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"prosodies they have no mastery over": a Conversation with Belladonna* Author Kimberly Alidio

by [Stella-Ann Harris](#), [Cassandra Bristow](#) / May 10, 2023, 1:46 PST

Upon hearing Kimberly Alidio read at The Poetry Project this past March, I was struck by her easy command of the room. She managed to loosen up a silent crowd with a joke about analyzing *TÁR* at a lesbian dinner party, then proceeded to use her singular attention to speech and sound to bring an entirely new life to poems I'd previously encountered only on the page.

Alidio's reading was not the only exciting part of the event. I was also there to support Alidio's publisher, Belladonna* Collaborative, an NYC-based independent publisher of works by women and feminist writers. Founded in 1999 by Rachel Levitsky, Belladonna* has grown from a series of readings and salons into a multi-faceted collective—a publisher of books, "chaplets," and broadsides that also hosts workshops, readings, and other literary programming. Belladonna* has built a reputation that precedes it, in part from its commitment to politically and formally inventive works and its [slow, affiliation and invitation-based approach to the editorial process](#).

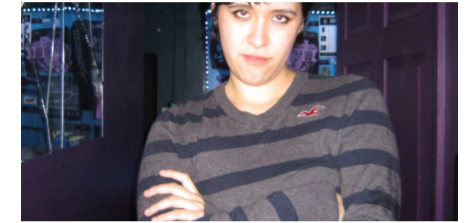
In the face of ever-apocalyptic discourse around publishing, I am endlessly impressed by the ways people continue to put interesting, challenging writing into the world, both online and on the page: collaged into zines, handbound into chapbooks, shared in bars and bookstores and Zoom meetings, published by small magazines or DIY presses. Poets and writers and artists and editors continue to make stuff for themselves and their friends, and in doing so open up spaces for deliciously experimental niches.

The following interview was prepared by Belladonna* Events Coordinator Cassandra Bristow. We are thrilled to share Alidio's fascinating examination of writer's block and breaks, the poetic ear, and sonic elements of language and composition.

Kimberly Alidio (she/they) is the author of four books of poetry; the latest is *Teeter*. Her writing has been awarded the Nightboat Poetry Prize and nominated for the United States Artists Fellowship and the Lambda Literary Award. Text-visual poems, commissioned by Nicole Eisenman and The Poetry Project, are forthcoming from Hauser & Wirth's Ursula. She lives on Munsee-Mohican lands along the Mahicannituck River, otherwise known as New York's Upper Hudson Valley.

— Stella-Ann Harris

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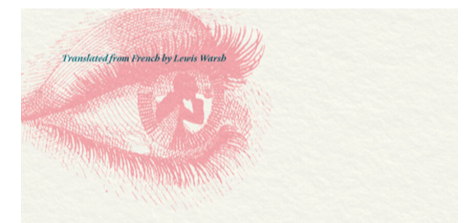
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Cassandra Bristow: I heard you read at a Belladonna* event at The Poetry Project this past March. You mentioned coming up against writer's block during your second book : *once teeth bones coral* : and fragmenting the prose and poems in response. Did that experience change your approach to writing or to performing your work?

Kimberly Alidio: I'm so glad to have met you at the Belladonna* book party. I enjoyed the comic moments of confessing to writer's block, partly because that experience has felt so serious, so dire, but also generative.

Through the decade of the 2000s, I revised and rewrote my PhD history dissertation several times, sometimes with different titles, while under contract with a university press. One or both drafts could have been publishable in some way, but were essentially compromised by the burden to convince an academic committee to keep my job. No draft I wrote gave me the fire to engage in what would have been a real fight for tenure, given I had a split appointment across two programs with heavy committee work. What really blocked me then is the extreme constraint on the scholarly reader to focus only on an array of expected references, citational and social, rather than experience scholarship as writing on its own terms.

Promotion-seeking poetry aside, poetry is free from the labor to convince anyone of anything. My academic historian's training gets activated by the documentary poetics of the Black Mountain School: the open-field of the page is the open-field of perceptions of time, context, and historical relations. These are the approaches that informed my first book—*after projects the resound*, with Black Radish, and its follow-up, *why letter ellipses*, with selva oscura press.

What I've called a "block" has meant a lot of writing and overwriting, revising and starting again: seemingly infinite variations of core material. In what would become the Belladonna* book [*once teeth bones coral* :], I was writing poems and prose on the breakup of many relationships: with an adopted city, a long-time partner, a good job, and friends, including a writing community. Again, there were multiple drafts that each had *something*. But all

together they raised to crisis-seeming levels questions of narrative and perspective, of how much to reference names and events, of what mattered. Each breakup was ending something that had taken two decades to form and de-form. I looked at my sentences and lines, and felt words outside the syntax of sequence, placement, fore/backgrounds, and combination. When I removed that syntax, the spaces of possibility opened up along with the spaces of the page.

CB: How would you describe your relationship to sound? I'd consider sound a defining presence in : *once teeth bones coral* : and your recently published Belladonna* chaplet *ROOM TONE (297)*. You seem to consistently take different approaches to sound throughout your work.

KA: Recently, poet Geoffrey Olsen wrote to me about *why letter ellipses*: "your work plays with sound as history and history as sound, how that exists as the erased voices that you pick up as with a microphone from the colonial archive of their absence." My first book is called *after projects the resound*: in a way, my work comes out of imagining culture, languages, identity, family, and friendship beyond instrumentality and commodity, which I find in the "surround," a concept Fred Moten and Stefano Harney use to talk about the peripheral position of the commons. The ambient mode is an ethic.

