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Tanya Lukin Linklater, *Slow Scrape*

By K. Bellamy Mitchell

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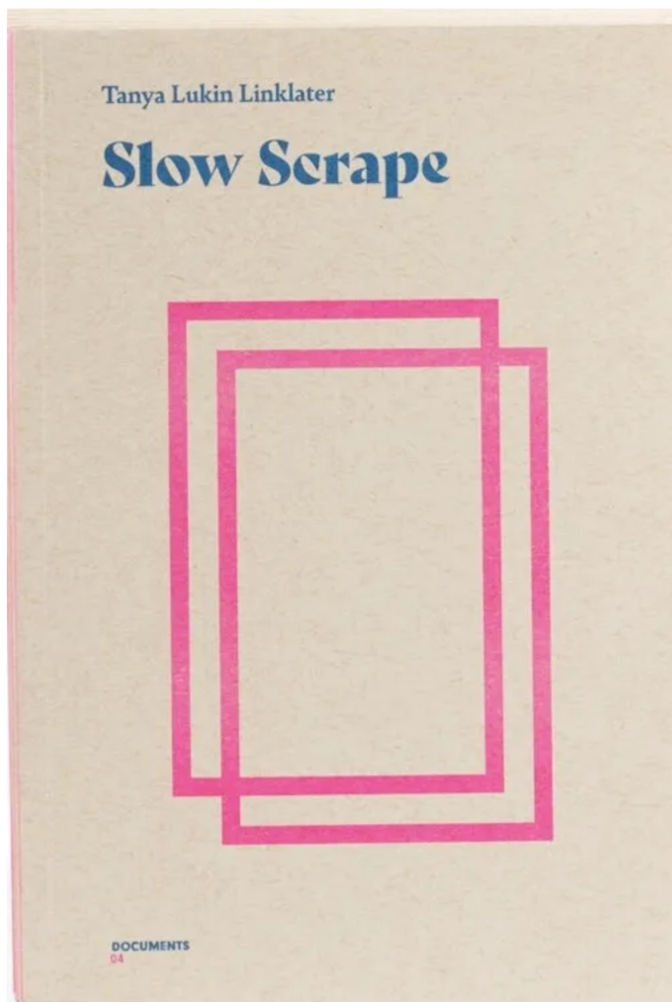
What relationships can one build with indigenous cultural belongings held in museum collections? How do the ethics of access and relation to these objects fray for settler and indigenous audiences? Tanya Lukin Linklater maps her process of answering these questions in *Slow Scrape,* the fourth publication of the *Documents* imprint published by the Centre for Expanded Poetics and Anteism in Montreal. The book marks a change of medium for the Alutiiq artist, who is best known for her experimental choreography, performance, installation, and video work. This project is a generous record of her works performed between 2011 and 2018, containing event scores, texts for exhibition catalogues and performances, and notational choreographies for previous and future acts of making.

Slow Scrape is also an occasional piece in the most capacious sense of the term. It responds to particular events and is meant to be read, performed, and heard by particular audiences in particular spaces. The "occasions" it marks are sometimes specific—there are poems responding to the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic, the lethal Good Friday earthquake in Alaska in 1964, and Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike in 2012. But even the poems without citations are anchored in time and place. The poem "i fall into this place between body and song" begins with an invitation to situate the reader that might serve as a motto for the book: "i wanted to begin in the place we are" (76). This poem articulates a spatial ethics of attention to context. Linklater's work goes beyond the institutional inertness of many land acknowledgments that apologize in the past tense for what they characterize as foregone histories of settler colonialism. Her poetic invitations make "the place we are" now into a live zone of risk, contact, and collaboration (76).

In the notes for this poem, Linklater reveals the granular context of its composition: it was written in twenty eight minutes during the artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's performance of "How to Steal a Canoe" at the ArtSpace in the community called Peterborough or Nogojiwanong, on Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg land. The text continues, "and how else to begin in Anishnaabeg territory than to begin through the making of a relationship with an Anishnaabekwe to begin with a woman who thinks through this land and with this land and in relation to this land I call the names of the women here" (76). And she does.

The women are present in the notes and acknowledgments but also seeded in the poems themselves. In an included interview, Linklater turns every question into an opportunity to name those she calls her mentors and peers, both women and others: Layli Long Soldier, Cris Derksen, Edgar Heap of Birds, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Rebecca Belmore, Wendy Red Star, Candace Hopkins, Elwood Jimmy, Heather Igloliorte, and numerous others. While the word "mentor" appears throughout, indicating a relational lineage of support and knowledge, the text also makes repeated reference to collaborators: ones who work alongside you. One of the book's most striking features is the sheer number of names of indigenous makers, thinkers, and scholars.



