

I want to save the land as much as my mother wants to save me

At the centre of the display case dedicated to Sir John Franklin's doomed 1845 Arctic expedition in the National Maritime Museum's Polar Worlds exhibition in London sits a portrait of Qalassirsuaq. Franklin and his crew were attempting to chart the final section of the Northwest Passage, but the ice got the better of them, and both his ships – HMS Erebus and HMS Terror – ended up getting marooned in the ice and the crew eventually resorted to cannibalism. Qalassirsuaq was among those Indigenous people who helped look for Franklin's lost men. If Western explorers and scientists had recognised the accuracy and value of Indigenous testimony and oral history sooner, it might not have taken them until 2014 and 2016 to find the missing ships.

As part of the same exhibition, Inuk singer Tanya Tagaq was commissioned to produce a sequence of music. Curator Dr Claire Warrior gave the musicians a tour while the wing was under construction and explained what was going to be in the exhibition. "Claire is incredible, I love her," effuses Tagaq over the phone from Toronto. "She was great in having an open mind and knowing how crucial the Inuit were to those expeditions. We kept people alive. We were generous and heroic."

The resulting music has been released as the digital download EP *Toothsayer*, a stopgap between albums proper, but no less creative or affecting for that. Tagaq has developed a unique musical vision by taking the gruff and guttural Inuit throat singing style, extending it and using it as part of a wide and fluid vocabulary that, despite its wordless and freeform nature, does not eschew rhythm and melody, and communicates directly and viscerally to a wide audience.

Inuit vocal games were banned by the colonisers, so reviving the vocal style is an act of resistance in itself, but Tagaq's work is underpinned by a strong political consciousness that has become more explicit with time. Her last album *Retribution* represents the music

world's most powerful response to climate change to date. To add to her artistic achievements, last year she published a remarkable semi-fictionalised memoir *Split Tooth*, which provides an intimate portrait of a teenager growing up in the frozen north intercut with dreams and poems.

In contrast to what she sees as her usual "punk-metal-improvisation" approach, *Toothsayer* sees Tagaq, her longtime drummer Jean Martin and, on two tracks, British-Iranian producer Ash Koosha (who she met when BBC Radio 3's *Late Junction* put them together for a session) experimenting within more popular forms and offering new visions of the Arctic landscape. "We wanted some serene sounds that would play on a loop for all to hear when they entered," Tagaq explains, "and wouldn't be intolerable to the people that have to stand there day after day. But with the sounds that were going to be in headphones we could fly our freak flag. I really wanted to have a contemporary element because the humanisation of Indigenous communities is absolutely crucial. That's a big part of why I do my work because people need to remove that old idea that we're primitive and godless and understand that we're human, we're people and we're equal. I think that's pretty basic," she laughs.

The ship is a source of shelter when the winds pick up, and also a spark to our imaginations. Who was the captain? Did they cast any bodies overboard? Had they succumbed to scurvy? Did they bring tuberculosis? Did their lips retreat in agony from their teeth as they received the same treatment the elements have always given us? ... Only logic and great care ensure your survival. Only the patterns of skills gifted by our ancestors keep us living in harmony. We obey or we succumb

It's 11am Toronto time when I speak to Tagaq on the phone, and she's already been to the gym despite having had a three hour drive the night before from a concert with The National Arts Centre Orchestra in

Kingston. The piece she was performing, *Qiksaaktuq* – Inuktitut for grief or grieving – is a lament for Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women. Unusually, the piece combines a fixed orchestral score with a brass section which responds only to the hand signals of an improvising conductor, and a completely free vocal part. A ten minute film of the final movement shows a barefoot Tagaq conveying, by turns, an intense sadness, traditional throat singing power, and gentle, innocent play. It also evidences a deep confidence in her own process – an ability to respond in the moment and rise to the demands of any given situation. In this case that means not just creating a captivating and musically coherent lead role in a concerto on the spot, but also embodying the emotional weight of a national tragedy. According to a UN report in 2015, young Indigenous women are "five times more likely than other Canadian women of the same age to die of violence" which is "often rooted in the deep socio-economic inequalities and discrimination ... which can be traced back to the period of colonisation".

The piece has been getting a good amount of traction in classical music circles, but it's not the first time Tagaq has used her profile to raise this issue with the Canadian public. Her 2014 album *Animism* was dedicated to the missing and murdered Indigenous women of Canada and when she won the Polaris Music Prize – the Canadian equivalent of the UK's Mercury Music Prize – she had the names of 1200 such people scrolling behind her as she performed.

Tagaq's infiltration of the classical music world stretches back to 2006 when she was invited to develop a collective improvisation called "Nunavut" with The Kronos Quartet. For Kronos this was unfamiliar terrain, but for Tagaq improvisation is the foundation of her practice, and the piece contains within it a sequence of duets which have the intimacy of the face to face throat singing games that are traditional in Inuit communities. Ten years later she appeared with Kronos on Derek Charke's *Tundra Songs*, a lively and gritty evocation of the Arctic over which Tagaq improvises. As she points out, "My friend

Tooth

The vocal artistry and storytelling of **Tanya Tagaq** stages a visceral conflict over Arctic ways of life, Canada's colonial past, and the cultural genocide of its people. By **Phil England**. Photography by **Maya Fuhr**

