

“Dubbing It Into the Earth”: A Conversation with Kaie Kellough

Faith Paré February 19, 2021

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Calling Kaie Kellough an ancestral voice is maybe presumptive or even paradoxical, considering the bold aesthetic leaps in his work, and his widening reputation as a necessary innovative voice among a rising generation of writers in Canada. Whether it be in the circuitry between voice, image, and jazz of his collaborative **“UBGNLSWRE” with musician and composer Jason Sharp and Kevin Yuen Kit Lo**, or in the lyrical torrent of his ***Magnetic Equator*, winner of the Griffin Poetry Prize** (McClelland & Stewart, 2019), Kaie’s poiesis is undeniably futurist. It’s from the futurism of his writing, however, that the ancestral surfaces. He is attuned to the frequencies of many Black histories unfolding all at once. The ‘past’ still reverberates with the same intensity. By weaving memoryscapes across continents in *Magnetic Equator* and the fiction collection *Dominoes at the Crossroads* (Véhicule, 2020), Kaie’s work splashes in history’s restlessness. History never knocks politely. It seeps in through the floorboards. Kaie is unafraid to go down with its tide.

I had the privilege to virtually chat with Kaie this past fall. After a summer fevered with anti-Black violence, from digital spectacles of police brutality to COVID-19’s quieter ravaging of Black neighbourhoods across Canada, I was spattered in grief. It was healing to listen to Kaie’s careful study and sheer love of Black cultural production. What began as a short Q&A on sound and its influences on his practice expanded into a map of the sonic, poetic, and generational traces in his work that criss-cross between the Caribbean, Quebec, the Prairies, and West Africa. We talked about our shared journeys, twenty years apart, of moving to Montreal to become poets, and what it means to wade in three lineages: Guyanese, Afro-diasporic, and Canadian. His keen reflections of his mentors’ gifts remind me that Black creators in this nation are inherently memory keepers of the traditions that nurtured us.

Below is an excerpt of that transformative conversation. As of February 2021, **a year since the launch of his Giller-longlisted *Dominoes at the Crossroads* at Librairie Drawn & Quarterly**, Kaie is **Writer in Residence at Queen’s University**. I know that this mentorship position will allow many to listen closely and generously to this future ancestor, as I have been lucky to. — F.P.

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Thank you so much for joining us on the SPOKENWEBLOG, Kaie. To get us started, I’ve been asking previous interviewees to introduce themselves not only as poets and thinkers, but also as listeners. What sounds have defined you as an artist and as a person?

I like being asked how to introduce myself as a listener because I think it’s the case with a lot of poets that music is central to our practice. I think about some of my earliest encounters with art and those are really encounters with music, with Black music, particularly from the Caribbean.

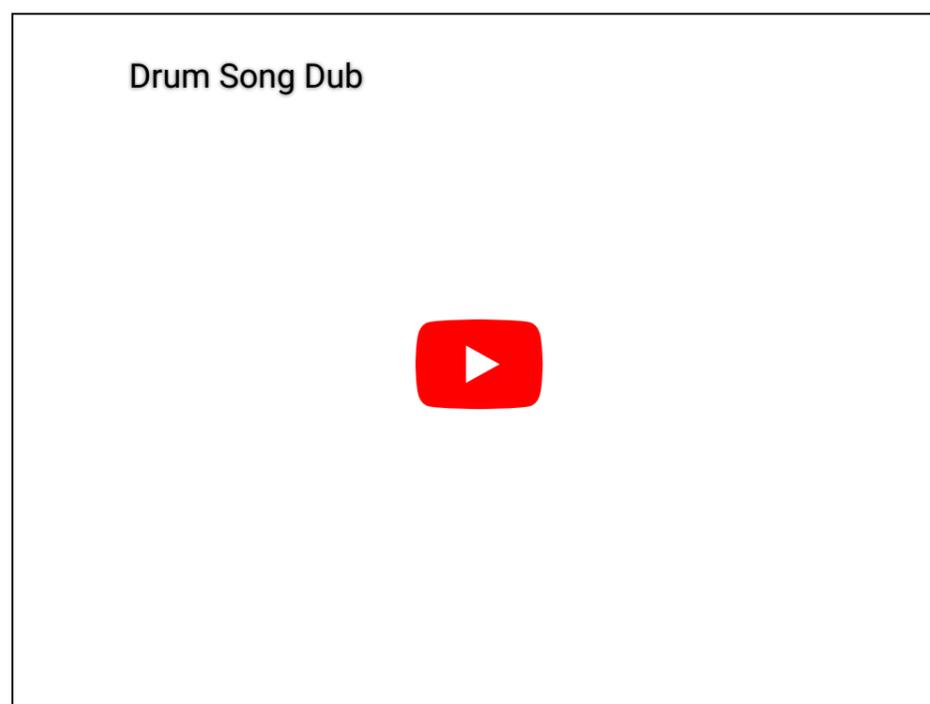
I'm a poet, fiction writer; I do live sound performance, sometimes in solo and sometimes in collaborative contexts. I like the idea of trying to be able to multiply and layer voice, to bring language and text into conversation with what instrumentalists can articulate. I've been pursuing those practices together, simultaneously, for a long time.

