

# Introduction to *Slow Scrape* | Layli Long Soldier

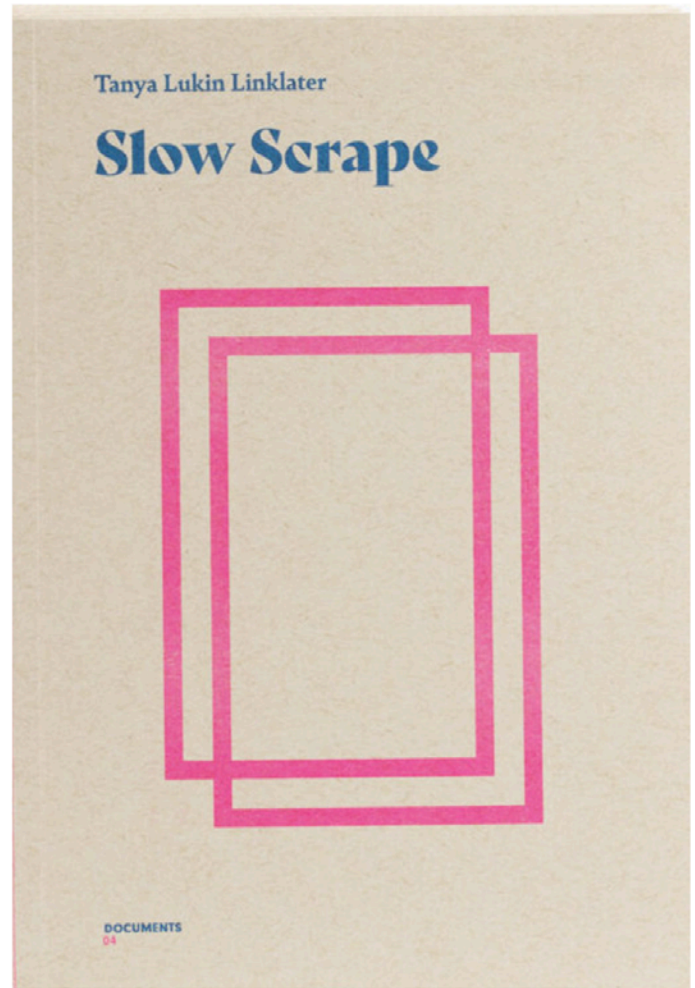
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Before entering *Slow Scrape*, I have known something about Tanya Lukin Linklater, which I cannot help but celebrate: she is an artist who is not confined to writing, but when her work does arrive to the container of a page, it radiates an undeniable life force of *possibility*.

Lukin Linklater works in performance, choreography, video, sculpture, poetry and non-fiction; this work is often site specific. Throughout these various modes, she is ever and always a community collaborator and a disciplined thinker. Upon receiving the K.M. Hunter Award for Literature, she explained, “Often I work in performance using written scores for movement as ways to locate choreography. The score is a visual, spatial, textual space between the dancer and I. This finding of a dance

later may be translated to the form of the video.” In this, I can appreciate a creative circuitry in Lukin Linklater’s writing—beginning with the purity of language, that guides another process, which then leads to an alternate, yet fully developed form. I sense from this collection of texts, however, that this creative process is not always linear, but simultaneous.

Movement, as she has explained, is often concurrent to her text. Therefore, when I am enlivened by the language and subject matter, I am just as “moved” by Lukin Linklater’s way of working, her way of thinking, and way of making. It is uniquely hers, permeated with unmistakable intellectual and creative sovereignty.



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Given this, we can also appreciate the way in which *Slow Scrape* is neither wholly poem nor verbose prose and exposition, but reads as text in step— toe-to-floor, light and gentle or heel-to-earth, pounding; felt from ground, up. That is to say, this work is most understood in how it lands along notes. Central to Lukin Linklater’s work is *score* and *notation*, wherein, traditionally speaking, symbols or marks represent elements of music; indicate instructions; or serve as shorthand commentary and observation. Only here, symbols of notation are found in the symbols of word choice and particular terms. For example, in the short piece, “Suk,” Lukin Linklater writes, “*Suk* / A human being. Afognak dialect: the S is pronounced SH. It sounds like shook but with a shorter o. Perhaps we shake. Or past tense, we shook. When are we shaken?” The term *Suk* is symbol for something greater, and in this case, becomes the Greater Question: *When are we (us, human beings) shaken?* Our answers surely vary, though surely, in asking we feel beneath us a “seismic undulation...no longer a tremble but a roll a roar a boom that does not end.”

Along the same lines, Lukin Linklater is determinedly precise in the lexicon she employs. As we think about *symbol*—its representation of the bigger or greater—we see how the word choices of “Alutiiq,” “Afognak,” “Nipissing First Nation,” “The Crow Fair” or “Astisak” not only anchor the work in respectful, cultural specificity, but are also the sign posts— markers, if you will—for larger issues and structures set before us in this book. Lukin Linklater writes, “An Alutiiq person enters and says / We exceed the discipline formation of Anthropology. / Then / We exceed the structures imposed on us.” We can understand how “Aluqtiiq” in this piece, for example, serves a greater intent. Here, Lukin Linklater refuses generalities—forgoing commonly accepted terms such as “Native American” or “Indigenous.” This refusal (or resistance) is, simply put, a fierce refusal of *erasure*—this insidious force sweeping us, globally, at landslide pace toward a devastating and unimaginable future.

