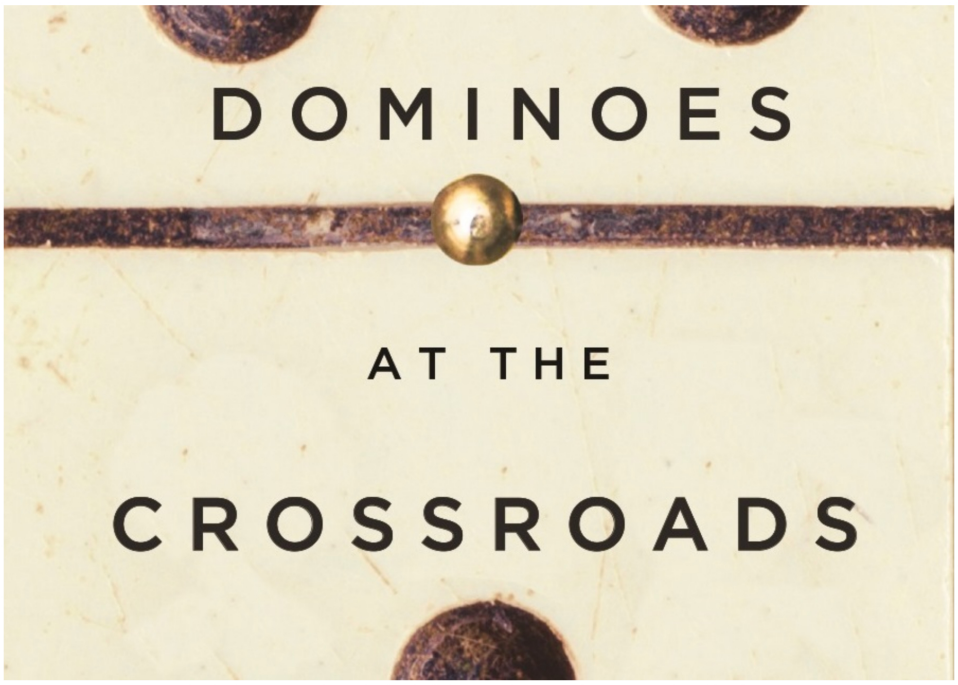

Credit: Event «Local Reads Book Club - Dominoes at the Crossroads» - Facebook

Dominoes at the Crossroads: A Reflection

> *Lying there, adrift on my hotel bed, I felt I could fall asleep to the rocking of Lake Ontario, which is really the Saint Lawrence, which is really the Atlantic Ocean, which is really the world... – Kaie Kellough, "Petit Marronage", Dominoes at the Crossroads*

As a critic, one often tends to search for a unifying theme or motif underlying their object of criticism. While I made my way through Kaie Kellough's collection of stories entitled *Dominoes at the Crossroads*, what I found instead of themes or motifs is what can only be called a *force*, propelling the collection backwards and forwards, between nations and ideas of 'Nation'.

On the surface, the collection is brought together under the frame of diaspora. In a large nutshell, diaspora simply implies a movement from A to B. Yet, Kellough demonstrates that when so much of this movement is *ancestral*, when so much of it has happened without choice or agency, under the brutality of the Empire, this gap between A to B widens and starts encompassing an infinitude of space, time, and feelings. Reading the text, I was reminded of a quote by Stuart Hall, cited in John Akomfrah's 2013 film *The Stuart Hall Project*, where Hall claims, "I can't trace myself to one central origin, I can trace myself to five".

Reading *Dominoes,* then, a question remains suspended over Kellough's words: what exactly is a diasporic identity? Or specifically, what is a Carribean Canadian identity? At times, it appears lucidly as a working class community tethered to the neighborhood of St Michel, soon to be lost to gentrification. In some instances, it appears as projections of a future where racial integration is not just a social media buzzword, but a lived reality.

In all of these vignettes, Kellough reminds us that no matter where national identity exists, in dreams or in reality, the claim to it has always been and might always be marked by violence. Indeed, as in "Shooting the General" is cultural identity somewhere in an underground antique store in the middle of the October Crisis? Or do we find our identities in the eyes that stare us down, questioning if we belong? Kellough's strength in this collection is in nudging his reader towards reflection rather than definitive answers.

> *Does it matter where or what year I was born? I am in the story, whatever story is being told, but I am not its subject. I am not supposed to have a name because I am the imported help. I am the servant of the story, the still figure someone might mistake for porcelain. – Kaie Kellough, "Notes of a Hand", Dominoes at the Crossroads*

Perhaps why I am so drawn to the idea of force when thinking about this collection is because force, unlike a theme or a motif, implies fluidity and movement. Kellough draws an elaborate map that is both an ode to the history of Caribbean migration into Canada, and a vision of how things *could be*. This collection reads as though it is several generations in the making, most notably because of the way in which Kellough plays with form and tone. Often choosing to write in the voice of a memoir, and even beginning the collection with a fake conference paper, Kellough presents us with literary forms we typically associate with nonfiction, a genre with a certain transcendental quality.

This is because nonfiction purportedly attests to reality, to things that were true at the moment of writing. Moreover, the form of a collection frees the author from the constraints of a singular plot structure, instead allowing Kellough to explore the ideas of diaspora and nation in disparate yet intricately connected ways.

In this way, the criss-crossing, time-jumping disjointedness of the collection is its greatest strength, because it reveals the nonlinearity of tracing the history of a diasporic community. Despite the deep violence that permeates through this timeline, often such histories elicit an equally deep ambivalence.

In "Petit Marronage", the story I resonated with the most, Kellough inserts himself as a character, described through the voice of the narrator who is a jazz musician. The protagonist recounts meeting "Kaie Kellough" at a literary and musical festival, where "Kellough" discusses approaching race in art. On this, the narrator reflects:

> *I imagine that like many middle-class people, his importance has been reinforced. He's been told that he's somebody, that he has a voice and that it should be heard. Not all of us are sung that same refrain, and not all of us are driven by those same expectations. – Kaie Kellough, "Petit Marronage", Dominoes at the Crossroads*

Placing himself within and outside of the text, Kellough is thus able to both raise the issue of a diasporic artist's responsibility to their depiction of race, whilst simultaneously questioning that very sense of responsibility itself. By doing so, Kellough carefully constructs an ambivalent mode of storytelling, one in which identities are in a constant state of negotiation between place, time, history, and nation. Ultimately, this collection expands the notion of national literature and shows us new ways to imagine what such an idea can be, both in terms of narrative and form.

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