

Afterwards:
Okwui Okpokwasili
& Tanya Lukin Linklater

Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance (ICPP)
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Constanza Armes Cruz: I want to begin by offering a few terms or keywords that I felt were resonating across both of your work and also words that you both used in the public program that just ended. These are: accumulation, insistence, sensing, restoration, and resonance. Maybe we can start with these spaces of resonance between your practices and then delve a little bit deeper. Perhaps you can just keep riffing on what you were both getting toward, right as we were ending.

Tanya Lukin Linklater: Maybe I can start by answering the question that you posed, Okwui, about what I was asking of the dancers in *A song, a felt structure: We are putting ourselves back together again?*

Okwui Okpokwasili: Yes, it was interesting that you also talked about the space of preparation. What do we have to do in order to prepare? How to go into that space? I thought to myself that that's true—what do we do to prepare?

Tanya Lukin Linklater: In the performance of *A song, a felt structure*, the sculptural object can come apart and be placed in different relations. We're putting ourselves back together again, while in the process of recovery and restoration. I chose to address two spines from the sculpture, which are the spines that I'm most familiar with, or most comfortable addressing—songs and language. Breath and orality are present in songs and language. In terms of songs, in this performance, the sound of the violin, pow-wow songs, ceremony songs were present. I asked Ivanie Aubin-Malo to dance this as she's Maliseet and familiar with some of these kinds of songs. The other dancer I work with, Ceinwen Gobert, is non-indigenous; she's a mixed-race Chinese-Canadian dancer. I asked her to address language, which might be our conversation, or the language of two poems I brought for us to build choreography from. These two poems by Indigenous poets Joy Harjo and Susie

Silook had a connection to Chicago, where the work was performed. I provided the poems and asked the dancers to find language that they felt spoke to embodiment. Then I asked them what does it mean to hold songs? What does it mean to carry language? What does it mean to listen to the spines?

Later two spines traveled to my home and they're still here. I don't know if I'll ever return them. This sculpture will move to another location. Bringing the spines into my home, being present with my family and I for this duration, becomes a different kind of work. I think about the work happening in community as we put ourselves back together again in all of these really rigorous and beautiful ways on a daily basis. That's insistence for me.

In terms of preparation when I visit cultural belongings in museum collection storage spaces, there are a series of things that I do before I enter that space, because I know that not only will the objects be listening to me as they may have personhood and agency, but their makers will also be present. I'm aware of how I conduct myself when I'm in relation to them. I also undertake personal practices in this preparation.

The objects in these spaces have been treated with DDT, arsenic and other chemicals. So there's this complicated experience of trying not to be afraid of them, and of what's happening to your body when you're in relation to them. We are in relation at all times. For me, the ancestors are present when I'm working.

Okwui Okpokwasili: That's super. Because you are also recovering a relationship, right? When you talk about the DDT, all of the things that have been put on the object to preserve it. To almost cut off that life or that sensory space. To make it into this one thing, as opposed to a kind of

container for a multitude of relationships. It's an interesting kind of recovery that you have to do and prepare yourself to do.

It makes me also think that there are some objects, maybe in Benin or Nigeria, or masquerades—I think egungun is what Yoruba people call them. The fact that these things were stolen, taken for five cowrie shells or whatever, and placed in Western museums, not only cut them off from their sensing capacity or sensory capacity, it closed a door, right? Some of these objects were literally portals. You would enter them and there would be a portal to an ancestral kind of conversation or plane or connection. An object wasn't made to be separate. Thank you for that clarification, but also for the insistence on a daily practice, which can be so complicated if it also includes trying to keep coming up with questions.

How is that practice also a capacious space for discovery? Because I do feel Tanya, I resonate with the desire and I have it in me to know something about where I come from. And it's interesting to be in this country where people say, "Oh, you're from Nigeria, you're Igbo. You know something about yourself." But I'm saying, you don't realize this rupture throughout the globe. I do sometimes have this desire to understand my context but I also understand, "Oh, that can never really happen." And what is the other kind of potential in that space of rupture, what is the imaginative potential that opens up? Because I must make it, I must make it. The importance of relation, sensing, and understanding the capacity to resonate, I just feel like right now we're in this moment where it's so critical as a race of humans, as a species to do that.

