



**External
Space**



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Kaya Joan

Part Three

February 19 – March 31, 2020

“Part Three”: An Abridged Conversation with Video Poet Kaya Joan

Kaya Joan’s video titled “Part Three” describes the movements of a gender ambiguous being through a spirit world that exists parallel to our own, navigating rituals of grief, blood memory, and the medicine of dreams along the way. The character awakens in a world unlike our own, experiencing the grief of a spirit companion’s passing. Dreaming of their loved ones in a half-remembered prior life, the light of our waking world is, “...bright and artificial / some called me a name I thought I had forgotten / it tickled my ears and birthed visions of a different life.” Kaya’s voice narrates the poem with a blend of English and Kanien'keha, and animates simple line drawings laid over video captured with a mobile phone. To local Tkaronto’a:ka¹, the complex associations Kaya draws bring to life a Onkwehonwe presence in a city landscape usually posed as opposite, or even hostile, to native identities and practices.

Kaya and I met at a favorite coffee shop recently to discuss the making and meaning of “Part Three”.

¹ Translates to English meaning, ‘People of Toronto’.

² “*Mamatowisowin* is the capacity to connect to the life force that makes anything and everything possible... [developed] through dreams, visions, and prayer.” Battiste, Marie, and Barman, Jean, eds. *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle*

KAYA JOAN

I've never been to Kahnawake. My mom went for the first time last year and my grandma the year before. I was born and raised in Toronto and identify Tkaronto as my home. My thesis work unpacks that with the notion of blood memory. My family was forced to assimilate. There's a lot of anti-Blackness on my black side, and denial of Indigeneity on my Indigenous side. My job here is to unbury and recover. My work can act as a portal into the past but also into the future.

ROWAN RED SKY

What do you think about urban Indigeneity?

KAYA

It's a valid identification. I'm very inspired by urban thematics and aesthetics. I received all of my teachings and learned so much from the land here. I continue to learn about the history of Toronto, the meaning and protocols of Dish with One Spoon, and the history of the Toronto Purchase. The buried rivers are a metaphor for the buried histories within myself.

ROWAN

Tell me about the scene of the bird on top of the tree. The cultural association it brought up for me was the Tree of Peace.

KAYA

Alleyways are in-between spaces in the city. There's less distraction from things my spirit wants me to focus on. I take medicine from little things, allowing myself to notice and sit with them. That bird was singing in the alleyway and I really needed that medicine, so I made a video with my phone. An Anishinaabe word, *mamatowisowin*², means to be in the flow of things so deeply that your spirit and everyone behind you are guiding you.

ROWAN

How do references to technology fit into the poem's nature imagery?

² "Mamatowisowin is the capacity to connect to the life force that makes anything and everything possible... [developed] through dreams, visions, and prayer." Battiste, Marie, and Barman, Jean, eds. *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds*. Vancouver, CA: UBC Press, 1995. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 20 March 2017. 110.

KAYA

There was an apocalypse in this world we're in now, so this being had to go underground and re-emerge into this different space parallel to our own world. As an introvert, technology is a way that I connect with community. Leroy Little Bear wrote about how technology carries spirits. For this person, that's the way they remember a lot of their connections.

ROWAN

You mention, "They gifted me a song." What importance do song and music have for you?

KAYA

I'm as much a musician as a visual artist. Both of my parents are musicians and singers as well, so song has always been central to my life. I sing in my dreams and those are always the most powerful. Song is important medicine for connection with my voice and truth I need to speak.

ROWAN

Crossing-water-on-a-horned-beast is a motif in Onkwehonwe stories. Tell me about the horned beast illustration and the choice of clip you laid it over.

KAYA

I've always drawn a lot of spirits and weird creatures. I see these beings and their faces in another layer of reality poking through at me. The horned beast imagines what might exist in another dimension. The clip is a river in Mississauga. I went there with my mom and her partner last spring to see bald eagles, geese, great white herons, and little song birds. It was an incredibly powerful space of song. This is where I think spirits would dwell---Maybe a portal exists there.

ROWAN

What's the importance of Otsihkwes³, the fox spirit?

³ Refers to *Daucus carota*, commonly called Queen Anne's lace or wild carrot in English. A beneficial companion to vegetables and fruits, but easily mistaken for the highly poisonous *Conium maculatum* or poison hemlock.

KAYA

Creatures like foxes and deer often show up in my work. Foxes are really special creatures. I've seen them a handful of times in my life living in Toronto. Recently, me and my partner drove down to the water at night and a fox was in the parking lot of Ashbridges Bay. Those moments of seeing wildlife that you don't normally see in the city are powerful to me.

ROWAN

Tell me about the tso'tso:ron⁴ Otsikwes reveals to you at the end.

KAYA

We had a family cottage in Haliburton surrounded by magnificent birch trees. When my great-grandfather died, we had to sell the cottage. I was thinking about this person, in their moment of grief. Otsikwes gifts them knowledge in a dream of how to construct a vessel that will transition them out of this space of grieving. To come to this magnificent birch tree represents an important moment of deciding, "Okay, I'm going to move through by crossing the lake."

ROWAN

The Peacemaker story is all about a war that is self-perpetuating because everyone is in grief. That's the culture of the League, the condolence ceremonies were about how to grieve in a good way and how to unify while in grief. Were you thinking about the Peacemaker story and his stone canoe?

KAYA

The Peacemaker story is the only teaching on canoes that I have, so that's how I know we had dugout canoes. A really interesting part of the Peacemaker story is the motif of travelling while carrying something that you need to carry with you, in this vessel.

⁴ Refers to *Betula alleghaniensis*, commonly called yellow birch in English. A large species of birch, its hardwood is used by humans as a building material and its bark makes a convenient water-proof firestarter. An important food source for wild animal species.

ROWAN

You animate the canoe in the final scene on top of a photographic image of water, which is shot from shore. The canoe leaves an illustrated place over on the distant horizon, and comes closer to the viewer. Deconstructing the layers in my mind, I felt that they were leaving in the canoe, and through this visual poetry, they return to themselves. Where are they going in the canoe?

KAYA

I'm not sure yet. They had to leave a lot of themselves behind to transition out of this world to the other world. The next part would return to some part of themselves, whether reconnecting with community or ancestors or whatever that may be. I think my intentions are to connect with people on the other side and discover that they're not the only being in this other world.

ROWAN

From one urban Onkwehonwe to another, this is Onkwehonwe poetry.

KAYA

Nia:wen, I'm going to hold that with me. I experience a lot of anxiety and doubt, and so to have moments like this where you see me? That's cool.

ROWAN

People prey on those doubts, especially in urban environments. Our relationship to land feels mediated when we live in the city. We rely on traditional people to mediate a connection to creation. How can we connect to creation, our traditions, and ourselves on our own terms as urban people? And confidently move forward into our future instead of worrying if we're matching up with the past properly?

KAYA

Blood memory is huge to me. Finding that my imagery is referential to stories I know are within me? That helps me a lot.

To hear the podcast in audio form, please visit the file through this link:

