

MICHAEL NARDONE
“AMID THE VOICES, OF COURSE. THEIR BEAUTIFUL NOISE.”
ON THE AURAL POETICS OF ERÍN MOURE, KAIE
KELLOUGH, AND NICOLE RAZIYA FONG

When I moved to Montreal nearly a decade ago, I remember feeling struck by a desire to be immersed within a particular tradition of poetry the city seemed to cultivate. It was something I learned of from afar, a poetics that thrived across numerous sites but had a particular richness and complexity in Montreal in that it made use of numerous listening practices so as to compose poems. It was translanguaging, in that it worked between English and French, was informed by a co-mingling of and conviviality between francophone and anglophone writers, and spilled out into numerous other languages rooted to the spaces of this city and routed through it. This poetics was experimental – it approached poetry as a writing practice that could host or be inflected by various lyric practices, prose, theory, correspondence, documents, translational techniques, as well as speech and information genres of all kinds. This poetics participated within an expanded terrain of cultural production that involved theorists, visual artists, translators, choreographers, photographers and filmmakers, drawing from and working in dialogue with various innovations within those practices. To this extent, the poems themselves perhaps didn't read much like works I had encountered in my earlier studies of poetry, nor did it quite do what I had thought poetry did in that their compositional techniques or aesthetic ideologies were not quite legible to me yet. Though, I could recognize that the poems engaged with the formal concerns of poetry's multiple pasts while also grappling with and tuning themselves to the conditions of language, its transmissions and performances, in the present.

This navigation within the works themselves between the many traditions and uses of poetry combined with the questioning of and experimentation with what poetry might be now, what it might look like and sound like in our contemporary moment – it was an enthralling thing to encounter. And nowhere could I confront such an engagement with language better than in the writings of Erin Moure. Founded in a practice of deep listening, Moure's works are attuned to writing taking place in numerous places and languages (English, French, Galician, Spanish, and Portuguese) while remaining acutely aware of the of the political-linguistic conditions of their locale's composition (in the settler-colonial nation-state of Canada, in the province of Québec where English is, officially, a “minority” language, in the multilingual and cosmopolitan crossroads of Montreal). They are queer, feminist, intersectional, deconstructive, and exploratory; they are anti-imperialistic to their core in that, in both theme and syntactical construction, they grate against those crude political forces that attempt to homogenize and contain cultural expression within a few readily defined categories. As Moure (2018) writes:

Poetry, for me, is not one aesthetic that hounds or trumps another, but is a complex textile, virtual and holographic, material and scapingly real, one that can be folded, spoken, shaken, torn and mended, re-dyed, and always it makes a sound of gentle working, fierce working at cellular and molecular levels where language/s (and they are plural) coalesce and intersect. In poetry, textualities, textscapes, texteriors, generate and are generated, thrall and intercalate. Anger and despair are not alien to poetry either, for poetry is not “meaning” but is this “working,” this *formae vitae* in which the individual poet's mind and hands are plural with other poets and all are called “to work at the limits of signification.” Not entropic but amplificatory. For, as Chus Pato reminds us in Galician, poetry is always sovereign. Though there *are* social strictures, seen and unseen, that act to limit what is readily available to us in poetry, poetry is its own search. It obeys its own command only, and it occurs in our midst, and never to one of us alone.

If poetry is a gesture that opens, and opens to listening, then how a poet listens is more important than who a poet “is.”

Here, Moure’s inversion instantiates her poetic practice more generally. As opposed to a figuring of the poet as one who utters forth, who declaims their singular perspective outward into the world, we have one who receives, who composes in the act of reception, who acknowledges and maps their relations in the midst of the world’s noise and traffic.

In such a practice, any act of speech or of resistance is founded, first, to use Moure’s words, “Amid the voices, of course. Their beautiful noise” – in listening, in the encounter, in being with. To this extent, her works materialize a crucially important aural poetics, one that enlarges the sphere of the audible by sensing and giving form to the sonorous. On the relation between these two distinct terms, François J. Bonnet (2016) writes: “The sonorous *sounds*, whereas the audible *gives itself to be heard*. Thus, every audible is, a priori, sonorous, but the sonorous is not always audible.” The array of Moure’s overall production – poetic texts, translations, collaborations, introductions, curations, and self-published editions – share in common a distinct capacity to apprehend and structure, both graphically and performatively, a “planetary noise,” as her recent edition of selected poems is entitled. In making audible our soundscape’s dense palimpsest of relations, their languages and syntaxes, her works generously offer their readers an opportunity to hear the world anew.

The compositions of Kaie Kellough orchestrate on the page and in performance the sonic relations formed through and within the continuum of diaspora. Over the course of three books of poetry, two recorded albums, and a novel, Kellough has virtuosically charted out a “compressed cacophony” that intones numerous people, places, and languages merging into contact. Echoing between the Caribbean, the Canadian prairie, and Montreal, among other locations, his writings have the ability to disorient even as they locate the reader within a particular space and time. They do so by means of Kellough’s impeccable skill to blend both the noise and the signal (or, at times, and perhaps more accurately, *the noise that is a signal*) that takes place in the itinerant exchange of language. Édouard Glissant, writing in *Carribean Discourse* (1989), observes: “Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse.” Glissant situates this statement in his historicizing of Creole in the transatlantic slave trade as a medium of communication in which those dispossessed of subjectivity, land, and language could speak with one another while “weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise” so as to camouflage it from their masters. It is in such an instance of “phonic materiality” that Fred Moten (2003) locates the ongoing resistance that animates black radical aesthetics.

