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Poetics of Disorientation and the Caribbean Reader

The Caribbean is long familiar with imposed cartographies and orientations. Kei Miller, a Jamaican poet, essayist, and novelist, and professor of creative writing at the University of Miami, has written extensively on colonial demarcations of space, as well as on counter-geographies that resist and persist. His 2019 poetry collection, *In Nearby Bushes*, considers the “violence of place” [1]; that is, how “place” can be a term for the undoing of Caribbean spatial constructions. Referencing Christopher Columbus’s enduring blunder, he writes in one poem:

Sometimes I consider the names of places: The West Indies. Or said another way: Western India

as if India was not enough.

And isn’t it incredible that such a name should stick despite all geographic proof to the contrary. And maybe that is what place is— a distorted way of seeing, an insufficient imagining.

Cristobal, como se dice ‘Taino’ en espanol? Indio

Cristobal, como se dice ‘Carib’ en espanol? Indio

Cristobal, como se dice ‘Guanahatabey’ en espanol? Indio

What did it matter, our own names?

We are insufficiently imagined people from an insufficiently imagined place.[2]

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[1] Kei Miller, “Sometimes I Consider the Nameless Places,” *In Nearby Bushes* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2019), 37.

[2] Miller, *In Nearby Bushes*, 33.

Columbus, an utterly lost colonizer, thought he had arrived at the “West Indies,” and this bogus geographical assumption became the Caribbean people’s inheritance. The naming of the West Indies represents larger processes in Western spatial disorientation, with its “original” (the origin of this name, but in no way the origin of the New World) bumbling and accidental nature becoming the basis for a globalized understanding of the archipelago. This mistake, leading

to a view of the colonial world that is always defined in contrast to the West, erased local knowledges and worldviews and established itself as universal fact, an example of what the Argentinian decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo refers to as the “coloniality of knowledge.”[3] Imperial epistemologies hide their geographical and biographical specificities and become the universal/“objective” ways of shaping and understanding geography and space. To grapple with this insufficient imagination, Miller questions the very notion of “place,” exposing its coloniality and its violence.

The making of “place” becomes a violent act when it distorts the communal or ecological cosmologies that preceded it and when it ossifies these distortions into fact. The author counterposes these “places” with the “nameless places”—the “here that was here / before the invention of doors or houses or cities, the landscape / before it was landscaped, just the easy acres of possibility.”[4] Miller’s meditation on the inherent destruction that forms part of official cartographies raises the following questions: If places are produced through violent meaning-making, how does Miller’s poetry inhabit nameless, placeless places? In other words, if orientations are destructive and imposed, does Miller offer a poetics of disorientation? Furthermore, do poetics grant us access to situated epistemologies that come closer to Caribbean dwellers’ experience of place? As Miller draws us into the uncharted bush, he uncovers how disorientation can be a tool of resistance against colonial logics; yet “placeless places” also hide their own forms of violence. His poetics offer Caribbean people ways to read and witness their own landscapes of pain and beauty.

Landscape Poetics

Throughout his oeuvre, Miller writes about the Caribbean landscape, problematizing the very notions of place and space, as well as how they have been socially constructed. Miller’s poetics call our attention to the heteropatriarchal lenses and practices that shape spaces. Through his concern for the intersection of place and trauma, Miller builds upon a long line of Caribbean poets, such as Una Marson, Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, Lorna Goodison, Louise Bennett, Luis Palés Matos, and Aimé Césaire, who have used poetry to leverage painful histories, to explore the anxiety of belonging, and to self-fashion a national identity. The scholar Silvio Torres-Saillant, in his study of Caribbean poetics, explains that a central preoccupation in Caribbean writing is the “common necessity to speak to the present meaning of past events and [to writers’] acute self-awareness as beings in the midst of historical processes.”[5] Torres-Saillant explains that one of the main factors that illustrates the omnipresence of poetic historical exploration is the fact that Caribbean people inherited a history and a world shaped and ideologically constructed by the scribes of Western colonialism. Therefore, Caribbean writers must undertake historiographical repair. Turning away from colonial writings and their distortions of the Caribbean, generations of writers felt an impetus to “write” its landscape—there was a sense that the New World needed to be depicted in local terms. More than a writerly task, these efforts sought to foster a feeling of belonging and an anti-colonial Caribbean identity, through a healing

[3] Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 99.