When it comes to being a listener, I would say that the most formative works were those that I heard growing up in my parents' house, and those are still works that I return to. Those are works that have shaped my sensibilities in a lot of different ways; have shaped my ear, shaped how I approach art and think about art. Those are the experiences that reach down to the very marrow of you when it comes to art. Everything that comes after that is in reference to that and in conversation with that.

I think of some of the African American music, you know, Sam Cooke, whom I didn't appreciate until I was older because the songs seemed so pretty and tidy. Roberta Flack, *First Take*. BB King. The mighty Mahalia Jackson. Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight and Pips. There was some '80s stuff going on there, like Lionel Richie, Peabo Bryson, Luther Vandross; all kinds of stuff that I couldn't stand [laughs]. As a kid, I remember my mother bought me the *Thriller* record. Prince & the New Power Generation, all that stuff. And then for West Indian music there was, of course, Jimmy Cliff's album *Wonderful World, Beautiful People*, which I still love to this day; this curious mix between ska, rocksteady, soul, and gospel. The songs on that remind me of Sam Cooke songs: they're these miracles of compression and beauty. Third World, the Heptones, Dennis Walks. There's that album by Rita Marley, *Who Feels It Knows It*—there's so many great devotional tunes on that record.

I would say the heart of the matter here is the Wailers. The record that I've probably listened to more than 1000 times, no joke, is *Natty Dread*. It's the first Wailers record where Peter Tosh and Bunny Livingston are no longer in the band. Bob has brought in the I-Threes, Rita Marley, Judy Mowatt, and Marcia Griffiths, as vocalists. In Jamaican music, there's so many amazing three-part vocal harmony groups. Instead of a three-part male vocal harmony group, it's Bob as the lead singer and then the I-Threes, and it creates this intricate interplay. They can all be harmonizing, they can chat back and forth, they can echo one another, they can call and respond.

My whole lifetime is in that record. That is probably my first most profound and substantial experience with art, with the art of the Caribbean, with art in general. Art as protest, as outcry, as social consciousness, as revolutionary chant, "chant down Babylon", as love songs, as a soundtrack to life, the kind of thing that would support you through the hard times. That, as a listener, is where I come from. That's not necessarily what I always try to duplicate but that's my listening profile, it starts right there.



Kaie says "Drum Song Dub" by Scientist, one of his recommendations, "strikes a resonant and bass-heavy cultural note."

How have those musically formative years and your training as a musician shaped or challenged your poetics, or vice versa? Does the plane between word and sound feel breached, requiring 'translation,' or are they on a spectrum? Or otherwise?