Tanya Lukin Linklater: I'm in alignment with you when you talk about a door being closed because these were portals. Yes, their own sensations and their own capacity

for sensation given this long time that they've been in this closed-door space. Yet I believe that there are Indigenous people who continue to nourish these even from afar. They maintain a kind of life even from afar. They also wait for us; they wait for us to come to them.

The other part of what you're saying—and I agree with you—is that I will never know the experience of my ancestors. I will never know fully what it was like before. But on the other hand, there are these things that come through: these energetic qualities, these resonances, these things that exist that we can't see, but we can feel and sense them. That guides what you're speaking about, which is this kind of relationality, this way of being with one another. I agree that this is important for all of us—not just Indigenous or black folks—because we're in a time when we have to better care for not only ourselves and one another, but also for the environment.

Okwui Okpokwasili: That's right. The idea of repatriated bones, having the children handle them and know of them—it gives me chills. And I'm thinking, when you talk about these things that we don't know exactly, we can't be there, and we don't need a documentary. But we need some way to open up a kind of porosity to let that sensing come in and to not claim it as absolute truth and exactness but as a guide of some kind. Where is it guiding us? Where are we going? My partner makes objects and we shape the objects. But how do they live? How do they also have that breath? And how are those objects something that we are in relation to, just as the dancers are finding a relationship to that spine? I also feel some resistance, because we exist in an art space that privileges the object, precisely because it can be put on a market and traded, captured in a capitalist framework, to build wealth, a particular kind and idea of wealth. When we're done with our interfacing, our interaction with the object, I want to say goodbye. We work a lot with

plastic, which is problematic as I think about it, because I'm like, "What did we do with that plastic when we were done?" We used it because of its materiality, the sense of how it captured light, but also in Nigeria the few times we've been there, plastic is used for everything. People sell plastic bags with water. And then they repurpose it before they burn it, which is a terrible smell, but you know that this plastic has been washed, and used, and hung. Years ago, we were using plastic as a kind of reference to certain spaces, particularly the urban spaces in markets in parts of Nigeria, but then I'm like, "Gosh, but where did it go afterwards?"

[Tanya Lukin Linklater](#): I often think that museums are built for objects and not for people. I mostly make performances within the museum. I negotiate within and with hierarchies when I undertake a commissioned performance. I negotiate for liveable wages for dancers and others involved in this work. We need to be paying people for their work, the training and experience they've accumulated over a lifetime, their contributions to a project. I negotiate for spaces in which the performance team can change clothes, where we can eat and have water, and space to rest during breaks. I worked in a space intended for performance and I thought, "This is so much easier."

I am concerned about how the object takes precedence over performance, so sometimes I make performance installations, performance platforms in different sizes that can be built by any museum. I attempt to make things that are reusable and can have other lives afterwards. I've been feeling precious about these lately. How do we negotiate some of the complexities of that, thinking about how objects can have a life, but also not prioritizing that over people?

And in terms of convergences with curatorial practice, how do we support the artist or the choreographer in their engagements, in their projects with people? I see myself

as a buffer between the performance team and the curator, and the curator is that buffer between myself and the institution. Sometimes institutions ask really hard questions of me, they push me, but they also support and fully get behind things. I hold space for the performance team and sustain a good relationship with the curator, who has a good relationship with the institution (or perhaps not).

Okwui Okpokwasili: I second that I feel like I'm just starting to be in spaces or bring performance into spaces that are shaped and designed for objects. And it's true, I find it just maddening. You have curators who are 100% behind you, but still it feels like, "Oh, I'm in the rich person's home," where the labor, the construction of this world is completely absent and invisible. And that, actually, performance, the labor of performance is the work. It's fundamentally at odds with what museums were designed to do. So that's potentially interesting, how live performance troubles that.

Joshua Lubin-Levy: Can I throw something in here—a question of value? How objects are given and assigned value, economic value, but also how they become part of a system of valuation that premises this idea of the object over the artist or the performer. And it was something that you said, Tanya, that made me think back to this idea of relations. You were talking about the work you do in preparing to go into collections or go to be with objects. You said something like trying not to be afraid of being in proximity to the objects—that idea that we could also be afraid of objects seems to come up against that there can be no risk in the gallery space around the object, but that there can be risk around the body. Are we missing a healthy relationship to the fear of what objects can hold?