[4] Miller, “Sometimes I Consider the Nameless Places,” 37.

[5] Silvio Torres Saillant, *Caribbean Poetics: Toward an Aesthetic of West Indian Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 46.

relationship to the land. That is, the history of trauma could be (re)named and processed through a poetics of the land.

In his poetic autobiography, Saint Lucian Nobel Prize laureate Derek Walcott argues that the role of the Caribbean writer left an imprint on generations of Caribbean writers and thinkers: he considered the writer as a figure who could feel the weight of this history while having the power to rebuild and rename their surroundings: “blest with a virginal, unpainted world / with Adam’s task of giving things their names.”[6] This Adamic tradition is also present in the Hispanic Caribbean where, for example, the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier invented the neologism *real maravilloso* to describe a poetics that grasps the inscrutable landscape and contradictory lived experience of the New World. The scholar Lorna Burns cogently addresses this tendency in Caribbean poetry: “Whether in paint or in poetry, it is the artist most closely connected to the ‘aboriginal force’ of the land, closest to the marvellous reality of the New World, who will have the greatest success in Adam’s work of giving expression to a new Caribbean aesthetic.”[7] Many authors who were subjected to a colonial education that insisted on the supremacy of European civilization challenged inherited ideas about poetry as the genre of an idealized English landscape. For instance, Louise Bennett, a Jamaican poet and early proponent of Jamaican Creole, states, “I began to wonder why more of our poets and writers were not taking more of an interest in the kind of language usage and the kind of experiences of living which were all around us, and writing in the medium dialect instead of writing in the same old English way about Autumn and things like that.”[8] Thus, for Caribbean writers, the literary inscription of the land requires navigating a tension between the history of pain and colonialism carried within the soil, as well as the alluring possibility that a world could be created anew.

But what does it mean, for Caribbean writers, to dig into the “aesthetics of the earth”?[9] In the African Diaspora, the landscape is not necessarily a source of grounding and stability. Water is taken up as a central metaphor by many writers because it may be the “landscape” that most accurately expresses disorientation and dispossession: it encapsulates the vital wound and rupture of the Middle Passage. Walcott stated that “the sea is history,” and the unpredictable tides are often nausea-inducing: “For history is not only absence for us, it is vertigo.”[10] More recently, and from across the ocean, the American scholar Christina Sharpe also theorizes the sea—specifically the boat’s wake—to elucidate how the African Diaspora continues to live in the wake of slavery. For Caribbean writers and writers of the African Diaspora at large, the ocean informs an aesthetic of disorientation that carries the history of pain and death.

