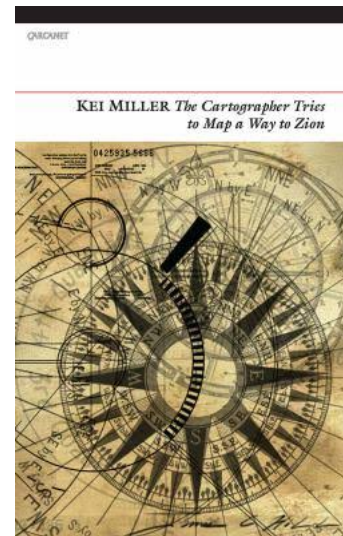


**Kei Miller**

*The Cartographer Tries to Map  
a Way to Zion*

(Carcenet 2014)

*Phil Cohen*



The exactitudes of cartography and poetry seem at first read to pull in opposite directions: one towards the seamless abstraction of the satellite map, the other to the concrete image which evokes the sensed landscape and the deep call of place. In fact, our appreciation of maps is never not sensuous – their colours, shapes and textures all inform our reading of them while poets have often used maps as a way of taking quite abstract ideas about reality and its representation for a walk. Equally map makers are always trying to render the invisible visible, while poets mission is to put into words what is usually left on the tip of the tongue.

This elective affinity was first and most memorably explored by Elisabeth Bishop in her poem ‘The Map’ first published in 1932:

Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is,  
lending the land their waves' own conformation....  
Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?  
-What suits the character or the native waters best.  
Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West.  
More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors.

Ever since, poets have been digging away to see what they can unearth at the limits of the mappable, from Laura Riding’s grim perception that ‘holes in maps look through to nowhere’ to Louis Brogan’s cartography of the body:

mapped like the great/Rivers that rise/Beyond our fate/And distant from our eyes

And, of course, the poetics of place has been a constant theme in English lyric verse from Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth to Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and Andrew Motion.

One of the most direct and interesting responses to Bishop’s poetics of mapping came from an African American poet writing in the 1960s, Gloria Oden.<sup>1</sup> In ‘A Private Letter to Brazil’ she begins by unsettling the cartographic pact:

The map shows me where it is you are. I  
am here, where the words NEW YORK run an inch

out to sea, ending where GULF STREAM flows by.  
 The coastline bristles with place names. The pinch  
 in printing space has launched them offshore  
 with the fish-bone's fine-tooth spread, to clinch  
 their urban identity.

And then in the space opened up by this manoeuvre she writes in Rio (where Bishop had moved) as a port linked historically to the African slave trade and thence travels on to the West Indies which has become 'the chain of hop scotching islands that, loosely, moors / your continent to mine.'

Oden was writing before the emergence of black cultural politics *and* critical cartography. Kei Miller's new collection of poems *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* has been deeply informed by both. He has undertaken a unique engagement with themes of black identity and the role of indigenous counter-mapping in challenging the stereotypical associations of race and place that Western map making has underwritten. The poems take the form of an extended conversation, between 'The Cartographer', who represents the liberal face of Western reason, concerned to 'transform' (which in this context means erase) what he sees as the local idiosyncrasies of the landscape into a universal scientific idiom and 'The Rastaman' who roundly condemns the 'immappancy' of his adversary and asserts the primacy of his own cultural voice and world view in making sense of the islands past, present and future. At the beginning, the conversation is more duologue than dialogue, as statement is followed by counter-statement, but as the work proceeds a more subtle dialectic intrudes into these crude thoughts.

Take this encounter for example:

De rastaman I-nunciates something like:Map  
 Was just a land-guage written against I & I  
 who never know fi read it – I & I who born  
 a Jubilee and grow with I granny and eat crackers  
 for I tea – I&I who got no talent  
 for cartography. Map was just Babylon's most vampiric  
 orthography

The cartographer sucks his teeth  
 And says – every language, even yours,  
 Is a partial map of this world.  
 How much  
 Have we not seen and heard  
 Because there was no word  
 for it –at least no word we knew?  
 We speak to navigate ourselves  
 Away from dark corners and we become  
 Each one of us, cartographers.

Miller is well equipped to move between these rival discourses and allow each to partially deconstruct the other. He is a performance poet, more precisely a dub poet who draws directly on the prosody and diction of Jamaican creole; he ‘livicates’ his book to the ‘bredren and sistren’ of Occupy Pinnacle, a group campaigning to reclaim land in Jamaica originally owned by the founder of the Rastafarian movement, who was driven from it by the colonial authorities. But he is also an academic, a reader in Caribbean Literature at Glasgow University and clearly steeped in contemporary post colonial studies.

As a deserved winner of the Forward Prize - no collection matched his for conceptual ambition and sheer poetic verve - he has to steer a fine line between becoming the ‘house nigger’ of the white multicultural/ literary establishment (aka Guardian/LRB readers), and being somehow associated with black gangsta culture with its rampant sexism, homophobia, street violence and crime. His defiant citation of reggae bad boy Buju Banton as a rasta culture hero might alienate some readers, while his reference to Sylvia Winton’s ‘most cryptic essay’ on ‘How we mistook the map for the territory and re-imprisoned ourselves in an Unbearable Wrongness of Being’ might not do much for his street cred in certain circles.

