenous pedagogies, cinema and pedagogy, and Indigenous research methodologies. My master’s research began ten years of research-creation centered on traditional Alaska Native performance by investigating movement forms, language, and song. This research often led me to engage with anthropological and ethnographic texts that document Alaska



ABOVE: Tanya Lukin Linklater (Alutiiq), *Slow Scrape* performance still, 2015, in collaboration with Ziyian Kwan for the exhibit *Reading the Line*, curated by Pablo de Ocampo at Western Front, Vancouver, BC. Linklater responded in movement to installed, two-dimensional artwork and the gallery’s architecture. Image courtesy of the artist.

Natives’ precarious relationship to the field of anthropology and museums, dating to the early 20th century. Museum collections across the world hold our objects, yet our former relationship to many of these cultural objects is no longer fully understood. Anthropology is often turned to as a source of cultural reconstruction but is fraught with a difficult history.

My doctoral work is an investigation of art writing as a practice. I intend to write a series of essays about contemporary Indigenous artists who are engaging with ideas of insistence and perhaps translation in their work.

Your visual practice remains interdisciplinary and dynamic, and you continue to employ video, performance, photography, and installation. What is the philosophy driving this body of work?

My early artistic practice insisted on a continuum of performance and translated my concerns, including (but not limited to) resurgence and futurity through contemporary art and performance. Insistence and translation continue to be central to my work, but these concerns are complicated by

everyday, lived experience. I am compelled by process and the idea of translation across forms.

As a respected poet, your work has been featured in numerous publications both in Canada, the USA, and in other international venues. Can you provide a sense of when you began writing poetry?

I began writing poetry as a young person at Stanford University. At the time, I read poetry but did not study creative writing formally or develop creative writing as a practice. I wrote monologues for a few years, here and there, as I was interested in performance. In Edmonton I joined poets Anna Marie Sewell and Marilyn Dumont informally in a writing group that took place at Anna Marie’s kitchen table. We worked like this for a couple of years until an opportunity arose with the Edmonton Poetry Festival to develop a larger-scale project. The Honour Songs Project consisted of writing and performance workshops we coordinated in the City of Edmonton, as well as performances and installations of text/textiles as art objects. This was a turning point in some ways for me, but it wasn’t until 2012 that text became more prominent in my practice, building on my methodology



ABOVE: Tanya Lukin Linklater (Alutiiq), *Slow Scrape* performance still, 2015, in collaboration with Ziyian Kwan for the exhibit *Reading the Line*, curated by Pablo de Ocampo at Western Front, Vancouver, BC. Linklater responded in movement to installed, two-dimensional artwork and the gallery's architecture. Image courtesy of the artist.

of using text as movement scores for choreography in live performance and video. Strengthening my writing practice was the focus of a mentorship with Layli Long Soldier, a phenomenal poet I met at Bard College in 2011. We met weekly via Skype—connecting across the distance between Tsaile, Arizona, and Nipissing First Nation in Northern Ontario. Out of this mentorship came two long poems, “The Harvest Sturdies” and “the the,” catalyzing the development of a series of live performances in galleries, videos, and installations for the past three years. If I think about the women I’ve learned from, they are Indigenous women poets with deep connections to their ancestral homes and to the communities that they live in today.

While it’s often an overlooked question, especially for mid-career writers, it’s quite a significant one: why did you begin to write, and write poetry specifically?

Growing up, I didn’t see reflections of Indigenous people in television, films, books, or everyday news. I didn’t see my experiences reflected as a girl who grew up in the ’80s in poverty during Reaganomics. In Native American studies courses in the 1990s, I learned about the histories and

policies Indigenous peoples have survived in North America. These histories are mostly absent from K–12 education. Indigenous women poets reflected their refusal to be erased or rendered invisible while grappling with the attempted genocide in North America and intergenerational trauma. These poems were connected to writings by women of color, and I recognized a shared experience. In the last few years, my writing has responded to political events in the world: the attempted assassination of Malala Yousafzai, the girls’ education activist, and Chief Theresa Spence’s (Attawapiskat First Nation) 44-day hunger strike on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada, for treaty rights. My writing has become more specific.

How would you describe your poetry to others that may not have read it or are interested in reading and experiencing it?

