

Heavy Weather

How Tanya Lukin Linklater deploys a mix of atmospherics and choreography to resist ongoing colonial violence

by Camille Georgeson-Usher

Let
me
ask
you

What does it mean to be in relation to weather?
To be shaped by weather?
To bring weather?
To be weather?

Last summer I left my home in Vancouver to go to Columbus, Ohio, to meet the artist, choreographer and scholar Tanya Lukin Linklater and her collaborators for several days of open rehearsals as part of Tanya's retrospective exhibition *inner blades of grass (soft)/inner blades of grass (cured)/inner blades of grass (bruised by the weather)* at the Wexner Center for the Arts. I left on a Tuesday, expecting to arrive the same day, with a short layover at Toronto Pearson Airport. I do not wish to belabour this story as it is unnecessarily long and sad, but it foreshadows so much of what is at play for Indigenous people in our simple acts of moving through the world, moving towards the places we are trying to get to. I did not make it to Columbus that day. As I was attempting to pass through us border security in Toronto, the border agent began asking me a series of questions around my work, to which I answered:

I am an academic, I have three degrees.
I am a professor, and I write about contemporary art.
I am often asked to come speak at events and conferences,
so I travel to the States a lot.
Yes, I am what you would call a 'Native American'.

I was pulled into secondary screening, where I was stuck for hours, missing my connecting flight. When I finally saw a second border agent, he asked me another series of questions around my being Native, if I 'actually' worked at the University of British Columbia and was 'actually' a professor, why I didn't have Indian status yet, when I was planning on getting it. I explained how I had to wait for my father to get his, then I could apply; but I didn't see how that was relevant. Then finally he asked why 'someone like me' would be travelling to do what I said I was doing. For many, this question might be shocking. For me, it was sad, demoralising, disheartening, dehumanising, but

not shocking. I found myself on the outside of a social sphere, looking in at the markings of a turbulent occurrence, or at the afterlife of the colonial system; Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2008) helped me to find a particular language around this social phenomenon. The undercurrent here pulled me out to sea with its violent flail, by the imposition of what anthropologist Kristen Simmons has called 'settler atmospherics'.

When I finally arrived in Columbus, I went to the Wexner to meet my friends and colleagues for the last moments of the open rehearsal for the day. As I walked up the long ramp to the bright exhibition space, the hot sun echoed across its walls. Tanya's largescale work of red kohkom scarves suspended in layers from the ceiling, *Held in the air I never fell (spring lightning sweetgrass song)* (2022), slowly came into view as the quiet sounds of movement and discussion gradually grew louder. When I peered into the space, everyone was sitting and talking quietly. Coming to sit alongside them, I felt as though I was wrapped in what I can only describe as this perpendicular undercurrent of love and support that intersected the flailing turbulence my brown(ish) body had just faced. This undercurrent only being possible for me through the gathering of Indigenous beings who surrounded my shaken body with care.

The turbulent atmospheres of the colonial afterlife have conjured seething currents at the surface. We – those marked by colonial violences – are at times pulled along by these turbulent currents, yet we conjure our own, perpendicular countercurrents by continually refusing that which has been placed upon us without our consent. Sometimes the colonial turbulence is not seething, it is an afterlife, it is just the state we are in, which might be a quieter weather system that weathers us regardless. These atmospheres, almost unnoticeable at times (and alongside many others), are explored by Tanya, who conceptualises the weather as both a series of relational structures by which we are shaped as well as colonial systems we wade through. Particularly, this conceptual framing for her practice considers her Alutiiq/Sugpiaq homelands in southwestern Alaska. Tanya's theorisations of weather, alongside her choreographic work, describe the ground-shaking atmospherics of Indigenous refusal, resistance and relational structures. I felt that the wrapping of my being after facing such racialised turbulence was perhaps made visible through *Indigenous geometries* (2019), created by Tanya with Métis architect



Scrape soak steam pour crack sew bend brace, 2024
(performance view, *inner blades of grass (soft) / inner blades of grass (cured) / inner blades of grass (bruised by weather)*, 2024, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus).
Photo: Luke Stettner

March 2025

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Tanya Lukin Linklater with Tiffany Shaw,
Indigenous geometries, 2019, cold rolled steel, laminate ash, paint,
matt polyurethane, hardware, 213×272×272 cm.
Photo: Blaine Campbell

Tiffany Shaw. Over those few days of rehearsals at the Wexner, I often found myself standing inside this architectural work. I felt held and comforted by the bent ash wood pieces that curve up and inwards creating a riblike structure that folds towards itself.