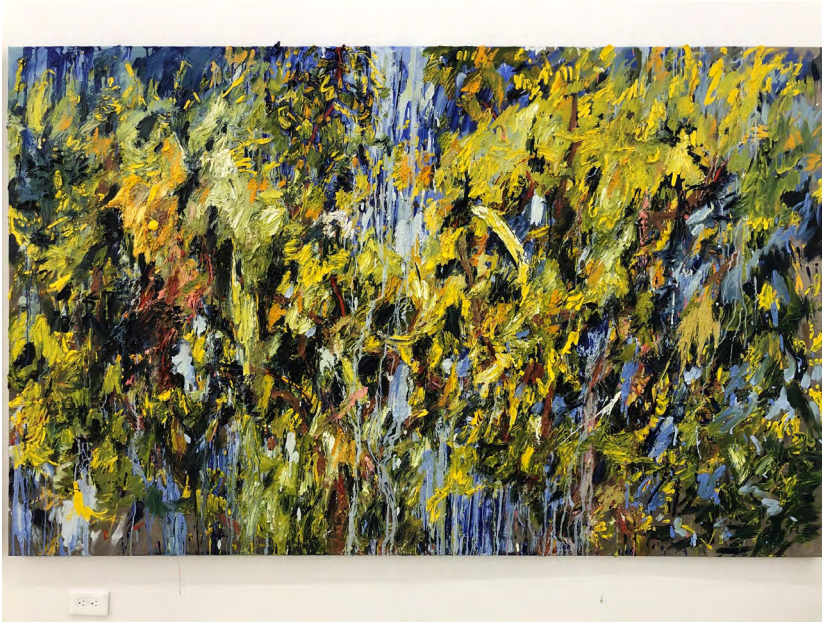
[6] Derek Walcott, *Another Life* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2009), 152.

[7] Lorna Burns, “Prophetic Visions of the Past: *The Arrivants and Another Life*,” in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Literature*, edited by Michael A. Buckner and Alison Donnell (London: Routledge, 2014), 186.

[8] Louise Bennett, “Interview with Dennis Scott,” *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain*, edited by E. A. Markham (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1989), 47.

[9] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997 [1990]), 149.

[10] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 161.



Jun Martínez, *Caer hacia lo alto*, 2020. Oil on linen. 60 x 96 in. Courtesy of the artist. Jun Martínez, a Puerto Rican artist based in Bayamón, has an oeuvre that centers the archipelago's interior landscape, including dense forestation and flowers. In this piece, the dripping blue paint disorients the viewer by evoking water among the shrubs.

Certainly, waterscapes poignantly express the traumas of colonialism and slavery. However, by visiting different landscapes, like the bush, less examined histories of anti-Black violence emerge. Miller, for example, takes us to Jamaica's interior. Following a tidalectic logic,[11] I do not wish to place the sea and the bush in opposing categories but instead show how the bush contains experiences of disorientation that echo the past and intersect with the histories that waterscapes have represented. Within the geographic liminality of the archipelago, this aquatic-land, the bush is its own liminal space, one that contains the potential for magic, regeneration, and the imminence of violence and death. Miller's poetics theorize the bush as an integral location to understand how past wounds inform current-day violence, especially sexual violence, in "postcolonial" Jamaica. The trauma of the Middle Passage, understood as a sexual trauma and as the imposition of white heteropatriarchal gender relations, provides a necessary context for the gender violence depicted in Miller's writing. Yet the bush has a history that distinguishes it from waterscapes: alongside colonial violence bloomed Maroon resistance. Maroon communities challenged colonialism in both physical and ideological ways: they provided, for example, a space for expressions of gender that were not overdetermined by the modern/colonial gender system.[12] *In Nearby Bushes* moves effortlessly between past and present, showing how this "placeless place" continues to house this particular ambivalence of violence and resistance. As readers, we inhabit a bush marked by past colonial violence, current homophobic and femmephobic violence, as well as femme pleasure and spirituality.

The poem "Here Where Blossoms the Night" contemplates contemporary femicide alongside past Maroon women's resistance. The poem contains several references to flowers and plants whose names are apt for wordplay, through which Miller highlights different presences and absences in the forest's interior.

[11] Kamau Brathwaite, who is also inspired by the ocean, takes this historical pain and, through it, theorizes a Caribbean ethos. His term "tidalectics" is based on the fluctuating tides and articulates the nonlinear, non-teleological, and cyclical nature of Caribbean culture.

[12] Yuderky Espinosa and Celenis Rodríguez Moreno, "Hacia la recuperación de una memoria de resistencia afrocaribeña a partir de los relatos de abuelas, madres e hijas de la comunidad Los Mercedes, República Dominicana," Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, Grupo de Trabajo Crisis Civilizatoria, Reconfiguraciones del Racismo, Movimientos Sociales Afrolatinoamericanos, 2020.