In some ways the work is sparse. The poems use everyday language, which is possibly more accessible to the reader. Sometimes the poems directly quote women interviewed. The poems make sense of or interrogate the space between words. I reckon with the white space on the page or the space between

Take the time and space to be a writer. It takes deep dedication to write in a thoughtful way.

language as an idea, a place, possibly a place of potentiality. Sometimes the poems become clearly visual, referencing beadwork, a hide being stretched, or the smoke used to color hide in a canvas tipi. These visual images are connected to the content of the poems.

I’m curious to know if you can speak to some of the themes undercutting your current work in both your writing and art practice?

Themes include personal memory, historical memory, Indigenous women’s experiences, labor on the land, Indigenous language, poverty, pedagogy (learning), the ideas of home, distance and diaspora, and Indigenous concepts of orality—our ways of passing on knowledge—and relationality, knowing how to be a kind, ethical person in relation to the world, informed by lived experiences. More recently, I’m compelled by the complexity of our lives as Indigenous peoples: the specificity of our experiences, which counter reductive ideas that can come to dominate our imaginations.

Who is your audience, or, better yet, who do you imagine your audience to be during the process of writing? Who do you write for primarily?

It’s a difficult question, but perhaps first and foremost I write for my family. My dad reads a great deal in our village in Alaska, especially during the winter. He encourages me to write, and I wonder if the work partly reflects his generation’s experiences. I write for the women in “The Harvest Sturdies,” Agnes Hunter from Peawanuck, Marlene Kapashesit and Lillian Mishu Trapper, my relatives in Northern Ontario, who shared their experiences tanning hides, beading, and sewing. I write for my sisters, literally and figuratively, and I write for youth. I think that a good effect of this writing is potentially offering different ideas of Indigeneity to readers of published works distributed more widely in online poetry journals, as well as the audiences of my visual arts projects in galleries.

I’m interested to know if your visual practice informs your writing work (and vice versa) in any way? Considering that you often cross over between disciplines and expressions, I assume that there is some leakage here. If so, how does it materialize?

Perhaps it is my lack of academic training when it comes to creative writing that allows me to look at the text from the perspectives of visual artist and choreographer. I think of the text in utilitarian ways: How will the text function as a movement score or movement structure to be communicated

with dancers for live performance or video? How will the text function as a visual art installation with different materials? I see poetry as a substrate of my visual arts practice, generally. I apply ideas of visual composition to many of the poems I construct.

As a writer myself, I often wonder what other writers struggle with. For me, it’s doing justice to the artist or artwork I’m discussing. What do you find most difficult when writing?

I often find establishing the structure of the work, with its own internal logic, difficult. Establishing the structure often goes hand in hand with the content of the work.

Once we were young and looked to others for guidance. Do you have any advice for young writers?

Read poetry, short stories, the long journalistic article, and novels. Develop a daily writing practice. Don’t beat yourself up if you can’t write every day. Seek mentors or writing groups. Edit rigorously. Reflect. Think about the concepts that you are writing about. Ask yourself what ideas you may be replicating. Don’t publish too soon; develop your work. Take the time and space to be a writer. It takes deep dedication to write in a thoughtful way. Read Layli Long Soldier, Joan Kane, dg okpik, Orlando White, Marilyn Dumont, Leanne Simpson, and Joy Harjo.

What are your plans for the near future? Do you have any exhibition or writing projects underway, and where should the reader expect to encounter them?

Currently I’m editing a new video for an exhibition curated by Wendy Red Star at Mary Elizabeth Dee Shaw Gallery, Weber State University in Utah. I’m in the midst of development of a new installation for a two-person exhibition, *A Parallel Excavation*, curated by Ociciwan Collective at the Art Gallery of Alberta in Edmonton. I’m in research and development of performance for a series, *Affinities, Variations, and Scenes*, in conjunction with the first retrospective of Joan Jonas in Canada at DHC/ART in Montreal. This project, curated by Barbara Claussen, will include Joan Jonas’s *They Come to Us without a Word*, which was installed in the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale this year. I was privileged to see this work and look forward to responding to Jonas’s body of work.

Finally, from the last question from the “Proust Questionnaire”: What is your favorite motto?

Ask an Elder.

