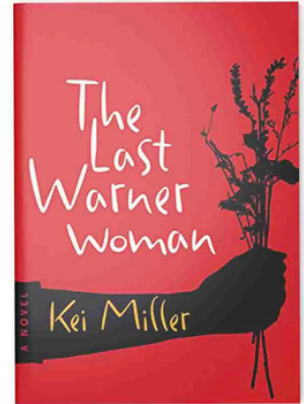
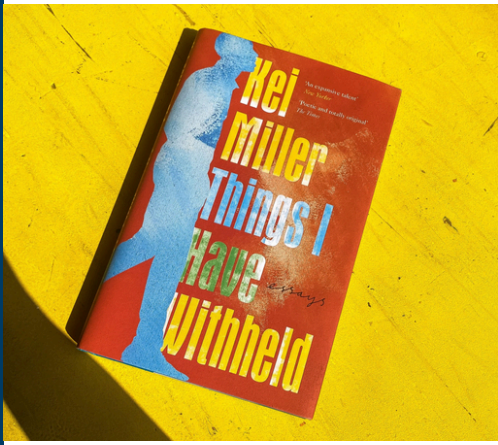


“Understories: A Conversation with Kei Miller”

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The Caribbean Studies Program of the College of Arts and Sciences, in conjunction with the First-Year Writing Program of the Department of English, received funding from the College of Arts and Sciences for a globalization project titled “Understories: A Conversation with Kei Miller.” Dr. Kei Miller—an award-winning Jamaican poet, novelist, and essayist—is author of such works as *The Last Warner Woman*, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, and *Things I Have Withheld*. Dr. Miller, who is also a professor of English at The University of Miami and who teaches creative writing, visited Howard University for two days in early November and undertook several immersive activities with students and faculty, activities designed to bring the intellectual cultural production of the Caribbean to life for a Howard audience.

Dr. Miller’s visit began with a public reading that was held on Thursday, November 2nd. Attended by between eighty and one hundred students, the audience filled the auditorium in the School of Social Work. Opening remarks were provided by Dr. Patrick Goodin, the Director of the Caribbean Studies Program and moderator of the event, who offered insightful commentary on Miller’s work to an eagerly awaiting audience. This was followed by a welcome from Dr. Carole Boyce Davies, the Chair of the Department of English, and then by an introduction of the speaker by Dr. Corey Lamont, a member of the Department of English and of the Caribbean Studies Program. Dr. Kei Miller then took the stage, reading from both his recently published book of poetry and his work in process. But it was far more than a simple reading. The audience was not only treated to the cadences and sound of Caribbean literature; Dr. Miller contextualized each of the pieces before he read, situating the audience in the intellectual and cultural milieu that prompted the writing. After the reading, the floor was open to questions, and Dr. Miller responded thoughtfully to queries about his creative practice. Dr. Miller’s revelation that he draws from the Caribbean landscape and indigeneity as source material was particularly illuminating. Both students and faculty had their interests similarly piqued when he responded to a question on the politics of representation in his discourse and explained his methods for disaggregating aesthetic techniques for each genre that he writes.

The vote of thanks was subsequently given by Dr. Hannah Regis, a member of the Department of English and of the Caribbean Studies Program. Dr. Miller stayed to entertain a long line of students wanting autographs before being taken to dinner with a small number of faculty and students. This interaction highlighted the connection forged between the students and a literary luminary, underscoring the transformative nature of the experience.

Dr. Kei Miller's visit continued with a second day of activities. On the morning of November 3rd, also in the auditorium of the School of Social Work, Dr. Miller met with interested students, including those who were reading his book in first-year writing classes, as *Things I Have Withheld* had been chosen as the common text of the First-Year Writing Program. Guided by the adept moderation of Dr. Goodin, the discussion unfolded as students delved into inquiries about Dr. Miller's writing practice in general and the nuanced topics in *Things I Have Withheld* in particular. Dr. Miller, in turn, opened with an overview of the major themes of the collection and their inspiration. The ensuing dialogue was characterized by the students' highly informed questions, which spanned an array of themes and issues. These encompassed the impact of coming-of-age as a writer under the influence of Caribbean women writers, the recognition of similarities and differences across the Black diaspora, when it is not wise to speak/withhold one's truth, as he put it, and many more topics. The students were not reticent and kept Dr. Miller engaged without interruption. The discussion ended only because another group had reserved the auditorium for the following hour.