Here where blossom the orchids, two hundred
& twenty in variety. Some have adapted to bone
dry places, to being purple amongst the stone.

Here where blossom Jamaican Ladies
of the Night, I mean the flowers –
their petals, the colour of weddings,

their perfume, the scent of parlours.

There is much that blossoms in these bushes
& much that rots, like Jamaican ladies of the night –

I no longer mean the flowers. Here
where grows the Hog Apple, the Hog Money. Here
where wild hogs rut at the roots of things.

...

Here that cannot be held by the English.
But how they tried!
Here is where they found Nanny.

or where Nanny found them,
where you might find her still – if you believe
in kumina, the never-dead of spirits.

Nanny – do you know her story? Her peculiar ability
to catch bullets? & where? Some say
she could even shoot them back

but I think this was all a metaphor
for the magnificent stink of her farts,
that coming across a whiteman

she could lift up her frocktail
& clear the bush of English.
Here where is the inscrutability. The wild

& passionate uproar. Here
where is the horror! The horror!
Here where you might find the war.[13]

[13] Miller, "Here Where Blossoms the Night," *In Nearby Bushes*, 11.

Miller faces the painful past of slavery, but mainly to encounter rebellion. Featured in this poem is Nanny, a famous Jamaican woman Maroon leader, placed alongside the Jamaican Ladies of the Night. Here we see a spectrum of ways of being women and femmes, from dainty ladies to farting warriors. Aside from the flowers, the women and femmes in this poem are no longer alive: Nanny is a "never-dead" spirit and the other women "rot." They were all subject to forms of violence in the bush: Nanny fights the English while the others, as the collection

reveals across many poems, are victims of a variety of forms of gender violence. It is this liminality, of regeneration and death, as well as the stories behind this violence that Miller uncovers—like the hogs who “rut at the roots of things.” This poem and others in the collection call on Caribbean readers to behold our landscape and its sediment’s layers of trauma with new eyes, where we see the suffering, as well as the beauty and resistance of women and femmes.

In this sense, *In Nearby Bushes* treads dangerously close to the imperial land-as-woman metaphor, which involves “the fantasy that savage (in the etymological sense of ‘sylvan,’ from Latin *silva*) landscapes are inhabited by savage (in the figurative sense of ‘uncivilized’) women, inextricably linked to this ‘natural’ habitat and equally in need of Europe’s civilizing mission.”[14] Black women and femmes have long been defined by the colonial imagination alongside and through the tropical landscape. The constructed relationship between Black women and nature gave way to a specific type of dehumanization: female subjects were connected to the bush in that they were defined as savage, conquerable, and sexually available. In this way, they were denied humanity through the negation of white femininity.[15] This discursive history is latent in Miller’s collection. Unlike the conflation of women and the tropical landscape that invisibilizes and naturalizes colonial violence, *In Nearby Bushes* correlates women and femmes and the bush to underscore the ubiquity of femmephobia. That is, Miller displaces the victim-blaming imaginary of the sexually available “savage” by exposing the bush as a place that houses despicable gendered violence in contemporary Jamaica. His poetry links the natural landscape with women and femmes in devastating ways, but also in ways that honor their lives and beauty.

[14] Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 111.

[15] The ways in which the plantation matrix required a process of the ungendering of African enslaved persons is discussed by Hortense Spillers in her canonical essay “Mama’s Baby, Poppa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 6481.



Ebony G. Patterson, *...wata marassa-beyond the bladez...*, 2014. Mixed media on paper, 85 x 84 in. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery.

