

Listen, the Landscape: The Nature Narratives in Jacob Ross' Short Story Collection *Tell No-One About This*

Michelle Ramos-Rodriguez

University of Puerto Rico – English Department, College of Humanities

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“Short stories are like a shot of vodka or gin – concentrated and full of impact”, explains Britain-based Grenadian author Jacob Ross in an interview with Sofia Aatkar, the perfect description for his forty-two years of short stories encompassed in *Tell No-One About This* (Peepal Tree Press, 2017). The book is divided into four sections: *Dark*, *Dust*, *Ocean*, and *Flight*, each subtitle representing an aspect of the setting or characters on which his writing centers. To exemplify this, in *Dark*, the story “A Game of Marbles” describes a boy using his sling-shot and marbles during the night to provide for his family. *Dust* presents “And There Were no Fireflies”, the story of a young girl experiencing the changes of her body while admiring a different type of beauty she begins to recognize through her aunt’s figure, for

what remained of the dying day settled on the woman’s skin like dust. (Ross 2017, 172)

As a transition from *Dust* to *Oceans*, “A Way to Catch the Dust” tells the story of an elderly man who describes the sea as a taker and giver of life to his young apprentice whom he is teaching how to predict the weather by comprehending the language of nature. Lastly,



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in *Flight*, “A Better Man” portrays a migrant woman demonstrating her strength after finding a remnant of her past in the strange and unknown London. Each section highlights human interaction in the form of love, compassion, violence, conflict, and heartbreak. This is clear in the presence of themes such as mother/child relationships, gender roles, education, grief, racism, politics, tourism and class struggle which play important parts in his framing of the Caribbean, particularly his home island Grenada.

Furthermore, Ross represents Caribbean people still struggling with the remnants of colonization. Their exploitation is closely tied to the natural landscape, for it, too, suffered from the colonizer’s quest for power. Colonialism stripped the land of its natural resources through deforestation and the plantation system in order to satisfy the needs of those at the other side of the world. In Ross’ short stories, nature is a character that observes and interacts with the human environment because he recognizes the importance of all the life found in the Caribbean landscape.

In one of the most compelling stories in the collection, “De Laughin Tree”, a grandmother fights to retain her land instead of selling and letting it be developed into a tourism area to resemble the reality of many Caribbean islands. The biggest appeal of the land is its position – a clear view of where the sun and the sea meet that opens the eyes of our child narrator into understanding:

Like it had a voice inside o me dat was sleeping, an is only dat sight dat wake it up. It tell me dat nutting can’t belong to nobody. (Ross, 2017, 118)

The grandmother understands this principle and plants the indomitable, ‘unrootable’ tree – the laughin tree – as a defence. While the laughin tree grows in this fertile land, the rest of the community is trapped in the tourism economy and displaced to a land that offers nothing but sickness. As the story progresses and the tree’s presence is defended, the narrator’s statement feels truer: nature is alive and deserves to co-exist in our landscapes without having to be threatened by capitalist economies that rely on distortion and bounded beauties. The symbiotic relationship in this story between human and nature is what can ensure the survival of the Caribbean ecosystem.

Likewise, in “Roses for Mister Thorne”, another elderly woman, Miss Anni, grows roses at the request of the political figure Missa Thorne. As she finds herself uncertain about the future, she dedicates her days to nurture her flowers regardless of the physical damage to her body, paradoxically through the object reflected in his name:

How in growing this gift for him, there was also cruelty: the destruction of the stunned and malformed, the burning and uproot-

ing. She might make him aware that she paid for her cruelty with blood. Becuz this rosebush wore a fortress of thorns that did not spare her hands. (Ross 2017, 139)

She considers the limits of growing and cutting flowers that give aroma and beauty before being replaced when they wither. Miss Anni explains that the roots are the essential part; they are “the part that grow” (Ross 2017, 144). The roses become a metaphor for the future of Grenada and the Caribbean. While there are claims of progressive political strategies to guarantee a fruitful future, their superficial and attractive ideals do not enfranchise the entire community. The roots represent the people, and all the pain is worth it, if it means that the roots are planted in fertile ground; it is the only way they will truly thrive.

Differently, the sea sets the atmosphere in “Listen, the Sea”. Amos, the main character, acknowledges how the people on the island abide by its rules:

You listen to the sea like how a person’ voice and unnerstand their mood. You watch the water move and know what that mean. (Ross 2017, 270)

He finds himself intrigued by a white U.S. tourist, Nancy, who challenges it each time she jumps into the waters without hesitation, yet he understands that her success will not last:

Whatever skill or trick she uses to defy the tide will not save her. Those killing waters will swallow her and spit her out in some dirty shore in South America. (Ross 2017, 252)

As he recognizes her recklessness, Amos ignores how he too puts his life at the mercy of the sea. His mother’s house rests on the edge of a cliff since the waters have slowly taken chunks of the hill, and from the sea-facing wall he can see the stones below. When he wakes up from the terror of loneliness,

the frenzy of the waters below threaten to rise up and suck him down. (Ross 2017, 259)

The possibility of falling or being pulled into the sea is not enough to move him; he remains at the edge carelessly. In this story, Amos and Nancy are a reflection of each other. They each suffer from unhealed traumas and are looking for ways to cope in the Grenadian landscape. They are actively and passively seeking the sea in hopes of having the waters choose when to set them free.

The presence of nature in some of Ross’ stories recognizes the inescapable connection Caribbean people have to their landscape. His

nature becomes a place of reflection, a place of personal and collective battles and revolutions, a generative place to grow a new and better future for Caribbean people. In "Bird", a little girl finds a Dream-flyer or Soul-carrier, the bird her recently lost friend had described as the animal version of the wind. She reflects

if people found this bird with her, they would kill it becuz on Kara Isle, anything they did not like or understand they destroyed... in all the sea-stories she'd ever heard them tell, at the end of every one, something always died. (Ross 2017, 348)

This child understands the assault nature continues to endure in contemporary times, a residue of colonization, and decides to ensure this bird's safe flight. Ross' storytelling leaves his characters and readers questioning what they must do in their quest for liberation, without selling, undermining or killing the natural presence that surrounds them.