Like a number of Linklater's event scores, "An Event Score for Kodiak Alutiit 1 (Helen Simeonoff)" structures a differential reading experience for settler readers and indigenous readers, indicating at the beginning that it can be performed only when an Alutiiq person "enters and says." The score thus interpellates Alutiiq audiences as both speakers and listeners. Non-Alutiiq indigenous and settler readers or audiences can only listen. These event scores are the formal heart of the book. The event score is a familiar form in the context of the historical avant-garde; fine arts movements like Fluxus challenged the primacy of the art object by "scoring" events to be performed as sets of instructions rather than making objects for display. Linklater's scores retain those formal contours, especially in how they imply the possibility of future performances. They also serve the concerns of the occasional by foregrounding how the artist and the audiences relate to the place of performance. Rather than specifying a particular geographic location, however, Linklater defines place and event around the presence of Alutiiq community: the scored event is possible whenever an Alutiiq person is present and able to speak to someone who listens. It does not exist without their living presence and cannot be told without them.

In "An Event Score for Kodiak Alutiit 1 (Helen Simeonoff)," the Alutiit tells the story of the 1872 acquisition of Alutiiq masks by a French anthropologist, Alphonse Pinart, and the metamorphosis by dispossession and decontextualization of those cultural objects into the Alphonse Pinart Collection of Alutiiq Masks (also known as the processes of curation and labeling). The glass that preserves the masks ultimately separates them from their networks of meaning and usage—and the faces that might wear them—and the captions that attempt to explain those relationships are inert, experienced as "texts alongside the masks that attempted to tell us what the masks meant" (61). For Linklater, the caption echoes the form of the event score, but hollowly. The caption describes a past-tense relationship of what the masks meant for an audience presumed to have no relationship to them and, in fact, kept apart from them. The event score, by contrast, stages the masks as presently meaning and in an active emotional and physical relationship to the Alutiit that surpasses description—at least in English.

The score structures a moment of intimacy between the masks and the Alutiit "we" that escapes the museum infrastructure, even as the masks remain physically located within that context. This intimacy also escapes the English language of the text itself, inscribed in a melancholic grammatical ambiguity: "Many Alutiit travelled from Kodiak Island to the masks held in a collection in France. They tell us that when they touched the masks they wept" (60). The "they" that tells the story is indistinguishable from the collective (not collected) "they" of the masks, as well as the "they" that weep when they touch the masks. It is unclear whether the masks or the Alutiit wept. Despite the fact that the unspecified "they" and "we" constitute a grammatical lacuna in English, the score gives voice to an Alutiit "we" that is nonetheless described by those pronouns.

The physical masks never escape the circuitry of museums. Indeed, "the Alutiiq masks eventually travelled back to Kodiak Island but only because we had an Alutiiq Museum to exhibit them and only if we promised to never repatriate the masks." But the inseparable "we" of the Alutiit masks and people does not occur through some imagined unmediated interaction or a denial of the colonial infrastructure that facilitates this moment of contact. It occurs by refusing to rely on that infrastructure or be reduced to it. The Alutiit conclude: "we exceed the Alphonse Pinart collection of Alutiiq masks" (60). In this way, Linklater's project is documentary: she illuminates the ongoing relationships—modes of listening, intimacy, and collaboration—between Aluutit and their cultural belongings, even through panes of archival glass.

One of the central cultural belongings of this poetic collection is the James Bay mitt, whose intricate process of making Linklater documents in "The Harvest Sturdies." Linklater explicitly calls these poems documentary, in that they quote her Omaskeko Cree relatives who address her and invite her to make alongside them: "*So it's done like this, Tanya.*" The poem is also occasional. It begins by citing Chief Theresa Spence, who wore a

pair of James Bay mitts around her neck while fasting for forty-four days beginning on December 11, 2012, in support of the Idle No More movement. From that act of protest and that individual pair of James Bay mitts, the poem unfolds a continuous past tradition, available for present making, in startling visual poetry:

seam thread needle hem seam thread needle hem seam thread needle hem seam thread

oo:::|| astisak ||:::oooo:::|| maskasina ||:::oo

(30)

practice practice practice practice practice practice practice practice practice practice

:.

a stitch a bead another stitch repeat a stitch a bead another stitch repeat a stitch a bead ano

other stitch repeat a bead a stitch another stitch repeat a stitch a bead another stitch repeat

o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o

(33)

The letters and punctuation that thread across the pages can be read as nouns or verbs: bead, stitch, thread, practice. This ambiguity of meaning and reading—as fact or instruction—impacts how one reads later lists of ostensibly recognizable nouns. The words "petal leaf stem" become imperatives, directions for growth, as does the long injunction of "practice practice practice" (30). These lines concretize objects as processes—as both made and makeable things—in the way a quilt pattern might. They also mark a relationship across time experienced through the work of making. On the facing pages, Linklater riffs: "Instead, with accent hues of moss / and lavender shades of rose, I follow / a map of syllabics" (31). These particular words are enlivened as verbs and sound in conversation. Like all visual poetry, these texts make readers toggle between ways of reading—for word or for shape—and pass on knowledge of labor and event through poetic notation.