M. NourbeSe Philip is correct to cite Kellough’s work as joining the tradition of “tidalectics,” the poetic practice theorized by Kamau Brathwaite that “foregrounds historical trajectories of migrancy and dispersal, and highlights the waves of various emigrant landfalls to the Caribbean and the process of settlement and sedimentation” (DeLoughrey 2008). In Kellough’s poem “kaieteur falls,” for example, from his most recent book *Magnetic Equator* (2019), words particlized into phonemes or slammed into compounded molecules of unfamiliar meaning cascade down and across several pages, as they are both fractured and forged into new constellations of meaning by an onslaught of punctuation and variable font sizes. A reader is confronted, at once, with several ways of approaching the text. One might attempt to read a single line straight across and therefore encounter:

potarorapidsfume}slide{e////////x}i{ûûûûûûûû}l{e|||||||s}cascade{intothegreen

Or, perhaps, they might pick out the singular letters dispersed throughout the glyphs, finding instances such as “e x i l e s e v a p o r a t e i n t h e m i s t.” One could, simply, sound out the circumflexed “û” in free fall down the centre of the pages, noting the possible letters lost in transmission that the mark often implies; or, instead, sound out, at random, the fused Joycean phrases at that free fall’s margin: “river-shimmer” “waterthunders” “distilledsound” “afarfrothingroar.” A matrix of signifying terms amalgamate in the poem’s pages. There are a series of personal resonances,

beginning with the “kaie” of “Kaieteur Falls,” the world’s largest single drop waterfall, located in Guyana, the place to which Kellough’s ancestors were forced and the place from which they left for Canada. There is the figure of the poet, Kellough himself, speaking as that perpetual stream of water that both welcomes and redistributes the “creoledialect” of “escapedmaps” into the “strangegrammar” of its “pooledripples.” Dispersed throughout are cross-cultural valences, the “riddym-ravings” that echo through an exile’s return to a source that streams, always, onward, elsewhere.

The writings of Nicole Raziya Fong occur on a level that is infrasonic. The phenomena they document and the voice that articulates their sensing seem to resonate out of a space where inaudible vibratory waves rumble through one’s body, where one’s barest perceptions merge with an articulable world. They create, in Erin Robinsong’s words, “a sensate weather system of thought.” And it is in such a system, we are reminded, that the domain of listening is something that acts upon and is experienced throughout one’s entire body. Steve Goodman (2010) defines infrasound as the “subbass frequencies under the auditory threshold of 20 hertz, often felt in terms of tactility or organ resonance instead of hearing.” Generated by turbulences in the physical world such as earthquakes, tidal waves, and thunderstorms, infrasonic waves, unlike ultrasound, maintain their power as they pass through human and animal bodies, impacting the nervous system, often inducing states of tremulation with their low-frequency vibrational force. It is as if Fong has calibrated her own nervous system to decipher and give shape to such forces and their effects.

Her book *PERFACT* (2019) scores a sensing of infrasonic phenomena as they reverberate between natural and meteorological processes into and through one’s most intimate negotiations with the world. “A three-part series of poems interrogating the nature of experience, language, trauma, and identity,” the book begins in a meditative treatise:

I cross: the symbol – the seam – the fold.

I crossed a subject with its affect. Its affect appeared as a circumstantial seam, derisively stitched across a surface of appearance. In crossing the surface of appearance, affect began to disclose habit’s recurring seam – a sign, exceedingly attentive within appearance’s grieving folds, the renewed / renewing subject now so fateful, now so seamlessly desired.

Erase envelopes the subject as the sign begins to monitor itself breathing. Its breath is the work of daylight held in a grieving appearance of affect and closure. When I understand a sign I become erasure’s itinerance. When I iterate a sign I begin to understand the subject for what it is: frayed dissociation from appearance’s obtuse body. Only when I become a sign do I disentangle myself from symbol’s intended folds, from the emblematic secrecy of affective loss.

From here, the subject’s variable composition, its shifting relation to materials and to materialized affect, morphs into a polyphonic theatre that is “sensorial, imagined, real.” Its cast includes “a prime number,” “subterranean time,” “culpability,” “neutrality,” and “STORM,” “WIND,” “RIVER” and “STAGE” play themselves. In their eventual dispersion, a singular, if contrapuntal, voice emerges in the book’s final section. At times, crystalline and epigrammatic, at others, swift and airy, the work assembles supposedly contradictory states of being and experience, unifying, for instance, a sense of instability within rigid structuring, the eternal framed within the momentary, the singular that is plural, while porously moving between occurrences situated within and external to a body. The certain alertness of the poems both reflects and refracts a universe – its substructures of feeling – that is, often, questionably there, yet perceived with absolute force.

Together, Moure, Kellough, and Fong articulate a poetics that is *otographic*, a term Peter Szendy (2016) describes as “the writing of listening, from one ear to another.” They do so in the various taxonomies of listening they explore in their works, ranging from the interpersonal, intercultural, and interlingual, the topological and subaltern, to the ambient and vibrational. Here, at a formal level, we encounter another instance of locating and expanding the audible so as to include more of the sonorous. With this, I return to, or intone, Moure once more: “If poetry is a gesture that opens, and opens to listening, then how a poet listens is more important than who a poet ‘is.’” A renewed poetics of relation is found in the works of these three poets, in how they listen, who they listen to and with, how they choose to inscribe such relations.

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