

Seattle Arts & Lectures
Interview Transcript: Kristen Millares Young
Interviewer: Gabriela Denise Frank
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Note: this transcript has been lightly edited for clarity and flow.

Gabriela Denise Frank

Hi there. It is great to talk with you today for our Seattle Arts & Lectures audience. I'm Gabriela Denise Frank. I am a Seattle-based writer, and I am here with Kristen.

Tell us a little bit about you.

Kristen Millares Young

Hi, my name is Kristen Millares Young. I am a Writer-in-Residence at Hugo House. I am the author of the novel *Subduction*, coming out on Tuesday from Red Hen Press.

GDF

Yay!

KMY

Yay! I am a journalist and, most fortunately, a literary moderator for Seattle Arts & Lectures, for whom I've moderated several conversations, including the Carmen Maria Machado appearance for the *Women You Need to Know Series* which happened at Town Hall Seattle in January of this year. I'm going to have the great honor of moderating a Q&A with Luis Alberto Urrea, who has been tremendous inspiration to me, and who has so many books—I mean, Pulitzer finalist for this one, *Devil's Highway*. *Nobody's Son* is one of the most beautiful memoirs. It spoke to me as someone from a hybrid culture. *House of Broken Angels*, *In Search of Snow*—early work—so many. *Tijuana Book of the Dead*, *Water Museum*, a collection of essays. I actually wrote my very first essay based off a prompt that Luis gave me—it changed my writing life, and launched me on writing a series of personal essays. I mean, now I teach personal essays at the UW Continuum College. So, he changed my life.

GDF

That is great. I have questions about all of these things—and more! You are the first moderator that Seattle Arts & Lectures has interviewed, so this is a little bit of new territory. Their goals are to get a better sense of our Seattle community of writers and to hear about and support the work that you're doing as an artist.

I wanted to start there and hear from you, for the benefit of the SAL community, a brief description of your book, which is out this month: *Subduction*. Tell us a little bit about that.

KMY

It's a very long path to bring a book to publication. Anyone who has tried to write a book knows how long that can take all by itself. I started researching my novel, *Subduction*, in 2007.

I spent several years researching before I began to write. I wanted to learn something that I did not yet know, which was: how is it that we, as immigrants, come to be settlers on this land, which is native land? What are the mechanisms by which that has happened and continues to happen throughout our history into the present day? What I found was a very welcoming, generous community in Neah Bay, which is where the Makah Nation is. Their way of being precedes the arrival of settlers to this region by millennia.

The Makah have been fortunate in many ways because of the abundance of their natural resources, marine resources and cultural resources. There was a long house—series of long houses—at the one of the traditional five traditional Makah village sites at Ozette that was buried by a mudslide. In the 1970s, it became exposed through storm erosion. The Makah tribe enlisted the help of Dr. Daugherty to begin an excavation that would be a model for collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous researchers. It was led by the team assembled by Daugherty and the Makah tribe, whose elders played a pivotal role in explaining the use of many of the artifacts which were daylighted.

Because they had been preserved in saltwater for hundreds of years, the organic material was not an impediment to their continued existence. At the time—and still—there was a lot of racist refusal to honor the treaty rights of these tribes, particularly the Makah tribe. A net that is housed under the auspices of the Makah Cultural and Research Center, currently led by Janine Ledford, helps prove the existence of those kinds of technologies to the state Supreme Court, which took that into account when issuing a pivotal decision to provide continued access to indigenous fishermen and women. It's an amazing community and they are pretty remote geographically—they're right on the northwest tip of the Lower Forty-Eight.

In this novel, I had two protagonists. One is named Claudia. She is a Latina anthropologist who makes her way out to the Makah reservation in order to conduct field research, and there meets a commercial diver named Peter, a Makah man who recently returned to care for his mother who is suffering from dementia and has become a hoarder in his absence. He left decades earlier because of the sudden death of his father and, having suffered that trauma, went into diaspora, like Claudia. These two people encounter each other and begin to find a way into relation that defies ethical boundaries and acts as a catalyst for situations that had been stagnant for too long.

