Published in: Bénédicte Ledent, Evelyn O'Callaghan, and Daria Tunca (eds.), *Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature: On the Edge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 203-212. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-98180-2_11
Status : Postprint (Author's version)

"(Re)Locating Madness and Prophesy: An Interview with Kei Miller"

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Kei Miller is a Jamaican novelist, poet, short story writer, essayist, and blogger. He has published three novels: *The Same Earth* (2008), *The Last Warner Woman* (2010), and *Augustown* (2016); four collections of poems: *Kingdom of Empty Bellies* (2006), *There Is an Anger That Moves* (2007), *A Light Song of Light* (2010), and *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (2014), for which he won the Forward Prize for poetry; a collection of essays, *Writing Down the Vision: Essays and Prophecies* (2013), for which he won the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature; and a collection of short stories, *Fear of Stones and Other Stories* (2006). He also has his own blog site, *Under the Saltire Flag.*

The interview took place at the University of Liège, Belgium, as part of a symposium entitled "Altered States: Configuring Madness in Caribbean Literature," on 23 April 2015.

Rebecca Romdhani: Kei, you have represented and discussed the subject of "madness" in the Caribbean. For example, in your essay "The Texture of Fiction," you tell us about how the Jamaican government cleaned the streets of mad people before the Queen of England's visit to Jamaica. This made me question how they would have identified a mad person—what it was they were looking for to decide that a person was mad. What do you think is the difference between madness in Britain and madness in Jamaica?

Kei Miller: Probably in Jamaica, "madness" is just a way to talk about the homeless, but those who very often are homeless tend to be people who are experiencing or seem to be experiencing various inner psychoses or neuroses. I am interested in how a society constructs mental illness. The homeless person who is filthy and babbles on the street corner and who asks for money is constructed as a mad person: *the* mad woman (a recurrent figure who goes by that name in so much of Caribbean literature), the mad woman on the street corner and the mad man on the side of the road. It is these people, these homeless people, who were removed and loaded in a truck and removed because they were unsightly.

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RR: Do you think that people would be seen as mad if they were well dressed and obviously not homeless?

KM: Probably not. I think it is homelessness that leads them to be labelled "mad"—I don't think that is the only thing; yet it is a huge part of the definition. I don't know if people are conscious about this. I am not interested in a more nuanced reading; I am interested in how society constructs someone who they call the mad person. If someone is untrained by the academy, if people say "the mad woman," what do they mean by that? Homeless vagrants or people on the street exhibiting some obvious manifestation of a mental illness, of psychic fragmentation. People who are babbling to themselves, who are not coherent. I am talking about those people who proliferate on the streets of Port of Spain, Kingston, and several Caribbean city centres.

RR: I am fascinated by some of the figures like this that you chose to write about in your work, such as the Warner Woman in *The Last Warner Woman* and the Rastaman in *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion.* Could you explain why you use them and what they mean to you?

KM: I am interested in the depth that such characters have always hidden—what has been unplugged in them. Ralph Ellison talks about choosing characters that have never been portrayed as having depth before: those who can't reflect on their own situations with intelligence and complexity. With a character like the Rastaman, that is what I am doing: getting him outside of the box that we have put him in. He has academic language and he has theory at his disposal, which is not how he is usually imagined. So I like this idea of giving these characters depth. The Warner Woman begins to interrogate her story. She doesn't have the sophistication that the Rastaman has, but still, there is a certain savvy with which she is disrupting the story and telling certain truths. That is a conversation between selves because the person who she is confronting is the writer: it is me. So on another level, I am using me to confront me.

RR: What research did you do into psychiatric hospitals in Britain for *The Last Warner Woman*? I am asking because I trained as a psychiatric nurse and, when I read your novel, I found it to be a very realistic portrayal of a psychiatric institution in Britain, which I don't often see in literature or film, so I wondered how you were able to create this in such a way that the staff and patients seem real for people who have worked in these institutions.

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KM: That is a really lovely thing to say, but that probably happened by accident. I did research, but I can't remember that research right now. I think I read through a few first-hand accounts of psychiatric spaces and also read through a lot of the theory around it. I was interested in why these people were labelled as crazy, and I was looking at the end of the era of the asylum because there was that move to close those institutions, so I read a lot. You know, the thing they say about literature is to read and then forget it; I think I take that to heart. I mean, you read everything you can, and at the moment of writing, you forget because it has to come naturally—you have to give yourself to the moment of telling a story. How I approach something as an academic is very different to the way that I approach it as a novelist or a poet. In the moment of constructing a story, you have to feel like it is all coming from you, but where it is coming from must be an informed space. In the moment of writing, I can't give myself over to questioning whether something is right or whether it is how it was. You read and you read and you take it all in. You trust that at the moment of writing, it will come from an informed place and it will seem realistic, but you don't, in the moment of writing, fact check and go back to make sure the details are right because that is a type of writing that disturbs the creative process.

