

TANYA LUKIN LINKLATER

On Felt Structures



Tanya Lukin Linklater,
*An amplification through
many minds* (still), 2019.
Video, 36 minutes, 22 seconds.
Courtesy of the artist and
Catriona Jeffries Gallery,
Vancouver.

Indigenous thinkers, writers, activists, and grassroots people have continuously advocated for a return to and recovery of Indigenous ways of knowing and practices as restorative actions for our Peoples. This advocacy for a return to practices connected to our thought and affective worlds is rooted in the belief that they will support a continuous repair of our families, Peoples, and communities. Elders and ancient structures inform our turn toward these forms of time and space that are found within our cosmologies. They are experienced by our Peoples through the body and the senses. Anticolonial Indigenous movements across North America from the 1950s onwards provide the historical, political, and cultural context for the work I undertake as an artist.

My work is rooted in Indigenous Knowledges shared with me over time and aligns with generations of Indigenous scholarship and action, politically and otherwise. The Alutiiq/Sugpiaq Peoples have undertaken a process of recovery and restoration through many activities initiated by our communities since the early 1980s. This ongoing work that our community members have set in motion in relation to ancestral Knowledges includes the continuance of land-based and embodied art forms, such as mask making, gut processing, fish skin tanning, the gathering and curing of grasses and roots, bentwood steaming, fur sewing and beading, song composition, weaving, and dance. Our community members visit museums to connect with ancestral or cultural belongings and learn from their construction, spending time with the information encoded within these forms left to us by our relatives. These activities taken together become the decipherment and recovery of Knowledges left to us by our ancestors. I am one person in the midst of this movement, attempting to learn from ancestral Knowledge and contribute to our collective efforts toward repair. The recovery of Alutiiq/Sugpiaq Knowledges, even as I live in a diaspora from my homelands, has been a significant concern of mine for decades.

This text proposes a methodological claim for my artistic practice that is rooted in a bundling of Alutiiq/Sugpiaq words connected to Alutiiq/Sugpiaq ideas.¹ This methodology of felt structures is embodied, ephemeral, invisible, and felt. I am seeking to bring language to our collective undertakings. I briefly describe our Alutiiq Knowledges in relation to our homelands, our waterways, our atmospheres, and our minds, and through embodied practices such as subsistence, ceremony, and

language. Felt structures — the atmospheres that hold us, our People, our ancestors, our belongings, and our homes in relation to a living universe — allow us to see the universe differently. It is a cosmos that is connected to our bodies, our very beings, in a constellation of relations between human and non-human persons, including the wind, water, Salmon People, and other beings.

Alutiiq villages of the Kodiak Archipelago, Alaska, are most often located on the coast. In this coastal zone, this space between, we are in relation to a geography continuously shaped by marine, terrestrial, and atmospheric forces. Our villages are mostly reachable only by boat or airplane. We are continuously in relation to the weather, to the storms that are carried by the wind to our shores. We look upwards to the clouds daily and to the changing nature of the ocean's tidal levels. The weather structures or determines our activities on any given day, like it has

¹ This text is excerpted from the methodology chapter in my forthcoming dissertation, Department of Cultural Studies, Queen's University. In the dissertation, I build upon Athapaskan scholar and writer Dian Million's intellectual labour in the field, including felt theory. Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2013).

done for multiple millennia. Indeed, listening to and forecasting the weather and seas has been a valued activity for Alutiit over time. They are forces we cannot ignore.

In the Alutiiq language, the word for “cloud” is qilak, which also means “sky.” The sky is where clouds are composed, where electricity is constituted into lightning, and where water vapour is arranged alongside particles forming droplets. Qilak is where storms are assembled through air currents, gathering momentum until they are released upon us. Storms can either be life-giving or wreak havoc.

The word for “weather” in our Alutiiq language is lla. Lla also means “outside,” “outdoors,” “universe,” “world,” “awareness,” “consciousness,” “wits,” “(common) sense,” and “sky.”² These multiple meanings for lla gesture toward an Alutiiq cosmology, unseen but present in the changing nature of the weather; in persistently shifting cloud cover; in the distillation, force, and volume of precipitation; and in the unsteady windsweptness of Kodiak Island.