That is *Subduction*. I'm really grateful that *The Paris Review* just named this a staff pick and *Ms. Magazine* listed it as one of their top 2020 feminist books, which was important to me, because these are fraught characters, and they have very complex lives. They are not walking archetypes for progressive values. To me, you need to think through characters for whom there is no easy redemption in order to have that kind of moral quickening within a reader. I'm grateful that these outlets have seen it for what it is.

GDF

As much as I know you personally, it feels to me like there's so much of you in this book. A lot of curiosity and passion and a quest for answers that I think could be easily bypassed by the rest of the world. There's clearly something that piqued you.

I had no idea you started [*Subduction*] in 2007. I met you in 2013, when we were in the EDGE Program together through Artist Trust. I remember our conversations over the years—you've talked about the different ways you started to weave this story together and to take it apart and to reweave it back again. I read an interview in which you said you went through twenty drafts of this story. I'm curious: at what point of weaving and unweaving and weaving again, when did it start to feel like it was coming into a shape or pattern that felt right to you?

KMY

Probably draft eight. I mean, there were major re-workings that happened in the very first draft. I had never written fiction before I started writing this novel—I had been a journalist for years—and, in fact, I had only begun writing essays after I had finished it. It was, for me, an extended inquiry into what it would be like to give myself the time to do something right.

Having been on deadline, daily deadlines and monthly deadlines, for years, I wanted to give myself that. I can call it a luxury, but I think it's actually essential to take time to reflect before producing a work of art, especially one that is multicultural and polyglot, the way that *Subduction* is.

The process by which I moved the book through later drafts—I had started the book in the life of one of the characters a few weeks too early—and because of that, I came to know her very well. This is the anthropologist. Where the book begins now, I had cut the prior chapters, and that was pretty much the majority of what I'd written while attending graduate school at the University of Washington. That felt momentous at the time.

I learned not to be precious with my own time. I believe in the iceberg theory as not just an analytical tool for understanding how movement and meaning imbue a story filled with elision. It's like, the beauty and grace and grandeur of the iceberg is not attributable to the part that you can see, but what moves beneath. I'd always understood that as an analytical tool, but what I came to understand as a craftsman, is that it's a revision tool. That there's so much that you can take out, but the text is still haunted by it.

The book *Subduction* now begins with a tremendous amount of energy. She's haunted by all these things that she's just been through and carries that image with her into this community, which is, of course, the real and long study of contact between settlers and indigenous peoples in this nation.

Subduction is about oral histories and the ways in which legacy is passed on through traditional means—and the ways in which it has frayed within mainstream American cultures. I ended up using that orality in the revision process. I read the book aloud to myself many times—I would read it aloud as I was writing it—and I would perform it. As the novel was in process, I was still performing from it. Get up on stage and it'll tell you real quick, what needs to go. It's a hard way to burn something you don't need out of the book, but a good way.

GDF

That is a good way. And you were in Jack Straw. I imagine that was part of the process. As a Jack Straw Writer, were you performing this material during that year?

KMY

Yes. You know, actually, I finished my second draft right before I gave birth to my first son. And that was the year I was in Jack Straw. The very first outing I had after giving birth to Jack was training for performance with Elizabeth Austen, [former Washington State poet laureate].

Jack Straw played a huge role in keeping me on track, getting me out in public during that first year of a child's life. I gave more than a dozen readings, from Elliott Bay [Book Company] to University Book Store to the Central branch of Seattle Public Library. All over town and within the community with [Seattle Civic Poet] Anastacia-Reneé. There are so many wonderful people who are part of that program who have stayed part of my life.

I learned how to become a performer, in part, through that encouragement. I was bringing pieces of the book out and reading them. I have performed quite a few pieces of the book that I've taken out. I used to remonstrate myself for that time, calling it wasted, but I actually think I was developing a lyric prose style. That is something that comes more naturally to me now. I can access it quicker, and it doesn't require as many drafts, but the musicality of the sentences [comes from giving] them breath so many times.

It's something I encourage my students to do. It's a revision technique that works every time. Sometimes people want to just be done. But you're not done.