Understories

The poem titled “after Ebony G. Patterson’s ‘while the dew is still on the roses’” calls directly upon readers to bear witness to (femme)inine boys and their relationship to the bush. This poem refers to an art installation by Patterson, where images of black and brown bodies are among this artist’s distinctive elaborate designs made with patterns, bright colors, cloths, lace, beads, and glitter. Covered in floral and leafy arrangements, the theme of the installation is a night garden that is beautiful and wondrous, but also dangerous. Patterson produces meaning through the *imagined* contrast between Jamaican masculinity and the elaborate feminine designs that evoke the traditionally female practices of lace making and quilting. The installation’s integration of shoes, and particularly high heels, also signals the feminine.[16] However, instead of a contrast, these men bloom like the flowers that surround them. Often one has to look closely at the artwork to see male bodies emerging from the landscape of glittery flora. Miller continues this connection by making the boys’ bodies and femme attire take the place of flowers, decorating the ground of the imprecise “here” of the bush:

Here where are the bodice (spectacularly
jewelled) & the bodies (spectacularly jewelled).
Observe them – each one a catalogue
of fine sewing: black tack, cross-stitch, tentstitch –

made by women with hands as sure as surgeons
Here where are the hairpins; they glitter

like dew on the roses.[17]

[16] Del LaGrace Volcano and Ulrika Dahl, *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2008). They explain that “varieties of femmes are indeed about shoes”: stilettoes announce high femme and combat boots a butch femme (81).

[17] Miller, *In Nearby Bushes*, 15.

The femme paraphernalia that these boys don on their bodies make them part of the bush. Patterson’s installation and Miller’s poem celebrate and *naturalize* femme boys; their femininity—their glitter and jewels—creates harmony with their natural environment. Yet it also points to the painful reality that queer and femme bodies do not merely inhabit the bush, they often form part of the bush. Pertinently, one of the pieces featured in Patterson’s installation and reproduced here is titled *Dead Tree in a Forest*. . . and displays a body lying on the ground, amid dense forest (or the understory, as this vegetation can be referred to) that surrounds and almost overtakes the body. This poem asks us to behold their beauty—it orders us to “observe them— each one a catalogue of fine sewing.” Yet this beauty also signals a horrific intimacy where women and femmes are claimed as intrinsically Jamaican, but where this naturalization also threatens to swallow them whole.



Ebony G. Patterson, *Dead Tree in a Forest*, 2013. Mixed media on paper, 87 x 83 in. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery.

In both the poem and in Patterson’s installation, we see beneath the prettiness, “beneath and between the beauty”[18]—we see the “understory.” Upon closer inspection, one can detect the installation’s funerary aura. For instance, the grave-like mounds titled “...moments we cannot bury...” contain crafted glass objects, such as hands, feet, and shoes. As the curator Tobias Ostrander signals, these objects take on a “ghostly quality” and appear to be “touched by death.”[19] Returning to the poem, the imprecise “here” is identified as a burial ground: “Here that is not holy ground, but just a hole / in the ground—the funeral mound.” The poem about Ebony G. Patterson’s work concludes with the following stanzas:

Here that pulls the tears back into the soft
bodies of boys, & observe them –
their soft & spectacular bodies,

their spectacular bodices, the spectacular corsets,
the spectacular corpses. I want so much to say
this – that our bodies are spectacular

& not the hard truth – that our bodies
are spectacles; our death blossoms like roses
in the dark garden behind the house.[20]

[18] Ebony G. Patterson, . . . *while the dew is still on the roses*. . . , YouTube, [link](#).

[19] Tobias Ostrander, “In the Garden,” in Ostrander, *Ebony Patterson... while the dew is still on the roses...* (New York: Prestel, 2019).

[20] Miller, *In Nearby Bushes*, 16.

The harmony that their bodies and femme adornments share with nature turns to dread when death is what blossoms from them. As the feminist scholar Sara Ahmed indicates, sexual orientation is not just about what objects we are oriented toward, but about how these orientations toward sexual objects affect our relation to the world.[21] The same femme expression that makes these boys so spectacular is what others see as a display that must be violently quelled; it is what forces them out of the public eye and into the “dark garden.”