Yet, what we encounter in Lukin Linklater’s writing is not typical to many works of political and social “resistance,” because her approach is built on

a thesis of power— and this power is not established through dominance nor simplistic defiance, rather it is cultivated from *relation(ship)*. Through particulars of place, language, and culture, people begin to know each other; and erasure (rife with overlooking, forgetting, denial and invisibility) becomes impossible. When Lukin Linklater writes, “An Alutiiq person enters and says / Our memory marks Afognak. / Afognak marks us. / What are we tethered to? What holds us together?” she asks us to consider what binds, what connects human relationships by centering, first, the land; where we come from establishes who we are to one another. It’s in this relationship, then, that we are able to feel the impact of her words, “When I am home on our island I sense that the land exudes grief. / Many of us have left the land of our ancestors / perhaps because the grief becomes unbearable.” At moments like this, I begin to think about what awakens, shatters, or leaves us raw in literature. Out of the unbearable and seemingly unspeakable, ground is broken. We *feel* for one another. The soil of the spirit is plowed. And true empathy, meaningful action and change can begin.

Another aspect of Lukin Linklater’s work that should not be overlooked is her high regard for women—within family and community, among those who embody memory, story and cultural knowledge; as well women in positions of leadership, fellow artists, and intellectuals. Throughout Lukin Linklater’s career, she has collaborated with women and one could view these working relationships casually, amounting them to natural gravitation or connection. However, I propose that Lukin Linklater is intentional in her decision-making. Throughout *Slow Scrape*, women are referenced: her mother, her Nohkom, Malala Yousafzai, Chief Theresa Spence, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Maria Tallchief, Mary Anne Barkhouse, and more. The long poem, “The Harvest Sturdies,” is an incredible example of Lukin Linklater’s traverse into the leadership, wisdom, knowledge and artistry of women, beginning with the galvanizing hunger-strike of Attawapiskat’s Chief Theresa Spence in 2012 and 2013. Then, the poem unfolds into an epic, ingenious union of both visual and documentary poetics (the likes of which I have not before seen) using interviews with family members about the Cree process for making James Bay mitts. One whole page of the poem, for instance, is dedicated solely to two lines: “mitts : astisak /

women : iskwewak.” Moments like these are important moves and contributions to contemporary literature as this generation of Native artists and scholars faces a terrifying history of, again, *erasure*—that is, an undeniable absence of Native women’s perspectives from historical documentation. We reckon with countless books produced by anthropologists and non-Native writers who have weaved their way into tribal communities. For the most part, these visitors are/were men and, most often, collected information, stories, and accounts from, likewise, other men. What has resulted is a lopsided, unjustly incomplete written record of knowledge in our tribal communities—women’s contributions are frequently missing, entirely. Yet, many are working to build a newer, balanced knowledge-base. Addressing her Nohkom (grandmother), Lukin Linklater writes, “Now as we talk on the phone, you in Peawanuck me on Lake Nipissing, I wonder why I never asked you more. I waited so long.’ Yet, the shining importance here is, Lukin Linklater has asked.

I am compelled to return to the choreography in Lukin Linklater’s other creative endeavors, because inherent to the role of choreographer is leadership, connection, reciprocity, and a flow that allows some amount of improvisation. These qualities, likewise, shape *Slow Scrape*. There is a steady hand in Lukin Linklater’s writing—at times, the text is built through direct statement. At times, textured by poesis that loosens the imagination. But what’s most meaningful is, as a reader, I am allowed to take leaps, I am allowed to think for myself. Lukin Linklater directs without submitting to explanation. In this expansive and undulating meditation on time, relations, origin and colonization, Lukin Linklater guides and leads; all the while, allowing us freedom to participate. When she writes, “Spend time with the work. Be generous. / Generous-ness as potentiality, as a becoming,” I listen. I will follow the score. With her, I am becoming.



Tanya Lukin Linklater's installation, *The Harvest Sturdies*, 2013, banners with printed text. From *Down To Write You This Poem Sat*, Oakville Galleries, 2016 | photo: Toni Hafkenscheid

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**Layli Long Soldier** holds a B.F.A. from the Institute of American Indian Arts and an M.F.A. from Bard College. Her poems have appeared in *POETRY Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *The American Poet*, *The American Reader*, *The Kenyon Review Online*, *BOMB* and elsewhere. She is the recipient of an NACF National Artist Fellowship, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, a Whiting Award, and was a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award. She has also received the 2018 PEN/Jean Stein Award and the 2018 National Book Critics Circle Award. She is the author of *Chromosomory* (Q Avenue Press, 2010) and *WHEREAS* (Graywolf Press, 2017). She resides in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

**Tanya Lukin Linklater's** performances, videos, installations, and writings work through orality and embodiment, investigating histories of Indigenous peoples' lives, lands, and structures of sustenance. Her works have been shown at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Chicago Architecture Biennial 2019, EFA Project Space + Performa, Art Gallery of Ontario, Remai Modern, and elsewhere. She originates from the Native Villages of Afognak and Port Lions in southwestern Alaska and lives and works in Nbsiing Anishnabek territory, northern Ontario. *Slow Scrape* is her first book of poetry.

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