Tanya Lukin Linklater: A healthy relationship to objects and what they can hold is in parallel to my interest in healthy boundaries and working relationships between performers,

curators, artists. When we talk about hierarchy, I think the flip side of that is having good ways of being with one another, good ways of being alongside one another, being respectful and kind. For me, much of this is rooted in Indigenous ethics or modes that have been shared with me over time. Perhaps what we're saying about an object can also be said about people, and how we are with one another.

I'm interested in objects—not only because of my ancestors and this idea and ethics of relationality—but also as Indigenous people, we have been made into objects. We've been dehumanized and reduced. There are pervasive, reductive ideas of who we are, of our contributions and ideas. We've been so contained, constrained, reduced, limited that in a way, it only makes sense that I'm interested in an investigation of objects that have also been contained within a museum collection, toxic chemicals placed on them, that have been removed from our people, separated from the land, our songs, our dances, and the knowledge that surrounded them previously.

Noémie Solomon: A question came up earlier about the relationships you both have with the communities you work with. One part of the question might be, how do you work with and draw from the various people and experiences you interact with? Related to that, what kind of ethical stance or precaution do you take when you bring those works or those practices to the institutions, whether it's performance spaces or museums? I wonder if and how this question of “slippery positioning,” which was evoked earlier, might come into play in this negotiation of multiple spaces and communities?

Tanya Lukin Linklater: My foremost concern is with my community in my homelands. I'm thinking about writing in a way that is accessible to my community, so that I can bring

information home and have conversations with people. In Indigenous research, you are typically engaged with communities from the get-go. They're helping to formulate the work that you're doing—but that's not necessarily how I work as an artist. I give myself the time and space to be able to ask questions and to go where the work is taking me, allowing it to unfold.

Like Okwui, I don't identify as an activist. That's why I say that the work is happening in community. Political organizing is happening there, people are learning their languages, people are dealing with governments that continue to remove Indigenous children from their homes and place them in the child welfare system, and they are resisting. Art should never stand in for sovereignty. Art should never stand in for fully funding First Nation schools, or getting clean water to First Nations. It's easier to propose that artists can somehow do this work rather than do the actual work of making change for marginalized people, for poor people, for people who are struggling. In my practice, I'm not actively repatriating cultural belongings, but I'm pointing toward the work that's happened in my community to advocate for NAGPRA and to repatriate our ancestors and cultural belongings. I'm gesturing toward these histories. I take a position that art can't stand in for that kind of community-based work. There is space for different approaches and strategies and some artists may feel differently.

Constanza Armes Cruz: This morning I attended a public colloquium titled Self-Advocacy and Solidarity, which was talking about the resistance that museums and arts institutions have toward effecting real change. This colloquium was taking the very real experiences of people who had been pushed out, harassed, and had massive problems with their institutions. What you said about the need for a delineation between this community work and the artwork really resonated with me, especially because

I think that it's a trap that many institutions or galleries or presenters can fall into where they think that they're doing some kind of community work simply because they're curating work by BIPOC artists. And that's a step, that's a thing, it's a thing that you're doing, but you're not affecting the community in that way.

Okwui Okpokwasili: Or that it's not obviously instrumental, right? At least here in the United States, arts education is so non-existent. Art is either entertainment, something that can be bought and sold again, has a market, a space in the market, and a related system of valuation. Or it's used. It's not the thing in and of itself. It's a kind of medium through which we understand the pain and suffering of others or the need to address the toxic water in indigenous spaces or the toxic water in Black spaces.

There's also this idea of a separation between art and artists on the one side and community on the other. What does it mean to suggest somehow that I have to go to a community when, in fact, I am part of a community and I am trying to address an issue that I feel needs to be addressed? Or that I'm trying to address some concern which is relevant to the community and to the practice of making work and performance work, which is the sense of others? What is it to be next to others? And how does that shape how you move in your work, in practice and in the world? The concern is to think about that in practice. Of course, it has implications for how you move around the world, but it's not all straight. The art practice is a space where I'm exercising my imagination about how I live in the world. It's not always about a pure reflection of what the world is right now, or what I think should happen.

