# Dominoes at the Crossroads shows how Black history is entwined in Canada’s story

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Dominoes at the Crossroads

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Dominoes is a game of contradictions. It’s basically statistics with a helping of luck, but when the play is fast it takes on a hypnotizing, predetermined quality that feels like magic. As the tiles snake around the table, they tell the story of the game. Yet read those tiles from end to end, and it seems random. Which was the first tile laid down? You can’t tell from the resulting shape. It might be that double in the middle of the train or it could be forgotten off to one side. That first tile defines much of the game. It’s the ends that define who wins, though.

Kaie Kellough is a Canadian writer and poet with roots in Guyana who was raised in Calgary but has called Montreal home for more than 20 years. His new story collection, *Dominoes at the Crossroads*, is a book whose shape takes on some of the qualities of the game in its title, although there are other ways that title could be interpreted. For example, the domino face can be any colour really, but it is most often

represented as black dots on a white background. This could symbolize the book’s subject: the story of Black people in Canada – from Marie-Joseph Angélique, the slave of New France who struck back by burning Old Montreal, into the far future – especially Black Canadians of the Caribbean diaspora.

Or the title could simply be a nod to the game’s popularity in the Caribbean. It’s an evocative phrase for sure, with all the associations that “crossroads” conjures. In the title story, the men who play dominoes at the crossroads are ambiguous figures. They are rebels in hills of the small island country where the narrator and partner go on holiday. The crossroads where they play dominoes all day is a checkpoint where they collect a security tax from local landowners. They are unimpressed with the narrator’s roots on the island, and the narrator in turn considers them a threat. On the other hand, the domino players have read the visiting couple accurately: Montreal intellectuals whose academic interest in revolution – researching the New Jewel Movement that led the Grenada Revolution of 1979, or reading *La Lézarde*, Édouard

Glissant’s 1958 novel of young revolutionaries – is romantic at best.

But I think there’s something deeper to the dominoes symbolism, in that the book’s very structure contains those contradictions I associate with the game. The story at the book’s middle, “Petit Marronage,” could easily represent a double tile. Most of the stories in this collection are short, fewer than 20 pages, but “Petit Marronage” clocks in at close to 50. That length gives the story room to make links to the stories that preceded it and the ones that come after. It is like that first tile laid down in a game that by the random virtue of being first carries within it all potential future moves.

Dominoes is a game about possibilities – of cutting off options for others while leaving everything open for yourself – and I think of Kellough, too, as a writer of possibilities. In his first novel, 2016’s *Accordéon*, for example, he drew on centuries of Quebec history to produce a scathing satire of the Charter of Quebec Values. While the folklore in *Accordéon* was Kellough’s own creation, it rang true as a possible alternative culmination of that history, a mirror universe set in Quebeckers’ dreams.

*Dominoes*, too, is about potential, in the way the present and future are written by the past. In the opening story, set in Montreal a century from now, Kellough’s imagined great-great-grandchild gives a lecture on the history of the city. The lecture notes that Kellough “is not interested in futurisms,” but rather “wishes to examine the various urban properties that may one day emerge to shape the future.” The lecturer later adds: “Kellough’s notion of the future is informed by the city’s Black history. The future is encoded in the past and in certain events that decide our lives for us.” These quotes are not the story’s focus, but they offer a map for reading Kellough’s oeuvre and this book in particular.

Some readers might balk at an author’s mission statement so plainly inserted into the text, but then I

wonder what they would otherwise make of *Dominoes*, with the value it places on “drift” and its resistance to the idea that stories have defined beginnings and ends. This is more than a book of linked short stories with Black Canadians as its subject. *Dominoes at the Crossroads* articulates how Black history is not marginal to Canada’s story, but central to it – encoded in its history, and therefore its future too.