

INTERVIEW

Kendra Sullivan and Tanya Lukin Linklater

On creative practice, poetry, and motivating
institutional change.

NOVEMBER 15, 2024



Left: *Reps* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2024). Right: *Slow Scrape* (Talonbooks, 2023).

Kendra Sullivan's *Reps* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2024) is a postpartum book and a pandemic book. It chronicles the everyday endurance it takes to accept life *just as it is* while laboring *to radically transform it*. An inquiry into humanism and humanity, *Reps* asks how to undo “the human” without hurting anyone. Syncing with the circadian rhythms of an infant during lockdown, Sullivan wrote to the tempo of the breast pump on her desk, calling to mind other authors who bring language to bear on newborn care rituals, from Bernadette Mayer to Camille Dungy and Simone White.

Fueled by lyric propulsion and milk production, *Reps* is a surprisingly playful book exploring individual and collective identity and responsibility, environmental catastrophe, restoration, and healing. It's a book about parenting during the apocalypse, but it dispatches handily with apocalyptic thinking for something more practical, something like hope as a muscle that keeps pumping.

During our conversation, Sullivan told me she practices meditation. Recently, she sat with poet and meditation teacher Anaïs Duplan with some members of her climate

some members of her climate justice community to practice “awe.” Throughout the book, moments of awe and conscious breathing widen the heart’s aperture, allowing it to both break and beat in relation to the whole. In the last, long lyric poem, she wonders if her body’s primary role in this life is to “respirate catastrophe.” To clear the air. To start fresh.

Our conversation took place while I was preparing for my solo exhibition at the Wexner Center for the Arts, *Inner blades of grass (soft) inner blades of grass (cured) inner blades of grass (cured by the weather)*. Like Sullivan, I move between artistic forms—in my practice as a visual artist and choreographer and in my writing. In my book *Slow Scrape* (Talonbooks, 2024), event scores, documentary poetics, and concrete-based installations are coupled with embodiment and relational ways of being to both collapse and expand time.

Tanya Lukin Linklater

We first came to know one another through your curatorial work and the show *Accompaniment*, co-curated with Kari Cwynar in 2015 at EFA Project Space.

Kendra Sullivan

Yes! A show about friendship and support structures as key methods in art making. You exhibited an overturned wooden bowl carved by Doug Inga and four Yup’ik dance fans made of woven grass and caribou beard. Violinist Laura Ortman accompanied your piece at the opening. It was breathtaking. Or maybe *breath-giving* is a better phrase? While she played, the relationships in the exhibition space vibrated with life.

TLL

I remember that after introducing yourself to someone during the install, you said, “But I’m actually a poet.” I had no idea!

KS

We are both artists and poets! Our work travels geographically and disciplinarily. But our restlessness isn’t capricious; it’s a rigorous embrace of change as both method and medium. When my copy of the first edition of your book *Slow Scrape* (Talonbooks, 2023) arrived, it was warped and waterlogged—thick, crinkled, and rust-red. You say elsewhere that weathering is a way of being alive, of preserving liveliness in oneself and others.

TLL

Antithetical to our ritual and philosophical practices, Indigenous peoples—our ideas and our images of who we are—are not allowed to weather.

KS

A poem in *Reps* titled “EGG (DART)” directly addresses *Slow Scrape*. It explores some of the tools that humans have invented—maps, narrative,

plot, and developmental theorist Lev Vygotsky's idea of educational scaffolding—to stabilize or simplify an unstable and vitalized Earth and its irreducibly complex occupants. An undercurrent of *Reps* is that the earth is more liquid than we imagine, more wet than set. This deep motility, flexibility, and relationality is so present for me in your processes, which exist on a continuum that includes choreographic practices, decolonial critique of museums and education, and theory and poetry.

I'm in the middle of reading your dissertation, *On felt structures: weather, embodiment, and materiality*. It deepens that form to include dance performance and pedagogy, ritual and relationship, and exhibition-making. I work in graduate education, and many public scholars, including myself, believe that dissertation innovation will be foundational to broader institutional change. In addition to its contributions to feminist, Indigenous, and Black studies, I think your book will help students struggling to write with greater integrity, sensitivity, and relevance to their communities.



Photo of Kendra Sullivan by Laila Stevens Photography.

TLL

Only about two percent of Indigenous peoples in Canada have a graduate degree. It's important to me that one doesn't require a graduate degree to read my work. When I write, I think about writing to and for a specific public. In *Slow Scrape*, the event scores are intended to be a set of instructions for performance but are situated within the voice of an Alutiq and Sugpiaq person speaking to a primarily non-Indigenous audience. On the other hand, when gathering oral histories of the destruction of my ancestral village from the 1964 earthquake and tidal wave, I am honoring those voices and marking that catastrophe to and for the community.