Tanya Lukin Linklater: Okwui, you're proposing the potentiality in a space outside of domination. As BIPOC artists, we can get trapped. I do feel a responsibility to

address these difficult histories. I feel complicated about this. I'm choosing in different moments what I will address. I think you're proposing is this other way of being in a space outside of domination, or a potential space.

Okwui Okpokwasili: Because it's working on us all of the time. Maybe not everybody, but I feel that shit is working on me all of the time. I don't need to start to address it. I'm suffused with it. But you, outside of my body want to somehow have some clarity of understanding, and now you require me to not just be suffused with it, but to elaborate on it, shape it, frame it for you to be able to look at it, and come to some understanding that you can articulate to your board. That's not my fucking problem. I can't make that my problem, and I mustn't suffer because of it, but I will suffer. There's only so much. I know that what I'm looking for is a space outside of domination, is a space of liberation, is a space for my imagination and all of the wild and crazy silly, beautiful ways that it might manifest. And in that imagination, reach out to those people in my community who may also be other artists. Why can't we be in some wild fantasia, right? Not concerned with interpreting or framing something—that's also where the curator comes in. How do you prevent that kind of harm? How do you make yourself a buffer so that you can do what you need to do to make sure that space is protected. But you're right Tanya, you're in community, you're in the powwows, you see the people who are learning. What must you display?

Tanya Lukin Linklater: You're also speaking to the different experiences of people in different locations. As Indigenous people, many of us continue to live in remote communities. People are struggling in remote communities; not in all cases, but it's important to keep that present in my thinking. I agree with what you're saying about framing pain for an audience so people can learn about it. I think of reconciliation in Canada between Indigenous peoples and

settler audiences or settler peoples. That's why I speak to the limitations of decolonization and reconciliation. It means that we labor so that settlers can then learn about these histories that impact our current conditions; the change resulting from these efforts might be so incremental that it's exhausting.

Okwui Okpokwasili: I feel even the shape and the structure of a reconciliation process is captured within a particular colonial settler framework of dialogue and how you have the capacity for that. I'm always interested in asking "What's another way?" What's a way for you to go in private, maybe with one person who says, "Okay, I will go sit with you, but not to have it on display." And then you come out there and you just move for as long as you can. What's a framework where we also push people's bodies? What would it be like if this truth and reconciliation process wasn't just about sitting and talking and recounting the violence that needs to be archived and placed somewhere for people to think about and review? But what if that was a private thing? But then you say, "Okay, stand here." And I want a snake to be crawling up your spine, and I want you to try to shake it out of you and don't stop until I tell you to. What are ways where we're going to put you in a space where we're going to try to open up a capacity for you to maybe connect to something deep that's connected to something that you have done, or your ancestors have done, or a way in which your body can feel a particular kind of subjection? Maybe we don't say that, but how can we start to frame these things in ways that express a sense of urgency and frequency around the conditions that BIPOC people have been under and connect people to that? How do we shift to that? This idea of knowledge or how an episteme is formed? Really just go for it. But who's going to do that?

Tanya Lukin Linklater: I build relationships within these processes, only allowing people in so far. I refuse to

be a spectacle of pain and trauma for a settler colonial audiences. Let's focus on repair and restoration within ourselves. Some of my projects have addressed connecting women and girls to learn and be with each other. How can we and how are we with one another?

Okwui Okpokwasili: I appreciate your reminder for me, a sense of that power in the relationship to objects, the need to decouple them from the toxic capital systems. I don't have a problem with the spectacle of pain, as long as someone isn't standing next to me being like, "So why do you think that's happening?" And especially for the person who is going through this, to have to sort of prepare everybody. No. No. No.

I did this piece *Bronx Gothic*; eventually there was a film made around it. I think the director, who is lovely, made a film so that white people could understand what was happening. But in the performance, I was not concerned with that. I was like, "Come on in, I'm doing something." A lot of people assume: "Well, that's her personal experience?" No, that's not it either. I did, in a way, refuse to help people put it in some kind of context. I'm just saying: "It's there." How do we prepare people to be there? You know what I mean? To just get your body to sit and be there. There's nothing you can prepare, you're going to come out of it, you're still not going to know. Don't assume that you're going somewhere to develop a kind of understanding. Go to be there. You will not understand and walk away and be okay. You'll be okay or you won't.