One of the limitations that comes up when writing—but perhaps it's not a limitation—is that you can't actually make a sound. You can suggest sound very forcefully to the mind's ear, but you can't *actually* make a sound. What you can do is import compositional structures and musical structures into the poem or the text, whether it's prose or poetry. I think that one of the really

welcome and enriching challenges is to think about what you're hearing in, say, an Alice Coltrane record—you think about the crescendos, you think about the different patterns, you think about the different roles that the instruments are playing in relation to one another. You think about the shape and scope of the overall pieces and the patterns of improvisation. How would you as a poet interpret those things and how would you impose those shapes on writing? You don't have to be a trained musician to be able to think about it that way. It doesn't necessarily have to be within one poem, but it can be over the course of a sequence of poems. You could think: this next cycle of ten poems is going to be a crescendo.

The other thing is oral performance, because oral performance gives you immediate access to sound. I think having something of an active interest in the oral tradition is instructive as a poet. I always feel I have to say this because I was shaped in a moment where the oral tradition was really looked down upon, in particular by poets of the page. The understanding you develop is actually embodied. I think that that can only enrich a person's poetry practice.

In SpokenWeb's collections, you're a frequent performer in our archive of the Words & Music Show, a 20-year-long performance series organized by poet and curator Ian Ferrier. Since moving to Montreal in 1998, what fluxes have you witnessed in the city's spoken word community? How have you seen, and engaged in, those shifts through local cabarets like Words & Music?

Ian Ferrier has been very generous to the poetry community over the years. I thank him for that because I came to Montreal when I was fairly young and he took me seriously as a poet, which my parents wouldn't. "I'm an artist, I'm a poet now"—they're like, "Oh, are you? Go back to school. Study computer science, please" [laughs].

Ian used to live in this beautiful place on Laval Street. He used to tell me that it was a place that the poet Émile Nelligan had lived in at one point. Even if Émile Nelligan had not necessarily lived in that place, he might have lived in one next to it or close to it. He had this recording studio set up in his basement, which I would go over there and record little poems and duets with different instrumentalists. Wired on Words and the music scene was very much entwined with the Plateau neighbourhood and Mile End. When I moved to Montreal, it was a few years after the 1995 referendum, so there had been a big exodus and a lot of the city was derelict. It was down on some hard, hard times. There were so many young people here in the Plateau: students, bohos, all kinds of artists. Dancers, musicians of different types and styles, visual artists, novelists, poets, spoken word performers, theatre people, the whole gamut. So many of them, of us, lived within this one neighbourhood. There were literally hundreds of artists. I don't think that you could have had that experience anywhere else in Canada, probably nowhere else in North America. Wired on Words was at the heart of that. It's collaborative whether you like it or not because here's a dancer who wants to work with you, so break out your text and work on that. Wired on Words provided, in conjunction with Casa del Popolo and Sala Rossa, a locale for those conversations to happen. That was just indispensable.

A lot of the ways that we talk about Black writing focuses on the product of writing, the actual book, when there are the readings that we attend, the editorial advice given, the kinship building. How has that kinship among Black writers in Montreal and across Canada influenced your writing?

In Montreal, one of the things that I became part of was the earliest iterations of the Kalmunity Vibe Collective, back when it was up in a little cafe on the corner of Saint-Zotique and Saint-Dominique in Little Italy and you could still smoke indoors. It was a loose collective of predominantly Black and brown musicians, vocalists, singers, poets, who had come together around the drummer Jahsun. It was his idea, to create something that was improvised but along the lines of genres of popular music from the African diaspora. He would lay down some ground rules: each piece would begin with a riff and a different musician would have to start it; each riff would have to be in a different key from the previous and would have to be in a different genre. Someone might come in with a guitar line that you might think would sound like an Afrobeat or a Soukous guitar line, and it would somehow move into R&B. The vocalists would usually be the last ones to come in, and they would add content but also the scope of vocal melody and rhythm. Jahsun called it "Live Organic Improv."

The aim was really to say something. It wasn't to create songs or popular music, but it was to experiment. It was to explore the relationships between different genres and it was to explore the connections between different genres of Black music from the Americas. It was to converse across our different languages and countries of origin, so you would have people like Fabrice

Koffy from Ivory Coast, you might have people from Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica. Haitian singers, Guadeloupean singers. It was multilingual. It was a really interesting attempt to explore our inheritance from the diaspora and see what we could come up with, and see if that would lead to the creation of new musical forms and new genres or new kinds of innovative techniques.