I keep thinking about the moment in *Reps* when a bump on the head results in cartoon stars and the start of the Big Bang.

KS

Have you read *The Sound of Listening*? The collection takes shape while Philip Metres is lying in bed recovering from a concussion. His ruminations about global fascism are interrupted by snippets of remembered poems. He begins to think about poetry's role in healing the body, mind, society, Earth. I'm interested in poetry as a physiological process of resurgence, a ladder one might climb back into consciousness after a big fall.

TLL

Can you tell me more about the beginnings of your own book?

KS

My dear friend the poet, novelist, and essayist Lucy Ives shared the hypothesis, and some structures to test its limits, that any given minute in any single life, no matter how quotidian, is an inexhaustible resource. This premise sent me down a path of thinking that led me to the myth—foundational to extractive capitalism—of inexhaustibility. Memory or storage, mining or extraction, and motherhood became tropes to explore sustainability—a dream of enduring livability.

TLL

Who else is the book in conversation with?

KS

I wrote alongside Renee Gladman's *Calamities*, a book of prose poems that begins each text block with "I began the day." By building on this trope, each prose block in my book came to represent a full life cycle. I used to work in hospice. We shared a wing with labor and delivery. The last breath of the dying mingled with the first breath of the crying newborns on the other side of a paper-thin wall. Beginning a poem is remembering birth, and ending a poem is rehearsing death.

TLL

Poems are what I call short form—a breath in a lifetime of breathing. I'm thinking about birth, passageways, and portals in *Reps*. These portals are open and available; we pass through them but don't always recognize them.



Photo of Tanya Lukin Linklater by Liz Lott Photography.

KS

The poet Cecilia Vicuña once remarked that crossing a river is dangerous because the other side is never just the other side. It's always another world, but you don't know which one until you get there. She had just crossed the East River from Brooklyn to Manhattan. She's a survivor of Pinochet's Chile, and, of course, migrants cross deadly waters every day. It's not a metaphor.

TLL

Oftentimes, my work gestures towards Indigenous ideas, but in opaque ways. The homes further north in Alaska were structured architecturally so that one would move from the outer world into the home through a passageway. Passing through was a significant action that you would undertake daily. The intentional movement between spaces is significant. You don't want to get stuck!

KS

Birth became a point of fixation for me in *Reps* because the passage through the birth canal to the first full-throated breath is like crossing a river to an undisclosed location.

TLL

Giving birth is dangerous. When you're speaking about passageways or portals in relation to reproductive rights, it's both abstract and embodied. Marginalized peoples have histories of forced sterilization to contend with, and the continued removal of Indigenous infants and children from their homes in Canada and the US. That's why the Indian Child Welfare Act is significant. Ongoing efforts reconnect Indigenous people with their communities and cultures after the active dismantling of families. Personally, I worked with Indigenous medical doctors and non-Indigenous midwives to give birth to my children. Now, there is a movement across Turtle Island to train and access Indigenous midwifery and doulas.

KS

This aligns with the work being done around maternal health, migrant moms, and reproductive solidarities here. When I wrote, "One mother's grief grabs all mothers by the throat," I was referring to how our common vulnerability and strength of will offer unfulfilled political power. If we organize society so that parents and infants are amply cared for, cultural repair is possible.

"Beginning a poem is remembering birth, and ending a poem is rehearsing death."

— Kendra Sullivan

TLL

I don't talk about this part of my life much because of how I have been outed as an artist who is also a mother.

KS

A lot of folks think feminism has a motherhood problem—that new feminisms don't know what to do with mothers. Patricia Hill Collins talks about motherwork, which describes work and family are interlocking spheres where the labor of Black, Brown, and Indigenous mothers are exploited. The Chicana M(other)work collective performs recuperative work that addresses legacies of ecocide and femicide. I was taught to embrace the posture of a poet who is also a mother by Diane di Prima. She found ways to write about soiled diapers, state oppression, and spiritual transcendence in a single sentence.

TLL

The significance of the quotidian is present in my practice, thinking, and process. That's a strongly feminist approach.

KS

You offer some feminist methods for making work, like felt structures and short forms. Scale is a method in *Reps*. I linger where the big and small meet: the mesosphere, the middle, the bardo. Throughout the book, I stick closely to both human finitude (mortality) and infinitude (an existential connection to Being, unfolding through nature, space, and consciousness). The writing process gave me permission to get caught up in the dilation of inner and outer winds. That motion reminds me of your critical interpretation of rising, falling, and holding or suspension—a score describing the bodily processes of giving birth and taking a breath. Does this resonate?