GDF

When you look at the arc of how long you worked on this project—I imagine there were things you were working on last year, in 2019, to finalize—that's a very long arc. For anybody who contemplates a novel, I've heard friends say, you're in it for seven to ten years. This is a long project, generally. Were there moments when you felt discouraged or stymied, and what did you do to work through those moments?

KMY

I received very good advice. One of my mentors told me two things: one, always be known as a closer; two, have multiple projects going on at any one time.

During the time I spent writing this novel, and researching it, revising it, and bringing it into the world, I was working full-time at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Then, that was swallowed by the great wave of newspaper closures of 2008-2009, so I started a nonprofit investigative journalism studio called InvestigateWest where I served as board chair from 2016 to 2019. I became a very active freelancer while attending graduate school at the University of Washington, and was on a Pulitzer Prize-winning team with the *New York Times*. I started writing dailies for *The Guardian*. I wrote my last daily literally two hours before giving birth to my second son.

They asked if I could cover the Oso mudslide. I had been covering it with them for a week. I said, of course—but I want you to know that when I first received this assignment for you, I was due on that day, and now I'm a week overdue, so you might have to reassign it. They said, *Okay—are you sure?* I'm like, Yeah, I can do it.

So I did that. I also published a bunch of personal essays and was fortunate to become the Writer-in-Residence at Hugo House where I've made mentorship an active part of my literary practice. And, you know, I have performed more than a hundred times. It's a tremendous, kaleidoscopic approach to staying in, right? You can view those things as having delayed the journey, and perhaps they did, but they also made it better.

[Writing] is not just an open-and-shut story. It's keeping yourself accountable to your community through performance and providing feedback, receiving feedback, mentoring other people, staying current with issues that are part of it.

I did a year-long investigation for *The Guardian* about Misty Upham who was a very talented Blackfeet actress who went missing in Auburn, [Washington]. The police did not look for her. I delved into the subjectivity and systemic oppression that is perpetrated on these communities. It's a necessary and continual reminder of the importance of telling the story and getting it right to the extent that I can.

Throughout my fiction, I do my best to go meta and tie the project back into itself—reflecting on it and on my own presence within these communities. That's kind of an essayistic move, to scoop the sand out from under your own feet.

I think it's important to build trust with the reader and to be honest with yourself during the long journey that it is bringing a book to publication. I have been very fortunate that other writers along the way reminded me of the importance of this project. I was grateful. If you see here, Luis actually wrote a little blurb. He said, "The brilliance of *Subduction* only suggests the wonders to come, highly recommended." That'll keep you going for a long time when you receive that kind of kindness from someone that has inspired you for so long.

People don't understand how these acts of generosity, they are like oxygen. It has been a humbling process, and I think that humility, even in extended doses, is good.

GDF

Shifting into your role as a moderator, which you served as for our [Artist Trust] EDGE group reading at Elliott Bay Books, you took my breath away.

This is where I love the word kaleidoscopic, because it does feel like, when you come into that room, you have taken a look at a lot of different things. You have researched heavily the person or people with whom you're moderating a conversation.

Can you talk about what you do before you get into the room or onto the stage? How do you go about preparing for an interview?

KMY

The very first thing that I do is I read everything that that person has ever written. That's number one! You have to prepare.

Luis, my God, he's got so many books. It's really inspiring. I consider it a continuation of my lifelong education but, you know, I need to read all of them. Through that process, you get a sense for someone's stylistic evolution—the way they have refracted the prisms of their concerns through different works in different genres over the years.

It reminds me of a time I went to the St. Louis Art Museum. There was an incredible German Expressionist painter named Max Weber, and they were doing a retrospective of his work. They arranged his paintings in an enormous room that was at least two hundred feet on every side, and it was all lined with his paintings.

You could see, as he developed his style, in one room. It gave you the sense, moving from murkier Dutch colors into very bright, dark lines—cobalt, crimson—the incredible pathos in the faces of his subjects, and get the sense that it was worth it: a life dedicated to art was worth it, because look at the beauty that was elicited over time. It complicated the narratives that our youth-obsessed culture perpetrates on artists, which is, if you don't flower forth at the age of thirteen, you're done.