That was a real serious community for me for a long time. But the other thing I can say is that living out here, there are a few people who I have to shout out. A Montreal person would, of course, be **H. Nigel Thomas**. When Nigel once introduced me to someone—I must have been like 26 or something, pretty young—he said, “This is Kaie. Kaie is one day going to write the Great Canadian Novel”. I thought, “Man, what are you talking about?” [laughs]. But it stayed in my head and I thought of it. It was that kind of West Indian sense of the older generation showing the younger that we believe in you and even if you don’t know how to dream yet, we have dreams for you. “Oh, so there’s a standard now and there are expectations. I have to meet these, right? I can’t let this go.”

There were some other people in Toronto. **Lillian Allen** has always been super generous. **M. NourbeSe Philip**, who blurbed *Magnetic Equator*. I’ve read her for years. And **Dionne Brand**, who edited the book and who invited me to submit the work to McClelland & Stewart. They’ve been just incredibly welcoming and supportive over the years, and that’s the kind of community that you need in order to progress as an artist. You just need to be in proximity to people like that, know that they exist and have that nod of support and encouragement and respect from them because they hold the keys to the tradition in a way. They open up the door and let you in, and you develop.

When I was younger in Calgary, I was friends with a couple of poets, and in my early undergraduate days, we heard that there was a small festival. It was called The High Performance Rodeo—of course, everything has to have a cowboy reference—and they were bringing **Clifton Joseph** from Toronto. It might have been before 1995, or around there. We had just sort of stumbled upon dub poetry at that point. We discovered **Linton Kwesi Johnson** and **Jean “Binta” Breeze**, and we didn’t know that this existed in Canada.

Mutabaruka had a poem, one of his most famous poems called “Dis Poem” and it’s dis poem and what dis poem shall do and what dis poem stands for. It’s a great statement. Clifton came to Calgary and had his own version of “Dis Poem”, and he spoke in English and patois. It was this incredible moment where we were witness to something that we didn’t know before, which was that there is a Caribbean poetics tradition here. After that, we found Lillian Allen, **Afua Cooper**, but we didn’t know at that time that dub poetry was a presence here in Canada, that Black poets in performance, that Black oral tradition, existed here. You came out of that just totally renewed and uncertain of who you were. We knew that this tradition existed here and that you could potentially be a part of it.

To think I don’t necessarily have to ‘go away,’ be a stranger in a strange land—this is the place, too, and I’m part of it. I don’t have to journey or pilgrimage to some other place where this work is ‘actually happening’. This work is being created and defined by its diasporic reach.

Yeah, you are part of it. It’s great to be able to be part of it. I have to give thanks to people like Lillian and Clifton and Dionne for dubbing it into the earth here.

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Kaie Kellough is a novelist, poet, and sound performer. From western Canada, he lives in Montréal and has roots in Guyana, South America. His books include *Dominoes at the Crossroads* (short fiction, Véhicule 2020), *Magnetic Equator* (poetry, McClelland and Stewart 2019), and *Accordéon* (novel, ARP 2016). Kaie’s writing has been awarded the Griffin Poetry Prize and the QWF Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction. It has been listed for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, the Grand Prix du Livre de Montréal, the Amazon/Walrus Foundation First Novel Award, and the QWF A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry. Since 2011 he has created mixed media compositions with saxophonist and synthesist Jason Sharp. Kaie’s work has traveled internationally, notably to festivals in the U.K., Australia, Asia, the Caribbean, and continental Europe. He continues to craft new passages. (Headshot credit: Kevin Calixte)

This article is published as part of the **Listening, Sound, Agency Forum** which presents profiles, interviews, and other materials featuring the research and interests of future participants in the 2021 SpokenWeb symposium. This series of articles provides a space for dialogical and multimedia exchange on topics from the fields of literature and sound studies, and serves as a prelude to the live conference.



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