Following a brief intermission during which the group relocated to Locke Hall 100, Dr. Kei Miller offered a masterclass in creative writing to a small group of students—a dozen undergraduate students and two graduate students. The masterclass cut across genres, so students interested in poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction were able to join. The masterclass included dynamic exercises, examples drawn from other writers, and the sharing of work produced by students of the class. It provided a space for students to interrogate the intricacies of storytelling, poetic expression, and the art of crafting compelling narratives. It lasted over two hours and ended only because a group of faculty and students were attending lunch with Dr. Miller at Sankofa as the concluding event of the day. The opportunity for students and faculty to engage Dr. Miller in a mealtime discussion bridged the gap between the academic and personal dimensions, and the students conveyed their appreciation for this intellectually stimulating experience. Students in the masterclass were enriched by Professor Miller's presentation of ideas and creative practice.

Testimonials on Professor Kei Miller's Masterclass:

"Kei Miller's masterclass was a truly enlightening experience. We read different works together, by numerous writers. We also got the chance to do some unique writing exercises and practice our own writing. We discussed what we read and wrote, and I truly learned a lot from it. I am very grateful for the experience, and felt much more inspired after it." --Tara Grey

"The workshop with Kei Miller was inspiring and engaging. Kei left us with the understanding that good writing exposes the world as being inadequately defined, which is something I will always remember and be inspired by. Through the exercises and discussion, I was inspired to look at simple objects like wires and shirts as much more complex subjects with stories to tell. I enjoyed hearing Kei speak and tell stories that related to our own stories, and I felt connected to everyone in the room. Overall, this workshop is something I will take with me for a very long time because of the new perspective that Kei Miller shared with us." --Courtney Bartlette

"When we sat down to begin the Kei Miller Masterclass, Miller began by giving us a writing activity that he was once taught in school. It was about challenging definitions and the way we think about things. He said, "Good writing will always reveal the world as insufficiently defined." Leaving the masterclass, I would also add that good teaching will do the same. In the short two hours we spent under his instruction, Miller offered me new ways to think about writing that I had never been taught before. And I left feeling changed, inspired, and honored to have learned from him." --Juan Benn, Jr.

"I signed up for the Kei Miller masterclass to broaden my skills because I felt I had gotten into a bit of a rut lately. I received so much more than I had bargained for. Everything that I learned felt so obvious yet enlightening at the same time. I truly could feel the difference in my writing just from changing my perspective. I am excited to try out these new techniques." --Zoe Pierson

"The Kei Miller class was really wonderful! I had read Augustown for a class last semester and loved Kei Miller's work since. Getting to meet him in person was a great experience, and getting to hear his insight on the writing process, as well as read some works he found insightful really helped me as a writer. It was wonderful to be given inspiration for writing and guidance from someone who has done the work before me. I left the class feeling educated and inspired to write more!" --Meron Campbell

Testimonials on Professor Kei Miller's Masterclass Continued:

“The Kei Miller masterclass was a really inspiring experience. Not only did Miller have a lot of good writing advice to share, but he also has a great personality and made the class fun. I especially appreciated the activity that we did in the beginning, because it was very simple but it opened my eyes to how creative I could be with my descriptions. I also liked that Miller brought examples outside of his own writing to show us what he was talking about; a great writer is also a reader. I definitely left the class rethinking the way I write prose, and I'm already implementing the things I learned in my writing. I hope Howard invites more authors to do masterclasses.” --Nedelka Yearwood

“The opportunity to take a masterclass with Kei Miller was truly unmatched, but Dr. Miller exceeded my expectations. Dr. Miller was kind and knowledgeable of the art of creative writing. We started the class by finding creative ways to define words with a group activity. He then provided three activities with examples of chosen poetry to model after. The first activity involved describing the story of our name, the second defining an inanimate object, and the third defining a notion, for example, ‘sprawl.’ Miller, throughout the class, was vulnerable and down to earth, giving us advice and encouragement to continue writing. I left the masterclass with a renewed motivation to write despite being plagued with the doomed ‘writers block.’” --Nyla Jones