Art is a continual excavation of the self and the reflection of the possibilities for society. That takes time and seasoning. It takes sadness and sorrow and all the things that life is doling out to us, bit by bit. What I find, being a literary moderator, is that the process of preparation makes me better, not just as a moderator, but also as a writer, as a thinker, as a human being. The deep study of another person provides a platform for me to know what they haven't been asked.

I don't like to ask questions that they've been asked before. You read enough interviews given by people and you're like, *Okay, they're being asked the same things all the time*. I think it's wonderful how many times people get asked to represent their people, because it's important to bring forward stories that haven't been told before. At the same time, they're not being asked about the craft they have spent decades honing.

I like to figure out how their aesthetic, their philosophy of being and writing, comes through their craft choices. I pay close attention to their authorial choices and ask about their intentions and try to connect them to larger issues in society but also their own flourishing on the page.

I think they appreciate being asked about their art, rather than being asked to deliver a nonfiction essay about what they meant when they wrote this book. I believe that ambiguity is an important part of art and allowing for the reader to think through characters and come to their own conclusions. To me, a conversation with an author is something that should elicit more inquiry, more investigation in the heart of the reader, and not just answer all of the questions that you could ask by Googling.

GDF

Without spoiling the surprise, because your conversation with Urrea is coming up, is there something about his work or, from a craft perspective, you're excited about exploring with him and the audience at Seattle Arts & Lectures?

KMY

There's two—well, there are many—but two I want to highlight particularly. One, Luis is one of the very best performers I've ever encountered. He has a tendency to memorize large swaths of his pieces and deliver them. That has inspired me—I'm doing that—and he told me how.

He said, and I don't think he'd mind me telling you, because he wants everyone to be better, *Read it to yourself twenty-five times in a row, and you'll get it.* And, you know, he was right. It works.

GDF

It totally works! I saw him at Fishtrap last summer, and he gave the most exciting talk. There was one particular phrase about Ursula K. Le Guin that I Googled, and his blog post came up—and it was exactly what he delivered. I couldn't believe it, because it was not short.

KMY

She is a huge inspiration of mine, as well. I teach her book, *Lavinia*. I love how she, for example, in one of her books on craft, wrote that creating a plot structure focused on conflict predicated the worse aspects of human nature—and that we, as writers, by teaching this methodology and absorbing it and bringing it into our work, were ignoring other ways of being and knowing that are equally as consequential as open fields for literary interrogation. She's fantastic.

The other aspect I appreciate so much about Luis—and this is something that I'm going to work on for the rest of my life—is range. His emotional range within a particular work is astounding.

Do you know that instrument, the marimba? I love that instrument. On one side, there are these huge hives and then, as it moves up, they get smaller and smaller, and make this beautiful, higher, joyful sound. I have been promising myself that I am going to play the marimba as a writer—to heighten everything that I show.

The sorrow and pathos of living is heightened when you have the discipline to get joy right on the page. [Urrea] does that well. He finds the absurd, he finds the tender. He finds the care, even in situations rife with injustice that are taking place against the backdrop of oppressive forces, like the colonial nightmare we're living in. He finds the joy. That, I believe, is why readers love him so much.

GDF

I can't wait for the moment where we can see you both, whether that is digitally, whether it's in person—hopefully it gets to be in person.

I want to get one more question out there—this was something that SAL was interested in hearing about. There's so much uncertainty in the world right now. You're launching a book at a time when all of the things you thought you were going to do are shifting.

Do you have any advice or things you're doing as a writer, as an author, that are different? Or that could help people who are going to be in your shoes, launching a book sometime between now and this time next year? What advice would you give to people about trying to launch a creative work at this time?

KMY

Well, I do prefer to be in person. There is something beautiful about looking into someone else's eyes, without the mediator of a screen, but the fact is, people are paying attention to common culture. And I don't mean "common" in the sense that is derogatory. I mean, a shared culture right now. There are very real opportunities to connect with people online. It is, unfortunately, not a good time as an author *not* to be on social media. Unless you're just in pure production mode, which is a wonderful place to be, and I recommend it highly.