To confront this “hard truth,” the reader is asked to bear witness, to behold the “spectacular corpses” with care and their “spectacular corsets” in awe. Twice the poem calls readers to “observe them” and once the speaker commands: “you must bear witness.” Unlike a cold medical or journalistic gaze, the poem models a delicate and loving gaze, where we move across the boys’ bodies to see aesthetic details like braids, hairpins, sewing, and softness. Here beholding consists of holding the Other and of being beholden to another.

[22] That is, it is a viewing practice that implicates the observer; through observation, a relationship is formed. While genres of writing tend to divide the viewer and the viewed, Miller calls for a form of writing and reading that undoes this violence. The poem’s observing narrator, who also commands readers to observe, suggests the possibility of a Caribbean community that can lovingly witness its own people. In this way, “after Ebony G. Patterson’s ‘while the dew is still on the roses’” models the intimacy of witnessing another’s humanity in a culture marked by white supremacy and homophobia.

[21] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 68.

[22] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 100.

Caribbean Readers

In Nearby Bushes is explicitly concerned with reading practices in the way it cites and manipulates various Jamaican newspaper articles that report on crimes that took place in the bush. These citations bring to our attention the context and the frequency of the phrase “in nearby bushes” in newspaper clippings. Miller’s collection asks us, as readers, not only to bear witness, but also to inhabit the point of view of those who lost their lives in the bush. This intimacy and beholdenness, which contrasts sharply with the quick and detached way in which newspapers are typically read, reaches new heights in poems that simultaneously interpolate the reader and the dead. In the poems about a twenty-year-old woman from Mount Peace in Hanover Parish who never returned home, Miller skillfully and beautifully depicts her witnessing her own death in a way that gives dignity to the process of decay, of becoming part of the Caribbean earth. The speaker tells the woman (and, presumably, the reader): “You had not imagined death as a thing so wide, so full of acres and sky.”[23] From the dead’s perspective, we see roosters and crows and breadfruit tress, as well as a turning inward, toward the body’s very own processes:

[23] Miller, “II.II,” *In Nearby Bushes*, 51.

A cell now eats itself. The self now eats itself. The body grows sour, like a green fruit. If only you had a tongue to taste the green fruit of yourself. If only you had a nose to smell what you have become, to smell the weighted waft of yourself, proof that you exist in air, that you are becoming the air, that you bear the flies that come towards

the harvest of yourself. How you have become this strange thing—a beacon to flying and crawling insects.

Already the worms are rising. Already parts of your body are returning to the earth, which is to say you are becoming the earth, and the things of the earth. You are the air, and the ground, and the things that rise to meet you.[24]

[24] Miller, “III,” *In Nearby Bushes*, 52.

As the speaker turns from death to decomposition, the verses “decompose” as well. They shift to a more prose-like poetry with a dry tone and succinct sentences. Poetry, like the souring body, transforms and adapts: “But the thing that was your body did not stop. It only began to do new things.”[25] Although death constitutes a loss of life and a loss of matter (a “harvesting” of the self), it is also a rebirth (the body becomes a beacon for insects and returns to the earth). While other poems depict women and femmes as spectacular, flamboyant, and beautiful, “III” depicts the transformation of a body into ubiquitous presence (it is now the air, the ground) in a matter-of-fact tone that does not wish to make death glamorous. This depiction denies the spectacle of Black death and pain that is often so easily consumed by white audiences. In fact, it is altogether uninterested in an outsider’s perspective. For those who lost their lives, death is a biological and spiritual (un)becoming that is grand only in its commonness.

[25] Miller, “III.”