Lla, or weather, is determined by air pressure, temperature, and moisture. Weather is often defined in the English language as “the state of the atmosphere.” The atmosphere surrounds the Earth in a series of five concentric circles. The densest atmospheric layer, the troposphere, is closest to the Earth as gravity pulls the particles of the atmosphere toward land and water formations, blanketing us with this thickest layer that sustains life. Weather is present in the troposphere. The next atmospheric layers, the stratosphere and mesosphere, express less materiality in a process of dissipation. As we move to the furthest layers, the thermosphere and exosphere, the air has changed, becoming less substantial, nearly weightless as gravity disappears and is rendered transparent, yet still present in the zone between us and the universe (or outer space).

A continuous ephemerality may describe air in its perpetually moving currents, which are different formations that, while patterned, cannot be fixed. The atmosphere is constituted by air that is invisible yet surrounds or envelops us. It moves us in the rise and fall of our chests and bellies, in the quiet expanse of our rib cages with each inhale, and in the suspension and empty pauses between exhales. The continuousness of breath, a cycle, embodied moment by moment, is shared among us. Yet, anerneq una, this breath, is also firmly in our body in this moment. Each of us partakes in this shared breath that is everywhere at all times yet unseen. This breath is connected to the clouds and to plant life, and is shared among us. In each sip and gulp.

I come to this moment by looking at times to the sky, 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. If we extend our thinking in relation to an Alutiiq world, we might say that this breath, anerneq una, connects us to the universe, through the air that is of our bodies, and to the concentric sky worlds above. This more-than-human structure that envelops

2 Jeff Leer, “Alutiiq Dictionary” (unpublished data files with macro codes, n.d.); LL, quoted in Alisha Sussana Drabek, “Litukut Sugpiaq’sum (We Are Learning How To Be Real People): Exploring Kodiak Alutiiq Literature Through Core Values” (Ph.D. diss., University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2012), 174.

us is also bodily. That which sustains our life with each rhythmic inhale and exhale also connects us to one another, to life, to creation, and to the cosmos.

I am proposing potential meanings for these Alutiiq words within a contemporary context. Perhaps this is the work of artists: to propose new meanings within new contexts. I am building upon the intellectual traditions of Alutiiq Elders, including the late Nick Alokli and Sophie Katelnikoff; Alutiiq and Yup’ik speakers, including the late Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley; and linguists and community workers, such as Alisha Drabek and April Laktonen Counciller, who have discerned meaning over time. I am extending their analysis by composing an understanding that builds upon their translation and interpretation.

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Indigenous scholar Kristen Simmons describes “settler atmospherics” and their role in anti-Black and anti-Indigenous violence in Black Lives Matter and at Standing Rock partly thus: “The conditions we breathe in are collective and unequally distributed, with particular qualities and intensities that are felt differently through and across time.”³ Ongoing anti-Black violence, climate crises, and our political mobilizations in response only make felt structures feel more urgent, as we cannot breathe within the pervasiveness of settler atmospherics.⁴

Felt structures are in constant motion; impermanent; shifting; fading; dense in moments, dissipated in others like cloud cover... The patterns of their arrivals and departures are encoded. We rely on our other senses in the processes of perception, discernment, and response to felt structures.

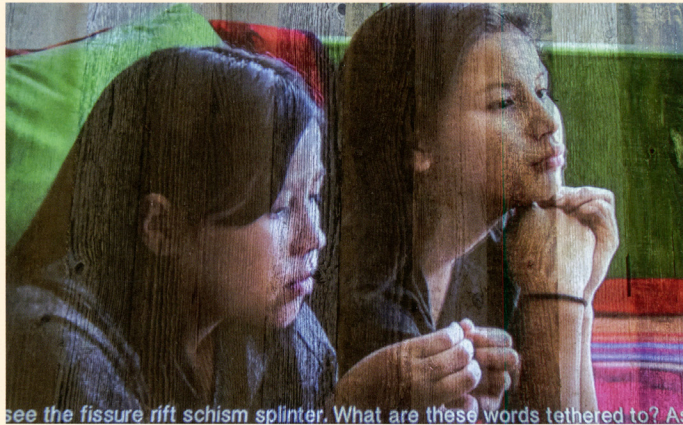
The work of reaching back to our ancestors is partial, as we cannot recover and restore the full complexity of these felt structures. They existed within a ritual Alutiiq/Sugpiaq universe prior to Russian contact. Yet felt structures may also be enacted as a set of ethics that guide our actions in the present moment, as a kindness toward our ancestors and to the world at large — embodied Knowledge practices that hold a future potential. Felt structures frame, inform, are the action of, and are generated by my work. Felt structures are simultaneously past, present, and future becoming.