Language politics is at the heart of Miller’s concerns. Rastaman says to the Cartographer:

Why you try so hard  
to cut the tongue out of Natty  
out of all Zion’s children  
telling dem how dem words  
was rough and uncomely-  
how dem language  
was nothing more  
than a tegareg sound?  
Explain why you try so hard  
to dub out Natty’s poems?

The question remains rhetorical. Only slightly less so is Miller’s position in the great debate between Kamau Brathwaite, advocate of black ‘nation language’<sup>2</sup> and Derek Walcott, whose Caribbean rewrite of Homer makes masterful use of *terza rima* and draws on the whole lexicon of English poetics.<sup>3</sup> Despite a few side swipes at sonnets and iambics, Miller gives us a display of technical virtuosity across a range of verse forms, from concrete poetry to the ghazal, an old Persian metric scheme. Some of the poems are clearly meant to be performed, others sit firmly on the page. Like Anansi, the trickster spiderman who plays such a prominent role in Caribbean culture and features in some of the poems, he likes to work both sides of the line, moving fluently between literary and vernacular idioms, as first the cartographer and then the rastaman takes the stage. The nearest he comes to making his position clear is in a praise song to the cartographic impulse:

Without which  
We could not dream the shape of countries,  
the boot of Italy, the number 7 of Somalia;  
without which we could not trace the course of rivers-  
feel a papery Mississippi beneath our fingers.

But then the poem suddenly reverses the direction of its argument to consider what might be gained as well as lost if there was a world without maps:

Submarines would beach themselves like omens-  
 Rusting mermaids on arbitrary beaches  
 ....we would walk nomadic distances,  
 Give up the language of men and learn the gekking  
 Of foxes.

Miller's lyricism is most fully developed in a series of poems entitled 'Place' which intersperse the text and which consist in thick descriptions of important sites of indigenous cartography, often linked to Rastafarianism or events in Jamaica's history which are beneath the radar of the island's official map makers. This is perhaps the first attempt at a rigorously poetic counter mapping of the black experience in a post colonial setting.

Readers unfamiliar with Jamaican patois – though some of it has now seeped into everyday usage via the street talk of urban youth culture in Britain- may find some of the terms and references obscure. If you don't know that Papa Ghede is a voodoo spirit that combines aspects of Eros and Thanatos, you won't get the poem dedicated to him. If you don't know 'ginnal' is a con man, 'jumbie' is a ghost, and Quashie, (who appears several times) is a term used to refer to 'country bumpkin', then you will miss some of the subtler riffs. There are some contextual notes provided but a glossary might have been useful.

Perhaps one reason it was not is that Miller deliberately eschews the role of translator; he does not want to act as a go-between, interpreting one culture to the other. His strategy, rather, is one of indirection. He turns the tables on the cartographer by trapping him in his own imperious ambition. In one poem he asks his local 'I-formant' for directions, and gets suckered into in an elaborate wind up as says he knows exactly where this or that place is only to be told he can't go there. In fact, as the collection's title's hints, the cartographer is being sent on a fool's errand. Zion may be the rasta's eternal city but it is to be found on a mental map to which only the initiated have access. This is spelt out clearly enough when rastaman tells the cartographer who has just attended a reggae concert in the hope of finding the key to unlock the mysteries of rasta's promised land:

My bredda  
 You cannot plot your way to Zion... you cyaa  
 Climb into Zion on Anancy's web  
 or get there by boat or plane or car.  
 Neither high or low science will get you through  
 Jay's impressive door.

Reading these poems made me want to explore more of the hinterland of Jamaican culture – and Miller is a good guide, despite, or because of, his ambivalence about that role. But it also made me think about the whole the notion of 'black maps', maps which do not simply affirm a different geography based on African experience, but which challenge conventional colour coding, first established by Charles Booth whose black streets are all too predictably

associated with the dangerous and perishing classes (see Jerry White's essay in this issue). The trope is found in the work of a number of contemporary poets. James Galvin makes explicit use of it in his poem 'Cartography':

Three things about the border are known:  
It's real, it doesn't exist, it's on all the black maps.

David Maisel's black maps consist of aerial black and white photographs of polluted and otherwise damaged environments which take on a hallucinatory quality.<sup>4</sup> For Mark Strand the map is a black hole, an attractor of floating signifiers on the point of implosion:

The present is always dark.  
Its maps are black  
rising from nothing,  
describing,  
in their slow ascent  
into themselves  
their own voyage  
its emptiness

Your house is not marked  
on any of them,  
nor are your friends,  
Only you are there.

Whether black is coded as a signifier of presence or absence, it highlights the desire to push back the frontiers of the mappable as both a poetic and political enterprise. It is at once an imperious and liberatory project and points to the fact that one culture's heaven can be another's hell. It is Kei Miller's singular achievement to have drawn out the full implications of this with a mixture of wit, cunning and savage irony. No-one interested in contemporary poetry, or current debates in cartography and cultural geography should be without this book.

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<sup>1</sup> Adele Haft ' "The maps shows me where you are". Gloria Oden responds to Elizabeth Bishop across National Geographic and McNally world maps.' *Cartographic Perspectives* 61, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite *History of the Voice: the development of nation language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* New Beacon 1984

<sup>3</sup> Derek Walcott *Omeros* Faber and Faber 1987

<sup>4</sup> David Maisel *Black Maps: American Landscape and the apocalyptic sublime* Steidl 2013