

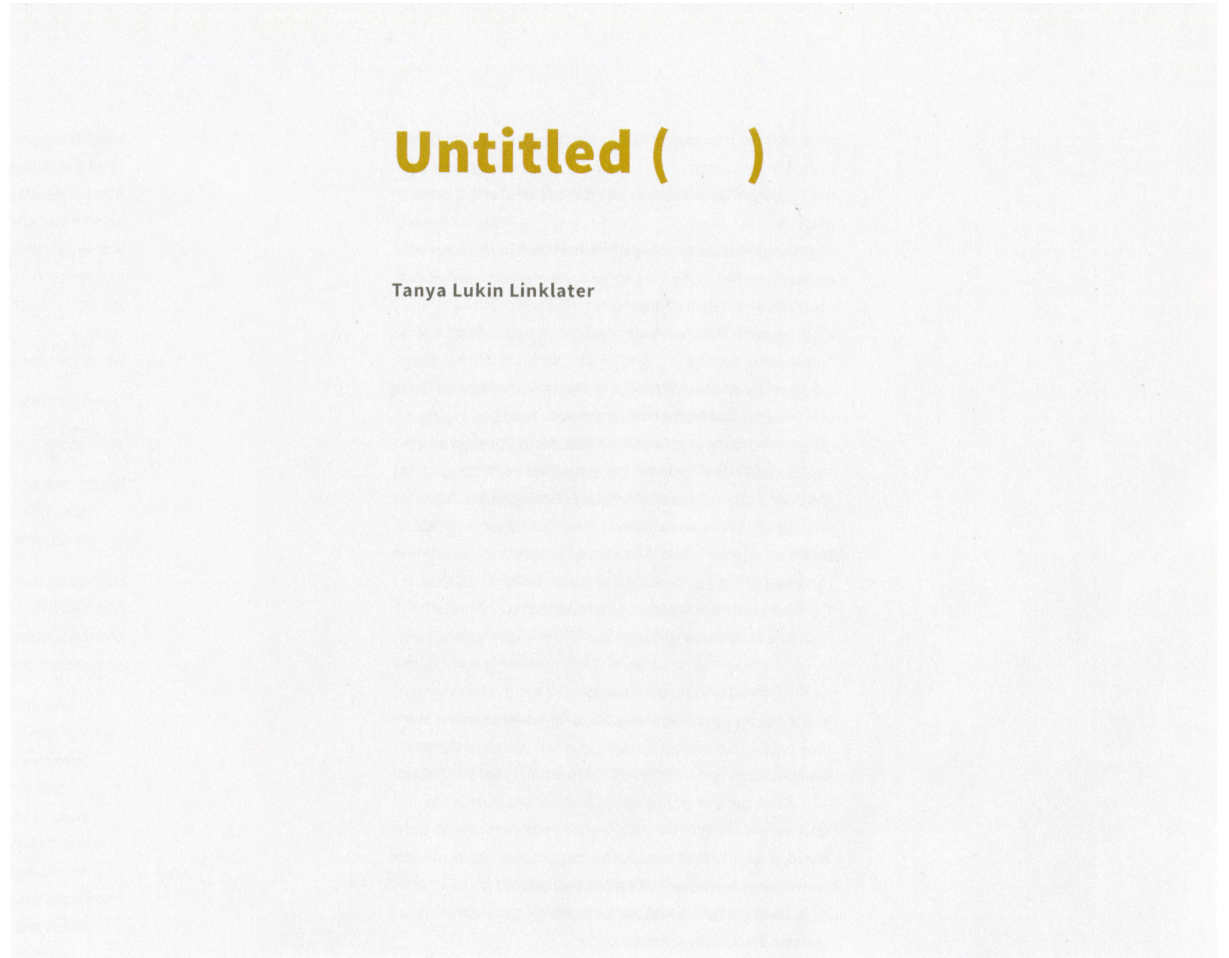
Far
Away
So
Close

PART III

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Untitled ()

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I live with the memory of home, of a place
I come from a place
my ancestors for thousands of years came from this place
Afognak
some say the first two people fell from the sky in a kayak
or were lowered in the bladder of a sea mammal, an
incandescent ball on the wind
Afognak is an island within an archipelago, an island within a
collection of islands
we grew there—our families and practices and ways of being
and thought and relations to the world
we grew from the grasses and driftwood, black sand and
salmon berry bushes, creeks and seagulls
the tides pulsing against the shores of Afognak
we traded and we knew others, their ideas their languages
and ways
our trajectories our invisible paths written in
the land in our bodies and our ways of being
with one another were interrupted

by Russian fur traders and priests
and the story goes that the Russian fur traders were brutal
they enslaved our men and sent them in search of the sea
otter
our old stories tell us that the sea otter is our
relative
the men were forced to pile sea otter furs high in kayaks that
now were constructed with three hatches
an innovation by the Russian fur traders
to make a hatch for sea otter pelts

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they traveled great distances from Afognak in these three-
hatched kayaks
to other parts of Alaska British Columbia Washington
Oregon California
where they were enslaved by Spanish missionaries and
tortured
thousands of miles on the ocean
what kept them, what prompted their continual return to
Afognak a place of brutality aching
perhaps memories of mothers, fathers, uncles,
daughters and sons sustained or broke them as
they imagined the people behind enclosures our
people separated by their labour what they could
produce or what needs they could meet

and this is not the story I want to tell about who I am or what
I remember of home
our memories can't only be about colonialism but
how do we grapple with these histories and the
subsequent generations of grief and the distancing
that we create in our own lives when we collectively
move to forget these difficult histories

this is not a theory how can it be poetry a real question I ask

what do we remember and what do we forget?
why the urgency to forget and to remember?
remembering may be far too painful for some, some
say remembering may be emancipatory

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this is one of the first interruptions Afognak experienced
and the priests at the time, in my understanding of the
stories people tell, those who dare to speak about history,
they tell that the priests were writing letters on our behalf to
the Russian Czaress, Catherine the Great, who was far too
concerned about her Empire and the Metropole to listen
about fringe sub-human inhabitants of the territory called
alaska—a place only valued for its production of the fur, the
remnant of the sea otter
our relative

how do we reckon with history? how do we reckon with our
ancestors' enslavement? how do we reckon with the choice
of our ancestors to be baptized by the Russian Orthodox
Church in order to become recognized by the state of Russia
as citizens, as human beings with rights? how do we reckon
with the collective grief that we (continue to) experience?
in the absence of our cultural selves, or the creolization of
Afognak that some anthropologists argue for?
I come from a specific place
this is about Afognak and it is not about Afognak
I wonder about the intellectual traditions of Afognak
I wonder about the language
and the residues of self and home and place
even when we are far, we are so close