RR: When you came to choose your English setting for the novel, how did you pick the Birmingham area?

KM: I know the moment when I decided that it wouldn't be in London and it would be in Birmingham. Was it that I read about some mental institution there or was it looking at the migration that happened there? Or could it have just been walking in that town square in Birmingham that something happened, some combination of facts that just seemed to place it more easily in Birmingham? Or was it also looking at where people were sectioned off from, where the homes were that they went to? When I began writing the novel, I imagined it happening in London, but in the middle of writing it, I realized that it couldn't have happened there. I can't remember what that reason was, but there was something that meant it could not have happened in London, so I was in search of a city, and, somehow, at the time, I visited Birmingham and walked in the city centre and I realized that this is where it happened. It just occurred to me at that moment.

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RR: Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid makes a connection between gardening and colonialism in her work. Did you consciously link the gardener, Bruce—who beautifies the hospital gardens, but who also abuses the patients, including Adamine, the Warner Woman—with colonialism?

KM: If you are asking whether it was conscious, then no, definitely not. I was not trying to layer the metaphors in any heavy-handed way. One of my friends who writes often talks about that moment when they are writing the villain—that moment when you can no longer write the villain because you don't know what their redeeming quality is. I think for me, there is an important moment when you know who the villain is and the wrong that they did. But you also need to know what beauty there is in them: how do villains create beauty, what motivates them, and what is at the heart of that? And I think until you know that, you don't know who they are. If you are just writing the villain as a source of evil, as an agent of evil and downfall, then it is just the cheapest thing to do in literature. I don't think that you have to redeem them—the gardener is not redeemed at all—but there is something of beauty in him; he must be an agent of beauty as well. The garden became interesting in that way, but not in the conscious way that Jamaica Kincaid is doing.

There are so many obvious metaphors in the novel about the spoiling of Eden, Edenic ruin, and the snake in the garden. These are the metaphors that the Warner Woman is always drawing on. From the very beginning, the writer man becomes the snake and Adamine becomes the terror of teeth and mangoes that is running after him. The images of snakes and deception keep on running through the novel, and in that way, the gardener becomes not only he who tends but also he who slithers and is deceptive. We understand his own fragmentation, his own kind of psychosis, but I don't think we have to forgive him. Even though we understand how he is constructed.

RR: It is interesting that you talk about different sides to people. Do you view Milton, the Warner Woman's Jamaican husband in England, sympathetically?

KM: Not terribly, I think he is worse than the gardener. What do you think?

RR: I didn't find him sympathetic at all, so I wondered whether you did.

KM: No, not at all. He seemed like a pretty awful character as well, and one that I didn't redeem in any way. What were his good points? I guess that by the time we meet him, he is kind of broken; always what happens with age is that there is a kind of softening.

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The character that I think is more complex is the Revivalist preacher. He is both abusive and in love with Adamine. That is the moment when the narrative becomes unreliable: does he beat her, does she want it, does he force her to leave, is it her choice? That seems a much more complex dynamic. That is a relationship that seems far more real because of the complex emotions of hate and love between them. The husband figure seems pretty worthless to me.

RR: The novel suggests that Lucas, the Revivalist preacher, may be Haitian because of his accent and the rumours about him, but the reader is left not knowing whether he is or not. Is there a reason that you leave this open?
KM: I can't even remember. This is where the book becomes a composite of little bits of research. I am sure that there was a Revivalist preacher at that time in Jamaica who probably was Haitian. There was a mystique about Haiti and no one knew for sure whether he was Haitian or not. I think it was a little bit of knowledge in the back of my head and I thought, oh, let me embody that. I think in the back of my mind he was Haitian.

RR: You have talked about the complex relationship between Adamine and Lucas. There is also a complex relationship between Adamine and the writer man who is writing her story, which raises ethical questions about storytelling. There is an upsetting scene when he locks his office door and she cannot get in to read what he has written about her. We do not find out why he does this. Why does he lock the door? Does he intentionally shut her out?
KM: He does. Strangely, it didn't upset me that he did that. I think it is in the moment when he begins to write something that he simply does not want her to find. Theirs is a strange relationship because she is allowing him in and she is also prying, but he is also prying, so who is the real person prying? If she has given him permission, does he have to leave his office open for her to read what he is writing? I am actually much more sympathetic to him. I can understand in that moment of writing that sometimes you write something and you haven't worked things out yet, so it is too vulnerable a time to give it to the person who is the muse. You don't need their contestation in that moment of creating. That would do something else to the fiction of it all, and I have to work it out by myself. I can completely understand the writer's intent to lock the subject out of that process of creating because you are fictionalizing and you don't need the facts to disturb you. Of course, I am completely empathetic with Adamine, who has this massive breakdown because of it, but they are both creating and they are both prying and they are both locking each other out in different ways that leads to this moment. There is

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something that he reveals in that scene that could have connected the dots too early for her: she could have realized that he was her son. He doesn't want that just yet.