I have been lucky to work alongside Tanya for several years now, sometimes in direct collaboration, sometimes admiring from afar and sometimes just thinking and dreaming together. Through her work as a choreographer, she facilitates moments for dancers to embody intellectual queries on the lived experiences and ideas of Indigenous peoples, ancestral belongings held in so many collections and what it means to be in relation (to self, others, land, nature, weather, oceans). Her artistic gestures will often revolve around several components that include structural elements within space, movement as seen through her open rehearsals and acts of gathering and visiting. An ongoing query for Tanya is the weather. She describes the weathers of colonial exploitation as a continuous force while also showing how Alutiit remain flexible and nimble due to their intimate relationship with harsh weather structures. As she wrote in the book accompanying her 2023 exhibition *My mind is with the weather*:

My mind is with the weather. With cloud, with wind and rain.
With breath, with sweat and voice.

Whether we weather. Whether we become weathered. Whether my mind is with lla or the weather, I am turning. I am turning towards tides, winds, clouds, rainfall. Lla extends before and after the ongoing human-constructed storms of colonialisms – weather patterns that weather us.

Note that ‘lla’ is the Sugcestun word for weather, but its definition is much more expansive and multifold than just ‘weather’ as we know it within the limits of the English language. In this statement we see Tanya’s installation piece *I am turning toward tides, winds, clouds, rainfall*. (2024) bring her theoretical research on Indigenous sustenance into direct relation with her artistic gestures and then later with the engagement of dancers. This sprawling piece that includes bright orange tarpaulin, pāua shells (abalone), beeswax and furniture blankets is a direct engagement with her relationship to lla.

As I think through how our bodies are in relation to weather, are shaped by weather, bring weather, are weather, it is perhaps important to start by considering our weathers as a refusal to calm

the enduring storms of colonialism. Fred Moten describes non-performance as a series of refusals that resists how colonial and imperial systems demand our performativity of whiteness as nonwhites. Nonperformance, he writes in *Stolen Life* (2018), is to ‘refuse what is normatively desired and to claim what is normatively disavowed’. Furthermore, he describes that ‘to refuse what has been refused is a combination of disavowing, of not wanting, of withholding consent to be a subject’. The nonperformativity that Moten speaks to is also found in the work of many Indigenous thinkers and makers, and one that we can use to refuse Western systems (with our own expressions of sexuality, gender and social systems of decision-making, for example) placed upon our lands while also continuing to have to navigate those systems. Plainly, it is a refusal to perform colonial subjectivities that have been forced upon us. Through acts of withholding, we might create undercurrents that flow perpendicularly against the wakes of the colonial afterlife; we persistently refuse to endure over years and years until our undercurrent becomes the current. The refusal I consider here holds competing parts; it suggests that we can refuse the turbulent weathers of colonialism forced upon us while also embracing the turbulent weathers of our own ancestral territories. We can learn from these turbulent weathers as they can point us towards revitalisation and renewal. Throughout much of her work, but particularly in her book *Mohawk Interruptus* (2014), Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson describes the crucial work of the Mohawk council of Kahnawà:ke in their persistent refusal of dominant settler governance systems, reinforcing their own sovereignty. Refusal, as Simpson writes it, becomes a way for imagining beyond those colonial systems – to reimagine in this way offers the possibility to set those systems anew.