"Teeter" is formally my sound book. I wrote a short essay for *Harriet* called, "My Native Language Is Noise," which is now in verse form in "Teeter." In contemplating the *chora*, the choral, and the echo, I made soundscape electronic pieces from processing and collaging incidental field recordings of places I used to live in, and those audio generated poems which are in the book. Noah Ross published both the [sound and text poems in Baest](#).

"ROOM TONE," my Belladonna* chaplet, is excerpted from a new manuscript of prose poems about grief and art. It meditates on the Issue Project Room marathon re-staging of Alvin Lucier's "I Am Sitting in a Room," a procedural piece that uses successive playback of a recorded, short and scripted speech to engage a room's acoustics as a resonating filter that blurs the line between spoken language and ambient tones.

Somehow, listening to sound through recording and playback creates a beautiful tension between writing as an active practice and writing as an active text. Somehow, writing becomes more hesitant and pleasurable when understood in relation to listening, when listening involves the active practice and active "text" of recording—studio recording, field recording, or video recording—and playback. The *sound object* becomes more a matter of layers of processing, filtering, and representing. The ear, the hand, and the voice become more activated in all these processes, rather than separated out into the stages of successive distortion. All this feels contemporary, real, and somehow instructive for approaching nature or origins or identity.

Theorist-musician Francois Bonnet writes on a "sonorous archipelago," an unregulated or unbounded territory of sounds that escape the conditioned ear. Even prosody, a decidedly non-ambient dimension of poetry that can be taught as a repertoire of devices (meter, alliteration, rhyme, repetition, onomatopoeia) and forms, can point to the politics of the "poetic ear" (activated by composing and reading) as it's been trained to hear Poetry, much like the scale-trained brain has been trained to hear certain sounds as Music and other sounds as noise.

From my practice, the things that are hard to transmit, reflect on, and rebuild in the medium of writing spur on what I understand as an avant-garde focus on forms and materials of written language. With all of language's malleability, I intimately know how writing doesn't easily represent what is known, experienced, materially conditioned, or what exists on multiple scales and time zones. Writing doesn't fail as much as it is its own order and medium of representing language. It's important to practice and play with how writing exists in the fields of all kinds of perceptions. It's a kind of inscription, transcription, description, ascription of things, rather than those things. But it's how we can transmit, reflect on, and rebuild them. The unsayable, so to speak, pushes me closer to language, particularly English,

in its written forms, rather than pushing me away. This informs the way I connect with other writers I work with in a classroom. It's also the way I'm attuned to the poetics of everyday life, and the poetics of forms and modes that aren't necessarily of and in poetry.

CB: I asked how you approach your work visually then sonically. But where do these two intersect? Is that meeting point different every time for you, or is there consistency?

KA: "Teeter" has several visual poems in the section engaging the sonic transcription of a heritage language I neither speak nor understand. My new manuscript of sentences on art and grief was composed in a Google Doc set to a 5.51" x 8.50" page size. I could only write sentences that would be in a font almost too big for its small page.

I often reflect on how a writing project retrains and untrains you. To answer the question further, I'll restate that I'm glad I no longer have to write for readers who read for what they already expect to read. I'm thinking of how I get to know readers as people who make references and responses that run through something they are making. And I don't just mean readers of my work; I mean any reader attuned to the poetics of the text and contexts and the feedback loops of relation.

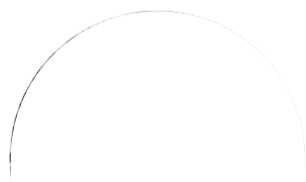
CB: What excites you about your forthcoming book *Teeter* (Nightboat, 2023)?

KA: "Teeter" started with an antagonism—an apologia for loving Language Poetry as a diasporic queer person of color whose poetic language is made up of many prosodies they have no mastery over—and ended up as a container that filtered everything and anything that wanted to come into it with an aura I experienced as grace.

I'm excited by influences; I love being influenced. My partner, Stacy, also a poet, perhaps for me the uber-poet, often references W.H. Auden's concept of "literary transmission" as a practice by which you transmit the voices of others to find your own. In your own voice are always the voices of others.

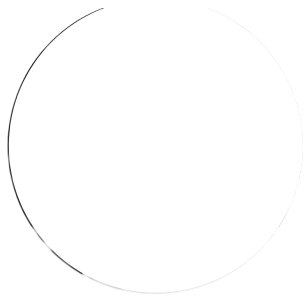
The staff at Nightboat includes people who've been visionary in producing "Teeter" and spreading the word about it. They've responded to the book with excitement and care: the cover is stark and glossy, the layout of the poems and colophon are clean and punchy. My work utterly depends on the brilliance of copy editors and designers, and Nightboat is part of a wave of publishers making dense, interdisciplinary, visually compelling contemporary books. In particular, I'm excited to be part of what I hope is an evolving sense of queer, BIPOC/ Filipinx diasporic translingual writing.

I'm excited by conversations such as this one, and the opportunity to talk and collaborate so more spaces, resources, and friendships emerge where we can make more things, find what we need, and exist in ways that feel more possible. To paraphrase what my editor, the poet Gia Gonzales, said to me recently: the struggle is real, but so is the yearning.



Stella-Ann Harris is a Brooklyn-based writer. Her work can be found in "The Portland Review" and is forthcoming in "Landlocked." She's on Twitter as @_stellaaah and on Instagram as @bluef13sh.

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Cassandra Bristow Cassandra Bristow (she/her) is a queer writer/poet/essayist currently working on essays that will hopefully appear on her Substack soon. Currently the Events Coordinator at Belladonna* Collective, she also curates a reading series called Rinse n Repeat and makes a lot of zines. Firmly based in Brooklyn NY, she shares a bedroom with her pet fish Weebo.

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