TLL

As a writer and artist, I work with the body to access the mind. Breath is a steady physiological and conceptual practice—it can be sped up or slowed down, but it's a form repeated 23,000 times a day.

“My work as an artist still has the potential to change institutions—to teach the museum if the museum wants to learn.”

— Tanya Lukin Linklater

KS

We don't really understand the relationship between reading, writing, and the body. Iraqi beat poet Sargon Boulus says that the poetry a poet writes in their lifetime stretches out before them from birth, like a great river unraveling under a rudderless boat. Language precedes the poet's arrival on the scene of life. If language is a destiny, it's located in the quotation. Breath is how we connect or, to borrow your term, "stitch" the body-mind unity to the everyday.

TLL

In "A Credo for American Indian Theatre" penned at the Institute for American Indian Arts in 1969, the faculty and students describe a relationship between ritual or metaphysical practices, time, and embodiment that structure Indigenous performance. Before I read that text, given to me by Candice Hopkins, I worked through some ideas as I trained in Indigenous dance and theater spaces. The ideas of the every day and continuance in dance are linked. Falling, rising, and holding are philosophical orientations toward continuance. The fall is always followed by recovery. I know this description is moving all over, but that's my nature today. I'm not very good at telling one story. I move through many stories.

KS

That's exactly why I love your work so much; it moves through many forms and stories! Layli Long Soldier refers to your work as iterative in her introduction to *Slow Scrape*—it accretes meaning as it travels.

TLL

I'm at home today. Where are you, physically?

KS

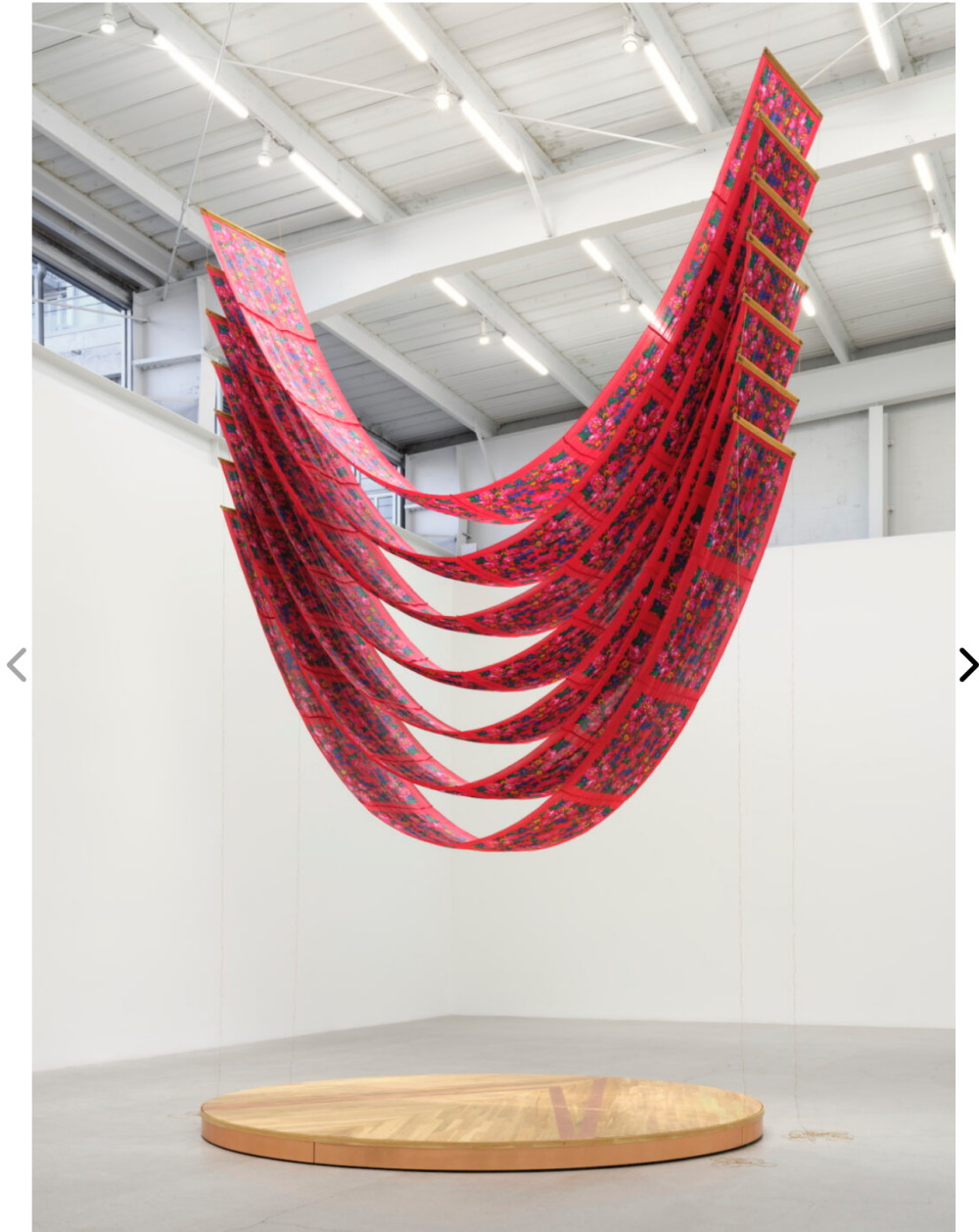
I'm in midtown at the university where I run a research center. Our framework for scholarly production is project-based, justice-forward, and community-led. I wind up in many hot spaces where what's at stake is existential: grief and loss, climate adaptation and housing instability, waterfront justice and the right to the city, and how to stop the neoliberal takeover of the public university. Duane Linklater spoke with Christopher Stackhouse and Dr. Audra Simpson about "Decolonizing the Collection" here, remember?