It's a combination of recognizing that the people you love and admire and have been following are still out there—they're just in their homes—and that is where your book would like to reach them, regardless. [That's where] I'm going to be. [I have] about a dozen pieces coming out over the next month or so, and a number of conversations, reviews and essays, which is the largest part of the tour I'm doing now: a steady creation of what, I hope, are beautiful pieces of writing that reach people where they are right now. It may not even be necessarily tied to my book. It's just about what I'm thinking about, what I'm going through.

Recently, my beloved grandmother died, my abuela. Her name was Carmen Ramos, and she was a writer. She taught me how to write while being also a tremendous caretaker for her family. [She] made enormous amounts of sacrifice for this moment in my life. She was not published as a poet. That was not her aim. But she was very supportive of my writing, and she weathered worse. I mean, I think about the tremendous socio-economic instability that ravaged Cuba and the educational opportunities that I've had here in the United States as a result of her rolling with it, and just making sure that her family had what they needed.

Of course, first things first. You take care of yourself and people around you during a hard time, recognizing that hard times are pivot points in one's life. And make sure to make lots of lists. My lists are legal pad-size long, and when they get too messy, they get stressful. I move a few of them down to different lists, fresh lists, although sometimes I'll give myself the pleasure of a ravaged page. I'm like, *That is done!*

I'm going to be conducting a series of live readings and recordings that I'm posting on the original dates of the thirty-five-event book tour I had scheduled—and am now rescheduling. I've been fortunate: some of the key bookstores and institutions have invited me back for the next year's conference or for a reading in the fall.

I have been very lucky that a number of people on Twitter and Facebook and Instagram—people who got a copy of my book one way or the other—have been posting about it. Their kindness, their appreciation of the nuance of the book, has helped keep me going. It's a very long process, and I work hard. There is no rest at this part of the process. I had built a schedule that was going to be extremely difficult to keep, and I was just going to have to do it. Now, instead, I am in very serious production mode. Frankly, that's where I needed to be all along. It's complicated by the fact that I'm homeschooling my two kids.

Their joy is a good reminder. I believe that joy is the natural human condition. Being a mother has taught me that, when we come into this world, we come in with a lot of joy. It gives me

hope, actually, for humanity, that we might pivot toward that in the long arc of our future, despite our history. My hope is that during this long period of time—however long it is before we're able to emerge into the light and into each other's arms—that we will all be reflecting upon the lives that we would like to lead: how we might care for one another, and the ways in which we could support each other.

We are about to experience a socio-economic cataclysm related to this pandemic, and people are already in dire straits, living hand to mouth. They're going to need our real and continued attention. We will need to come together as a society to make something good of this era. That's why I'm grateful to books, for reminding us of our humanity.

It can be easy to get into a defensive, aggressive stance around resources and feeling like, *I have less than I used to, I don't have enough, these opportunities have been taken away from me*. What I have found, for example, during the closure of the *P-I*, is that, with the right amount of effort, you can build a new thing.

GDF

I think that's a great place to leave it. We're going to end on a high note.

I wish we could keep talking! I didn't get to half of my questions. It felt good to go a little bit down the rabbit hole on some of these.

[Maybe one more.] Do you have a sense of what you might work on next, in terms of a larger project?

KMY

Since 2016, I have been researching and writing my next book, which is called *Great Mother*. It's a hybrid book that is interlocking, intersecting chapters of memoir based in modern times and fiction based on an ancient mother goddess-worshipping cult of pagan Rome. That is from the region where my Spanish family still lives.

As I move into the modern memoiristic through-line, I am showing myself—it's me—investigating these pagan beliefs while unpeeling the layers of family stories I received in diaspora, intergenerationally, that trace my family's migration from Spain to Cuba to the United States.

GDF

Beautiful. I can't wait to read that.

I got the notice from Red Hen Press that my copy of *Subduction* is on its way! At some point, when we're all able to come out of our homes, I would love for you to sign it for me.

KMY

That would be my great honor. Thank you for buying it; thank you for reading it.

GDF

Thank you for doing this interview, Kristen.

KMY

Thank you, Seattle Arts & Lectures!