The poem "Memoriam/Unspoken-ness" contains similar moments of visually interpretive possibility. Here, "five hundred birds / above a jagged moss-encapsulated slate rock" are studded into a cloud of "sets" scattered across the page before they take flight in the Alutiiq word *tengluni* (50). A reader who does not know Alutiiq confronts linguistic opacity, which marks a kind of historical damage, and also serves as an invitation to undertake the work needed to read: if you want to understand, search. For settler and indigenous readers alike, the poem activates the historical impact of colonial tactics of dispossession and control of indigenous knowledges by refusing to caption and curate these moments in the text—through translation, or contextual footnotes—so that they are easier to read. Their difficulty is a formal feature and a challenge.

In the notes, Linklater describes composing this poem in her "mother tongue" by consulting a dictionary. Like the venues where she performs, dictionaries are formally complicit: the first dictionaries of indigenous languages were compiled by settlers to facilitate violent reeducation and proselytizing projects. Nonetheless, Linklater uses colonial tools such as dictionaries and other, more modern inventions to show how traditional indigenous relationships persist through and in spite of these technologies and settings. Family is emailed, exhibits are visited with smartphone cameras, languages are learned through dictionaries and translated by friends. Kinship, trauma, and knowledge are transmitted when people come together to make—as in a beading bee—but also when they read books, yearn to speak with an artist, or ask someone to be their grandmother, as Linklater does in the poem "Nohkom" (17). In addition to inviting relatives into new relationships and working to build community with the women and makers around her, Linklater aims to collaborate with people across time and space who do not yet know they are her collaborators.

Some of her poems record acts of collaboration without access to instruction, an absence resulting from material poverty and the legacies of various kinds of dispossession. Without conventional pedagogy, knowledge and ways of making persist and can be gleaned by responding to landscape. The specific histories and contexts of the places where these poems happen have been effaced. A white blanket of snow covers a complicated landscape; regimes of whiteness and colonialism obstruct and attempt to bury local and indigenous histories underneath settler borders and names. Linklater's work responds in the sense that it collaborates with its environment, following a kind of poetic causation as she

walks into new meanings while traversing old landscapes. The verses in “Not Like Us” narrate a childhood spent moving, borrowing, eating, and growing up native on colonized land. Between these verses, there is a page with a single line that forms an ars poetica for learning to dance or move from the place where you are:

“because   breath crackles, I angle to light   a cadenced tread”

(5)

Along these lines, Linklater notices and builds a “notation” and “re-/notation,” learning her own practice of writing things down, turning her relationship with the world into a record for others. Nature intrudes, the living in the landscape interrupt, and she responds:

“As mourning dove s wing s whistle my footfall startle s andthe pattern upend s”

(9)

And then the lines continue, weaving details of place together with observations about how those details are marked on the page. Revision and repetition figure concretely as a decision to walk across the white landscape of a page once and then again, leaving different marks behind.

“so to re-pattern/ the s low s crape/   of time I do thi s-so   as to   re-traverse-it”

(12)

The titular poem “Slow Scrape” is an accumulated, tactile, performative archive of the relationships that she builds by and through making these poems. This event of her writing and moving and working is recorded, is documented, but is not reducible to its imprint in the book. Rather, Linklater highlights the iterability of her poems—and the actions they score—by turning the static record of what happened into an opportunity to build new relationships to what might yet be:

One then another

a yielding record

a record cultivated

so it will be held

to scrawl and carve, crowd then hew

I place one then another

until the gap between is less and we know

something together

(3)

This record(ing) answers the question asked at the end of "In Memoriam/Unspoken-ness": "How do we traverse the slow scrape of time" with a present- and future-tense relationship to cultural history (51)? Linklater's scores trace out possible movements from where she is. These movements are anchored through practice to an ancestral tradition; they live in the displaced present of the colonial past. They suggest that contemporary gallery spaces—whether cooperative, private, or artist-run—and books of poetry alike are susceptible to the same accumulative logic of the museum "collection." Rather than preserving her performances and poetry in a book to be shelved as one might add a specimen to an archive, Linklater charts a collaborative future of indigenous poetics. She writes anonymous and institutional spaces into places where the work of building relationships might be done together, and done together again, so that it does something different.

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