TLL

Absolutely. So, what does *Reps* mean or do for you amidst all this?

KS

Writing helps me to crisscross between cooler spaces of rest and play and hotter spaces of risk and solidarity. Poetry is a deeply human expression of physiological, psychological, and even societal resilience. It doesn't protect me, it's not armor. But it holds me up. It's an armature.



Tanya Lukin Linklater, *Held in the air I never fell (spring lightning sweetgrass song)*, 2022, Rachel Topham Photography.

TLL

I worked as an administrator in a university for eight years within the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Canada, which addressed the legacy of Indian residential schools. The TRC undertook research and gathered testimony from survivors who chose to participate in that process and produced what were called witnesses to that process.

There were calls to action that resulted from the process of transforming Canada's different sectors: education, healthcare, and social services. I was part of that moment. Simultaneously in my artistic practice, I undertook work around decolonization and the museum. The work was taking a toll on me as an Indigenous woman, artist, and professional working in

universities and museums. I left my administrative position to complete my PhD. I'm now a full-time artist. Writing has been central to that shift.

My work as an artist still has the potential to change institutions—to teach the museum if the museum wants to learn. I have thought about how transforming the institution is not my responsibility—it's the responsibility of settlers, or it's a shared responsibility. But Indigenous people do a lot of that work within the context of the Indigenization of universities and colleges or K-12 systems in Canada.

Your environmental art practice centers on rivers. When I think about rivers, I think about a project Duane and I undertook in 2017 called *Determined by the River*. We worked with the Rmai Modern in Saskatoon to organize works from the collection on a raft. Because of the museum's proximity to the river and its relationship to Indigenous peoples and land, it wasn't suited to hold the work, so we made a raft to hold the work. In this way, we held the work with our intentionality, our language, and this structure, an alternative to the museum: a raft.

KS

Does poetry hold the work like the raft held the work?

TLL

Let's just say the work urgently needs to be held.

Tanya Lukin Linklater undertakes embodied inquiry in rehearsal, performance, video, installation, works on paper, and writing. Her recent exhibitions include Aichi Triennale, Japan; Gwangju Biennale, South Korea; New Museum Triennial, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and Toronto Biennial of Art. *Inner blades of grass (soft) (cured) (bruised by weather)*, including works from the last ten years and new commissions, will be presented by the Wexner Center for the Arts in 2024. Her book, *Slow Scrape* (2nd edition, Talonbooks, 2022) draws on documentary poetics, concrete-based installations, event scores, and can be read alongside her practice of choreography. She recently completed her PhD in Cultural Studies at Queen's University with supervision by Dylan Robinson. She is a post-doctoral fellow in decolonial and transformational Indigenous art practices in the visual arts department at University of Victoria.

Kendra Sullivan is a poet, a public artist, and an activist scholar. She is director of the Center for the Humanities at the CUNY Graduate Center, where she led the Andrew W. Mellon Seminar on Public Engagement and Collaborative Research from 2014-2024. Sullivan is a co-director of the NYC Climate Justice Hub, the publisher of *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative*, and a co-editorial director of *Women's Studies Quarterly*. Kendra has produced public art addressing water access and equity issues in cities around the world and has published her writing on art, ecology, and engagement widely. She is the co-founder of the Sunview Luncheonette, a cooperative arts venue in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and a member of *Mare Liberum*, an eco-art collective. Her books include *Zero Point Dream Poems* (Doublecross Press, 2023) and *Reps* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2024).