RR: After this scene, Adamine climbs over the railings and looks out at the city lights. I did not believe that she was contemplating suicide, which is what the writer man brings up at this time, but I did wonder why she is there. Could you explain this?

KM: Because she wants a different kind of audience. The writer man can imagine another kind of audience: the audience who sits down to read a book. I didn't want her just talking to herself. I wanted her to speak out to a great expanse in the same way that writers do. If you sit down to type up something, you are speaking to a great expanse of nothingness and you have to imagine that somehow they are hearing your words. And it is in that way that Adamine becomes just as much of a creator as he is; she too is on a ledge, looking out to the city, speaking out to a great expanse. She is inscribing her words on another device: his device is paper and hers is the wind, and she is trusting that someone will hear it. Which is what writing is. I was trying to put them in two very similar moments of creation—two very similar moments of inscribing words on very different kinds of material. His material is much more substantial and has a physical substance, whereas her material, the wind, doesn't have a material substance, but they are both involved in the same process.

RR: In the novel we find out that the writer man is the new type of "Warner Woman" and that warnings can be about a catastrophe but also about redemption, peace, and love. Do you think that Caribbean literature, in general, or specific Caribbean texts contain these kinds of "warning" messages?

KM: I am always suspicious about making those big statements about "Caribbean literature." There are different ways to view prophecy. I think the novel sets out that prophecy can be about the future, which is not the biblical idea of prophecy. When you look at the prophets from the Old Testament, such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, to prophesy was to speak with the voice of God: when they proclaimed "Thus sayeth the Lord of Israel...", it didn't have anything to do with the future—it was just prophesying. The Warner Woman tries to speak with the voice of God. And, in another way, she tries to speak with a voice outside of herself and with one that can embrace an entire community, which, I think, is an important way of rethinking what prophecy is. If we speak outside of ourselves, we speak from a place greater than ourselves, and we speak to community. In this way, there are several things that we can say are prophetic, and it just means

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that prophesying is a large embracing thing. It is why using the Rastafari idiom "peace and love," which comes up in *The Cartographer* as well, can be the largest and most amazing prophecy. If that is the voice that is outside of yourself and if that is the voice that is needed to speak to a community, why is that not prophetic? It is the Warner Woman who is claiming a space, and sometimes the warnings—the voice of God—are not about ruin and damnation; rather they are sometimes what we need— what a community needs to hear. Of course, for the Warner Woman, her home is the Balm Yard; it is a place of healing. Therefore, it seemed an important way to reconsider what prophecy is and what warning is: to think of warning not as danger but as comfort. That is what I was trying to reverse.

RR: In the novel the writer man tells us that the highest number of schizophrenic patients in British asylums were of Caribbean origin and that he had thought that this was because the British were unable to appreciate Caribbean culture and the expression of Caribbean religious faith. In addition, he learns from some Jamaicans that those who go to Britain are, by definition of their going there, the crazy ones. Also, in your essay "Imagining Nations (2008)" (2013), you talk about the fact that Jamaicans in Brixton can buy many of the same foods that they can in Jamaica and that they can buy them out of season. You then link this to Erna Brodber's character in *Myal* who has a breakdown when she sees the black face production of "Caribbean Nights and Days" in America. Your essay turns on its head the idea of what could normally be seen as a comfort to immigrants in a new country. I found it interesting that places like Brixton and Peckham do have many different shops and many different communities living there, yet they also have an alarming rate of mental illness, so your essay made me rethink the way that I see Brixton and Peckham. Could you say something more about this?

KM: Diaspora, whether consciously or unconsciously, is a reconstitution of a home space and that reconstitution is never exact—reconstitution puts things out of whack. Things don't make sense in this new reconstruction unlike they did in the old place. In diaspora you have different parts of a puzzle and different parts of different puzzles, and you try to put them together to make a whole, and they just will not fit in the way that they did in another place. Sometimes you try to force them and that is what diaspora always is. There is always a madness to diaspora; I mean a desperation to this nostalgia that is desperately trying to re-create something which it inherently cannot because it is negotiating with another home space.