Tanya Lukin Linklater: This is getting back to those energetic qualities and your relationship to an audience. It speaks to some of my larger concerns about who the audience for my work is. What am I asking of them? I'm still working through the complexities and the ethics of that. I really appreciate your thinking through what you are asking

and the ways in which you ask. Those are the questions that I continue to ask and work through.

Okwui Okpokwasili: In the shared space of my public improvisational sonic practice, I have to be okay with the fact that the guest practitioners may not give you the thing you ask for. I don't necessarily know what I asked them. I know what I asked them to be. I know what I want for me. But people come into this space and they're going to sound and sing and scream and holler. People are just like, "What the fuck is this?" to which I'll respond: "Then go, you don't have to." So I'm chasing something and then there are some people who stay in there. I have faith that I have to truly chase the questions that I have, the slipperiness that I have, and I hope somebody will come along with me, but I can't always worry about the audience in one particular way. But if I can commit to the thing I'm doing, then maybe they'll be taken care of, or not. The work is so much already.

Tanya Lukin Linklater: The audience has a choice in the museum. They don't have to discipline themselves to sit still and watch my work, they have an exit. They can choose. At times they don't read that something's happening and then encounter it. I like when people come and then stay with it. I've also had times when young Indigenous kids or a mother came up to me and said: "We've been waiting. We have to go soon. Can you please perform?" "Yes." Because when else are they going to have the chance to see Indigenous women and contemporary dance in a museum? "Yes. Absolutely."

Okwui Okpokwasili: Yes, that porosity in the museum space is definitely cool. It's like a liberated space and then they can come and encounter you and be like, "Can you please do that again?" My background was in theater, or I think what I do is theater. But there's also a kind of frustration and a resistance to theater, as certain types of theater can

be incredibly controlling. And sometimes I find myself in an audience just arguing with it in a way that I'm not sure is always useful. I'm like, "Oh, I have no other space to be in right now." Except, "Oh, you think you're doing something to me?" You want to do this thing and you want this outcome and I'm not going to give it. I'm just in this adversarial position, which is also the fixed position that I don't want. I don't want to put people in that position because it's a delimiting space. Busted, feeling like a big old busted thing. I feel that way. It didn't get me. It didn't turn me on. You didn't frighten me. You didn't scare me. It's theater. But the space of the museum can be, "Whoa, what happened? Why is that person so close?"

Tanya Lukin Linklater: In conversation with dancers I'm considering performance installations so that they have space that's safer. Most people are pretty respectful, but sometimes audiences seem to exude the feeling that they have a right to consume the bodies of dancers. So I've started to think strategically about performance installations that give a bit of space between the dancers and the audience. Those are things that come up for me as I listen to dancers, to what's working and what's not working for them. How can I make this a better experience for them to get to the place where we want to go, but don't know what that is? How can I put some things in place for them?

Okwui Okpokwasili: Yeah, this speaks to what Joshua was saying around not valuing the bodies. We're afraid of what the bodies might do to the objects, but we're actually not concerned with either what the bodies might do to themselves or what others might do to those bodies. And then when you have BIPOC women moving in a certain way in these museums, that's especially charged.

Choreographies of the Archipelago: Artists in Conversation, a series of online exchanges between artists who work across a variety of geopolitical and disciplinary contexts, was hosted by the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance, December 3-6, 2020. Artist pairings included Yasuko Yokoshi and mayfield brooks, Tanya Lukin Linklater and Okwui Okpokwasili, Arkadi Zaides and Ligia Lewis, as well as Eleonora Fabião and Jelili Atiku. The event was co-curated by Noémie Solomon and Joshua Lubin-Levy, and organized in collaboration with Rosemary Lennox. Generous support for this event has been provided by the Ford Foundation. Immediately following these public presentations, discussions continued through an invite-only forum.

Afterwards: Eleonora Fabião and Jelili Atiku is an edited transcript of a private conversation that took place over Zoom on December 6, 2020, between the named artists, ICPP students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

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