3 Kristen Simmons, “Settler Atmospherics,” *Member Voices*, Fieldights, November 20, 2017, <https://kulanth.org/fieldights/settler-atmospherics>. Due to the brevity of this publication, I introduce Simmons’s theory of settler atmospherics without addressing its complexity.

4 Simmons.

TANYA LUKIN LINKLATER (Alutiiq/Sugpiaq, b. 1976
in the Kodiak Archipelago, Alaska)

Tanya Lukin Linklater's homelands are in the Kodiak Archipelago of southwestern Alaska. Her performances, works for camera, installations, and writings centre on the histories of Indigenous Peoples' lives, lands, and structures of sustenance. Her first collection of poetry, *Slow Scrape*, was published in the Documents series by The Centre for Expanded Poetics and Antisemitism Books, Montréal, in 2020, with a second printing in 2021. Lukin Linklater studied at the University of Alberta (earning an M.Ed. degree) and Stanford University (earning an A.B. Honours degree), where she received the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship and the Louis Sudler Prize in the Performing and Creative Arts. She is currently completing her dissertation at Queen's University. In 2022, she participated in the Toronto Biennial of Art and the Aichi Triennale (Japan). In 2021, her work was shown at the 2021 New Museum Triennial and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Also in 2021, she received the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts for Visual Art.



see the fissure rift schism splinter. What are these words tethered to? As



1. Tanya Lukin Linklater, *They fall the ground beneath you*, 2018, video projection on marine lumber plinth, dimensions variable, 17:20 minutes

They fall the ground beneath you is a video installation that reflects on Tanya Lukin Linklater's hometown of Afognak, family narratives, embodied knowledge, and memory. It begins with the artist tapping her fingers on a table, almost imitating the shaking earth. The village of Afognak on Kodiak Island was destroyed by a tsunami following the great Alaskan earthquake of 1964, the most powerful earthquake recorded in North America. During the tsunami, the artist's grandmother fled with her family to find high ground. In many ways, this work centres oral histories, kinship, and maternal care, broadly gesturing toward that which is felt, lived, and shared across generations. To honour the women in her life, Lukin Linklater includes her daughters and family members in the video, whose hands are painted with a copper-based paint that pays tribute to Anishinaabe territory, a region that includes North Bay, Ontario, where Linklater currently lives. This work evokes profound connections to water walkers, Anishinaabe women whose sacred ceremonial tradition of walking the shorelines of the Great Lakes with copper vessels containing water is a form of prayer and raises environmental consciousness. By making this video installation, the artist also honours Inupiaq and Athabaskan artist Sonya Kelliher-Combs, whose works feature in this exhibition. Lukin Linklater has encountered Kelliher-Combs's work, mostly through documentation, and is compelled by her commitment to process, memory, community, and embodied practices.

INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEWS

Indigenous worldviews are rooted in the idea that everything is connected and that spirits are ever present. Arctic and Amazonian cultures reveal a world where the connections between all living things is central, challenging Eurocentric worldviews through images and artistic creation, and teaching us how to respect the land and all that lives upon it. The works by Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe, Morzaniel Iramari Yanomami, and Gisela Motta and Leandro Lima are either inspired by ceremonial practices or document them, foregrounding spiritual activities as creative endeavours with healing properties.



2. Tanya Lukin Linklater, *An amplification through many minds*, 2019, video, 36:32 minutes, with Ivanie Aubin-Malo, Ceinwen Gobert, Eungie Joo, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Danah Rosales, and Jovanna Venegas; camera and edit: Neven Lochhead

An amplification through many minds is a work in three parts. In the first part, Tanya Lukin Linklater visits Alutiiq and Unangan cultural belongings at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology's collections storage, where she names the objects out loud — a kind of greeting or address to ancestors long removed from their homelands. The second part is an open rehearsal at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art with three dancers, who through a choreographic process investigate the museum as a structure that interrupts the life of cultural belongings. The final part returns to the collections storage, where a dance enlivens the space as a reconnection with ancestors. Both the songs and dances are a way of acknowledging that Linklater's culture is still alive. There is a government regulation directed toward American museums that receive federal funding to return funerary, sacred, and cultural objects to Indigenous communities. The desire of Indigenous Peoples to have historically and culturally sensitive objects returned to their communities has created tension among museum professionals, who see themselves as protectors of these artifacts. But for Indigenous Peoples, this museological practice is debatable, given that much of their cultural patrimony was taken from them under duress, and they often hold quite different views of the origins, meanings, and uses of those collected objects.