Having this abundance of food is a weird thing. This is the "wonder" of capitalism: there is a market for all of this, there are all of these immigrants, and all of them want to buy, but they

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are buying things out of season. This is not the natural timeline of how they would get these products back home. On the one hand, they are being nostalgic, but, on the other, they are being completely corrupted by the market—by the capitalism of it all. They are being subjects, players, and agents within this very system that is killing them. Again, just what kind of madness is that? I don't think any one of us has the time—I certainly don't think I have the mind complex enough—to analyse the several different layers of doing and undoing that is happening in that, but it is something that you observe and you want to highlight. That for me is what places like Brixton and Peckham represent: immigrants desperately trying to reconstitute home in ways that are always impossible and always incomplete, and that incompletion and that impossibility must reflect psychologically as well. There is an incompletion and there is a desperation that are mirroring what is happening in their own minds when they attempt to cook all these things that remind them of home, which is also a kind of OCD or weird drug. You are trying to remember home, but it isn't home. Buying mangoes and ackees in Brixton might seem wonderful and romantic, but it is not buying ackees in Jamaica; it is not the same thing. It is desperation; it is reflecting small mental breakdowns—small episodes of psychosis.

RR: What do you think gentrification of these areas does to this experience? This Saturday [25 April 2015], there is a march in Brixton to protest against this gentrification. People are worried that Brixton is going to turn into a museum. What do you think about this? Does it add more madness to the situation?

KK: I think it does. It is one of those complexities that I don't know if I know how to unpick. There is a larger idea that I want to think through, which I am working on for another essay. If you come out of the underground train station in Moscow, there is a thing that all people from Moscow do: there are these wonderful statues of dogs outside the station and, just for good luck, every morning they rub the snout of the dog. It would be bizarre if you just went there one morning and sat there because you would see thousands of people pouring out of trains and all of them, naturally, reach up their hands and rub the snout of the dog. It is for good luck. I don't know if people actually believe it. It is just that they have been programmed into doing it. They rub the snout of the dog, and it means that it will be a good day. Until you see that, you will never understand the frieze in St Pancras Station in London. There is a statue of a man kissing a girl and underneath it is a frieze. It is so old now that everything is rusted out except for one thing that is very shiny because people constantly touch it, and it is the snout of a dog. Until you go to Russia, you will never understand that this shiny thing in the frieze represents diaspora. It

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represents a Russian population physically reaching out and, through touching it, physically transforming it and making it into home. How does nostalgia make us physically touch a place and physically change it?

Nostalgia is never innocent. It is never something that happens just in our minds; it enacts itself on a landscape and changes it, which is what colonialism is. There is a reason why in every city in the colonial world there is a King Street, a Princess Street, a Victoria Circle, and so on, so there is a way in which this is always a madness in and of itself. We live in a world that is mad, and we get used to it. The idea of things being authentic and pure, what is that? Kingston is already the act of the white British person missing home, reaching out, and touching the landscape, and creating King Street and Princess Street—changing it and making it something else. The whole construction of the city is an act of trying to remember England. And that memory is always insufficient—it never goes far enough. Places like Kingston, Lagos, or New Delhi are always London insufficiently imagined. You have tried to imagine it, but you couldn't imagine it enough because whatever remains of the indigenous landscape resists this imposition. But if Kingston is London insufficiently imagined, is Brixton Kingston insufficiently imagined? Is Brixton Kingston returned to itself? Or is Brixton rather London returned to itself through a process of refraction because Kingston was already trying to be London? And because Brixton is now trying to be Kingston, is London coming back to itself in a way that creates another level of madness? I don't know how to unpick these things, but places are always trying to remember other places.

In one way, I would love to be part of this protest against gentrification in Brixton, but in another way, it is trying to reach for what is pure in what was never pure. It is trying to reimagine Brixton as this place for the immigrant, but Brixton a long time ago was a place of wealth before it was transformed by the immigrants. The influx of immigrants into Brixton changed it, but the version of Kingston that they brought with them was already trying to imagine London. Part of me would love to keep this pure idea of Brixton as this un-gentrified place for these West Indian immigrants, but that already is false. I don't know how to be ethically involved and hold on to a romantic idea that seems at its base to be ultimately false.

I go to Brixton and there is the wonderful market that has everything in it: there is yam, green bananas, ackee, and bammy, and that is a big part of who I am. And now there are these little French cafes and wine bars, but that is part of who I am in Jamaica as well. And suddenly who I am in Jamaica is now reconciled in Brixton. It is not just a single idea of Jamaica as a market town of simple people where you can get local produce, because there is now

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middle-class Jamaica as well, which, for me, has never been represented in England because England does not know how to sufficiently imagine Jamaica and the complexity of the Jamaican class situation. So for me, gentrifying a place like Brixton is simply giving me the spread of what Jamaica has always been in my experience. I don't know, it is way too complex for me to come up with an easy position on what is an evolving cultural phenomenon.

RR: Thank you, Kei, for being so generous with your time and thoughts.