These acts of refusal come into play in many ways for Indigenous peoples. It is a useful tool for us to be able to rebuild even within Western structures and systems that (they say) cannot be rebuilt. It offers the possibility for us to provide care and kinship systems for one another in places that will never fully offer this to us. To come back to the atmospheric choreographies of Tanya Lukin Linklater, I consider these refusals as critical methods for our kinship systems to be made paramount within how she builds her work. She allows the gaze of the largely non-Indigenous audience, as the rehearsals are open to the public, but refuses to abide by the many dictations by the museums that surround her work – in choosing not to describe



We are with. With sky, sunlight, cloud, wind. With ground, grass, trees, songbirds.
(*We are held*), 2024, site-specific open rehearsals
at Toronto Biennial of Art 2024. Photo: Mina Linklater



every component of the work to the public, Tanya selects what visitors may take from it, allowing the rest to remain unknown. In this sense, the refusal in Tanya's open rehearsals lies in the artist choosing to focus on the intimate relational systems / atmospheres between collaborators, allowing the public to view moments of that intimate relational work between dancers, choreographer and witnesses, while not catering to audience expectations. The refusal also comes in her unwillingness to appease colonial legacies that centre settler colonial comforts, perhaps speaking to a refusal of what researchers Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang refer to as 'settler moves to innocence' in their 2012 essay, 'Decolonization is Not a Metaphor'. Settler colonial comfort in museums falls into the habitual labelling, objectifying and othering of Indigenous peoples and our ancestral belongings, convincing us who museums are designed for and the differing levels of prioritisation around who is to *enjoy* the museum.

In thinking about her processes as seen through the very public gestures of her multiday open rehearsals, where the public is invited to witness the labour involved in creating her choreographies, I was reminded of bell hooks's essay 'Homeplace: A Site of Resistance' (1990). In this piece, hooks points to the ways in which systems of oppression have so successfully made it so that we, the target of so many oppressive tactics, have nothing left to give one another in our own private spaces. Our care for one another in our own spaces is how we refuse to endure. As I consider the museums and contemporary art spaces in which Tanya often works, I see these relational holding-patterns for one another as a method for how we can shift the dominating narratives in these spaces. Spaces that try to convince us that our very real bodies, our histories and futures, and our ancestral belongings held in those spaces are undeserving of love and do not belong. As Indigenous women who radically care for one another, we rattle the colonial afterlife; we refuse the systems that try to claim us, allowing ourselves instead to find *felt structures* that actively create space that is infused with love. For Tanya, *felt structures* are a way in which she brings ancestral homelands and knowledge together with theoretical investigations. Felt structures, she writes, are 'embodied, ephemeral, invisible, and felt', they are 'the atmospheres that hold us, our Peoples, our ancestors, our belongings, and our homes in relation to a living universe – allow us to see the universe differently' ('On Felt Structures', 2022). Our

*I am turning toward tides, winds,
clouds, rainfall, 2024, pāuashells (abalone),
beeswax, tarp, furniture blankets,
dimensions variable. Photo: Luke Stettner*

bodies actively change the shape of social space and, in turn, change the weather of that space; these are felt structures.

I am reminded again of the weather, in another text by Tanya:

These violences are not inevitable. Indigenous death is not unavoidable. Indigenous grief is not unpreventable. Indigenous dispossession is not unstoppable. These relentless weather patterns or storms of colonialisms battering our shores and our peoples are a series of human-constructed events rooted in dehumanisation and desire for land and resources.

To which I respond here:

Now I remember, because I wrote it over
and over and over
these violences are not inevitable
THESE violences are NOT inevitable
THESE VIOLENCES ARE NOT INEVITABLE

Throughout the open rehearsals we were continually reminded of the weather: we were brought together to conceptualise the shapes of feelings and shapes of the ocean through words describing specific details again and again, through subtle gestures the dancers find, through the sound of contemplative discussions and the sounds of the dancers' quiet movements across the space. And in so doing, we created *felt structures*. Once the rehearsals are finished, it is over, leaving only invisible traces in the spatial memory of these structures. Our multiday gathering consisted of Tanya as the choreographer/gatherer with a set of collaborators and witnesses. The rehearsals took place within the gallery space where Tanya's retrospective exhibition was installed. The rooms were dotted with blue wooden triangular shapes, kohkum scarves, video installations, watercolour paintings, architectural forms and a sprawling installation with tarpaulin, shells and fabric. Each of these artworks contains a reminder of the weather and, as Tanya told me recently, the ocean, which became a way to bind together all the works created over almost a decade. The dancers moved around, over and under the pieces throughout the space, particularly engaging with the blue triangular shapes in *Structure of Sustenance Three* (2024). The sound of their bodies gliding across the soft surface of the hardwood floor, of breath pushing through the air, of Tanya's quiet hums appreciating



