

# the the: Tanya Lukin Linklater

Tanya Lukin Linklater's *the the*, 2016, asks us to be patient, and if we can comply, we are rewarded with thoughtful and nuanced engagement with education, the body and language.

June 9, 2017



by Tasha Hubbard

Tanya Lukin Linklater's *the the*, 2016, asks us to be patient, and if we can comply, we are rewarded with thoughtful and nuanced engagement with education, the body and language. She recently presented the ambitious and meditative work at the Studio 914 Theatre, curated by Troy Gronsahl as part of the new Remail Modern's "Turn Out" series.

The multi-layered video, spoken word and performance piece is based on her emotional response to the attempted assassination of education activist Malala Yousafzai in the region of Swat Valley, Pakistan in late 2012. With the encouragement of Lakota poet Layli Long Soldier, Lukin Linklater started writing about it, and the work took shape as an exploration of the complex relationship one can hold with education, both in theme and visual form.

As an artist, Lukin Linklater is interested in the notion of making space for excluded voices (including Indigenous peoples) within cultural institutions, and this was the impetus for inviting artist Lori Blondeau and I as Indigenous women living in the community of Saskatoon. She explained: "I wanted us to talk about making space [in institutions and galleries], but also to think about what that space currently looks like and who is missing from that space. I keep asking myself this question and working through that. There are embedded structures that need to shift."

After the performance, Lukin Linklater and I had a conversation about the specific performance but shared our thoughts about memory, the body and patience.



**Tasha Hubbard: So the piece begins with you reading your reflective prose about Malala, and Saskatoon educator Randy Morin reading the text in Cree. Can you talk about your intentions and different methodologies for the piece, starting with the first aspect?**

Tanya Lukin Linklater: I use different methodologies for each component of the work. The first component is the text itself and working with the translation of my words into the Cree language. The two readings happen simultaneously, so there are times when you can hear both of us and times when you can't hear either. This portion isn't rehearsed or theatrical, so it is experimental as a text. He and I aren't acting; we are reading. So I am asking, what does it mean to read and what does it mean to have a shared space of our voices and the sounds of the two languages—English and Cree—happening simultaneously? Then, there is the video as well as the performance collaboration with dancers.

**Let's talk about the video, and what your influences are for that component.**

I felt very clear in the direction for the video. I reference Victor Erice's *Spirit of the Beehive*, 1973, Hana Makhmalbaf's *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame*, 2007, and Samira Makhmalbaf's *Blackboards*, 2000. All three films are situating children within a post-war period or within war circumstances, and I am asking how children engage with education and learning in these kinds of circumstances. For example, there is a relationship between two sisters in *Spirit of the Beehive*, but their family environment is broken by war. The subtext for the work is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the years gone into investigating residential schools and intergenerational trauma. There is a context formed by the complex relationship between Indigenous peoples and the education system.

### **How much of your own experience made its way into the performance?**

I had a different experience growing up—my family saw education as a way out of poverty. But that was happening in a different space and time, in the United States during Reaganomics. I didn't understand Indigenous peoples' historical relationships to education. There were boarding schools in the United States, but as Dr. Shauneen Pete says, we've all been structurally denied the opportunity to learn about Indigenous peoples in Canada and the U.S. in the K-12 and postsecondary system. So, I didn't grow up knowing about these complex histories to education as assimilative processes and processes of cultural genocide as they are described by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report. Yet, Indigenous peoples have historically seen education as a place of possibility. I am thinking of treaties and the medicine chests. I suppose there is a part of me that places hope within education, still.

The third part of this work is a performative collaboration with local dancers Kyle Syverson, Karla Kloeble, and Marcus Merasty. I bring the ideas and create the conditions of the work, such as the structure. I provide the text as a way for the dancers to access

movement and a place for them to improvise from. Improvisation becomes part of the methodology, as the dancers bring forward the understanding of their bodies and their responses to the text. I then place their bodies and movements within the space and in relation to one another. I am an outside eye making decisions about structures, movement choices, and placement.

### **How was it working with the three components?**

Working with three different methodologies is a complicated process. I'm not sure if I'll do that again. It is a lot for people to process.



**I was thinking that the work leaves a space for the audience and their own meaning making, that this requires commitment from the audience and a kind of patience.**

I do ask for patience. This piece is usually offered in a gallery setting, which is where most of my work happens, so people can get up and leave. But this time, with it being placed in a theatre, which comes with its own conventions, people were perhaps expecting it to be a

theatrical play. And then they might ask, “how is this a play?”

I’m interested in what happens when we watch dance. We breathe differently, we experience a kinaesthetic response to dance, which allows motion within our own bodies, and alters our relationship with the work.

Working in that space of live dance can be expansive compared to video. For the video, the camera was stationary, and so some viewers read it as portraiture, but I don’t know if that’s what I see. It is also about the gaze of the camera and framing. I use a sense of static motion in the video, investigating the relationship of the bodies and the camera. It becomes a form, a tight relationship. The dancers in the video are in difficult positions and motion—one dancer picks up the other and crosses the frame.

A critique of the work may be that I am working with young women. However, I consider that all three of these women are mixed blood—one is Metis and the other two are mixed Asian-Canadian dancers—but perhaps none of their bodies are read that way. So, I am asking, how do we read their bodies?

**Why did you make the choice to start using the camera as part of your practice?**

I was concerned with the erasure of my work. As a woman, as a feminist, as an Indigenous woman, I was concerned that the work would only exist as memory and conversation, which is also interesting, but the issue is that in order for this work to be sustained over time, it needs to have a longer presence. It was important to move into performative photography and video so that there was this longer relationship to it within a viewer and within museum spaces.

I also wanted to step out of the work. In performance, there is a great deal of discipline of the body and mind, and it is an ongoing practice. I really see that with the dancers I work with. For this piece, I needed to step out of the work and think about the visual impact and think

more about the endurance of the work itself so it exists beyond the performance.



**Talk to me about the poetic elements of the piece.**

I feel that poetry is a place where a lot of women's stories live. I am thinking about Joy Harjo, Marilyn Dumont. And when I heard about Malala's story, I felt like it took me into a contemplative space. I was in a mentorship with Layli Long Soldier, a poet on the forefront of everything. I told her how moved I was, and she told me to write from that place because it is urgent and real.

But as the piece has existed for three years, it has had so many different iterations. I feel strongly about having a performance practice that incorporates changes, to work with different dancers, locations, so that it becomes a different performance.

**So that you are responding to the place you are in, in different ways?**

Yes, that is part of my methodology—to respond to the location and

the people who are there. This makes me think of the conversation we had after the performance. By asking yourself and Lori Blondeau to have a live discourse, this was another way to respond to a community and place and to the concerns and ideas that are specific to this location.

I'll be continuing this approach in Peterborough in September 2016 for a work called *Constellation / conversation*, a collaboration with Leanne Simpson at Artspace that also involves Layli Long Soldier and cheyanne turions.

I want to contribute to expanding the conceptual space for Indigenous women in museums and other art spaces. That's why it was important to have you and Lori in the conversation and to work from and with relationships that already existed, relationships between us as Indigenous women thinkers and artists.

**I was honoured to have this conversation. Thank-you, Tanya.**

---

*Tasha Hubbard is from the Peepeekisis First Nation. She is an Assistant Professor at the University of Saskatchewan, and an award-winning filmmaker. Her latest film, in post-production, is about a 60s Scoop family who united for the first time 50 years after they were taken from their mother. Her research is on Indigenous film, Indigenous creative representation of the Buffalo and Indigenous women's and children's history.*

This interview was originally featured in [BlackFlash issue 33.3](#).