The dead’s poetic self-witnessing, somewhat paradoxically, also creates a sense of community where the reader is beholden to them. That is, these poems not only imaginatively create the possibility for the dead to witness their own fate but also catalyze a process of self-witnessing in the reader, thereby forging a kinship between the readers and the bush-dwellers. Miller’s usage of the second-person pronoun gives way to this dual form of beholding:

This is what happens on the morning after your death:
a rooster flutters up to a wall. You see neither rooster nor wall but are certain of the clumsiness of feathers, the fact of rough concrete, the wall unpainted, unfinished, like the island from whose earth it seems to rise.

...

How unspectacular, this business of dying, as if anybody could do it.[26]

[26] Miller, “II.I,” *In Nearby Bushes*, 50.

Although “you” clearly refers to a specific person—the young woman from Mount Peace—“you” also calls on the reader. The last lines of “I.I” complete this interpolation when we are reminded that death is so remarkably unspectacular because it is universally experienced. Again, this poem strips Black death from its spectacularity, which is a more pertinent message to the foreign readers of articles about Jamaica’s violence. However, the interpolation of the second person is relevant in different ways to the Caribbean reader of *The Gleaner*, the *Jamaica Star*, and other local newspapers, which are cited throughout the poetry collection. Miller’s writing asks Caribbean readers to

behold and to identify with the dead. The comfortable distance that is typically part of the role of reader collapses when the poems create a space for Jamaicans to see themselves in the women, femmes, gay boys, and gunmen: “Look – it have a time in everybody’s life when don’t care how / close home is, it is so far from Peace.”[27] In these poems, Jamaicans cease to see the bush as a space reserved for the queer Other, the indecent woman, the violent rudebwoy—a space where they could never end up—and instead see themselves, and every Jamaican, as entangled with the bush. *In Nearby Bushes*’ poetic reflexivity, where readers witness themselves through the dead’s perspective, is precisely about wrestling with this entanglement: Jamaicans must wrestle with the bush’s violence because it is violence unto themselves.

[27] Miller, “I.I,” *In Nearby Bushes*, 48.

Miller’s oeuvre evinces a continuing concern with what place-names hide or reveal, with the untold stories of places, and with nonhegemonic mappings. In an interview about one of his earlier poetry collections, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, Miller states: “I say again that my books are interested in the bits that are not shown on maps or the stories that haven’t been told, and I think my books try to stand in those silences, those erasures. Hopefully my books begin to be that map of Jamaica.”[28] In *Nearby Bushes* continues this cartographic labor, this time leaving the Jamaican cityscape and extending into less anthropocentric “territory”;

[28] Kei Miller, interviewed by Eleanor Wachtel, *Brick: A Literary Journal* 101 (2018).

Here that is the unplotted plot, the intriguing
twist of vines, the messy dialogue—just listen
how the leaves *uh & ah & er* nonstop.[29]

[29] Miller, “The Understory,” *In Nearby Bushes*, 8.

This poem is titled “The Understory,” which is a term that describes the plant life that grows close to the ground, and that Miller uses to play on the idea of the stories that do not see the light of day. These unplotted plots represent the poetry collection itself and Miller’s act of writing the bush, of leaving the straight and well-traversed paths and exploring the aesthetics of the earth. The poem “The Understory” concludes by challenging readers’ knowledge about Jamaican plots: “Are there stories you have heard about Jamaica? Well here are the stories underneath.”[30] Miller’s collection invites readers to behold with care the women and femmes who found themselves in its disorienting interior. Therefore, he moves beyond the concern in scholarship about the role of Caribbean writers and how they should represent the region by considering, instead, the perspective of the Caribbean reader: How do Caribbean people read and hold space for the violence and death that take place in their own bush? What reading practices can they develop to behold the dead with care and respect? If writing the Caribbean landscape has traditionally been a tool to celebrate and forge an ontology distinct from colonial influences, Miller underscores the role of reading practices in how we witness our own geographies. With reading practices that (be)hold the Other, Caribbean people can embrace the stories we often prefer to keep in the bush’s shadows, expanding cartographies of belonging.

[30] Miller, “The Understory.”