*Scrape soak steam pour crack sew bend brace., 2024 (performance view, inner blades of grass (soft) / inner blades of grass (cured) / inner blades of grass (bruised by weather), 2024, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus).
Photo: Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus*



*Scrape soak steam pour crack sew bend brace., 2024,
(performance view near sculpture Structure of Sustenance Three., 2024,
inner blades of grass (soft) / inner blades of grass (cured) / inner blades of grass
(bruised by weather), 2024, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus).
Photo: Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus*

the subtle moments when the contemplative prompt given to the dancers was found in movement. These subtle sounds punctuated the space, washing up against the huge windows.

After each session, the dancers would gather and discuss their movements in relation to the ocean. We were being asked to find language for how the ocean might be brought into the space. I came to appreciate the art of description in this practice, but what was being asked for was more than description, and perhaps a translation of how we sense something over and over to find something new within it. Being from the ocean, I found myself wondering how to translate the oceans that I feel within my own body into my writing, and then to describe this feeling to dancers who then need to filter these words into their own movements.

Over our lifetimes, we become familiar with the continual inconsistency of the weather. As Tanya has described: we are in relation to the weather, or for her, to Ila. In a text published in *Public* in 2024 she writes how ‘we observe the sky for weather to understand what might be possible on this day’. The atmospheres created through the gathering of bodies each day in the open rehearsals demands that we open ourselves to unpredictable outcomes, and that we witness Indigenous labour. Furthermore, that our labour is allowed both to refuse the colonial institution’s (the museum’s) dominance while simultaneously wanting to be in it in order to shift this dominance ever so slightly. We are able to hold these contradictory feelings at the same time – we are able to dance with it all – because our bodies are shaped by complex atmospheres, by the weather, by oceans that are often clashing and at odds. We create alternatives to settler atmospherics, instead proposing ever-shifting relational kinship systems made possible through the simple act of witnessing one another flowing in the undercurrent of the colonial afterlife and pulling one another to calmer waters.

Tanya has described the ephemerality of air, that it cannot be fixed, how we are of air while also participating in its ongoing transformation. We breathe in, we breathe out, we sigh, we create atmospheres through the simple lifegiving act of moving one breath

at a time. We witness how others are able to recreate the ocean after we have uttered words describing it from memory. I am reminded again that we are of weather. ‘I come to this moment by looking at times to the sky,’ Tanya writes in her 2023 doctoral dissertation, ‘to consider the ways that clouds lit by the sun at dusk and dawn make visible the air that we sense as ever-changing, the elusive materiality that is of our bodies and of the world simultaneously.’

Throughout the process of writing this, Tanya and I visited with one another. Most of the time we talked about nothing and laughed hysterically, but slowly we shifted into spaces of remembering how we have gathered around the many atmospheres she has facilitated through her work. I asked her about how we hold contradicting pieces, and how we bring these contradictions with us into the atmospheres we create collectively. She pointed to how the weather teaches us to hold it all, that racism weathers us, that weather can be tumultuous and violent in the settler colonial state, but that we also create weather structures for one another that can find love and regeneration.

Tanya’s process as a choreographer follows a practice of gently facilitating dancers (and other collaborators) towards states of being. This gentle approach to her work refuses the violent, flailing, turbulent storms of the colonial afterlife and suggests an alternative. At the centre of her work is embodiment – balancing the intellectual with the physical – turning us towards the rigorous labour involved in these atmospheric investigations. I asked her what these gatherings do and what she wants people to know about her work. She answered this by describing how she fundamentally believes that *dance does something in the world*, that *something happens as a result of dance* that we may not always be able to see. But these small shifts accumulate over time like the weather, and like the ocean colliding with the edges of land, slowly, eventually, changing the shape of coastlines. Even the gentlest of waves, over time, do *something*. ar

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As Indigenous women who radically care for one another, we rattle the colonial afterlife; we refuse the systems that try to claim us, allowing ourselves instead to find *felt structures* that actively create space that is infused with love



*This moment an endurance to the end forever (still), 2020, single channel video with sound, 23 min 17 sec
all images Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver*