

Fecha de recepción: 20 mayo 2018
Fecha de aceptación: 15 septiembre 2018
Fecha de publicación: 31 diciembre 2018
URL: <http://oceanide.netne.net/articulos/art11-10.pdf>
Oceánide número 11, ISSN 1989-6328

The Rhetoric of Movement: Exploring the Art of Mapping in Kei Miller's *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*

María ALONSO ALONSO
(Universidade de Vigo, España)

RESUMEN:

La idea de tránsito es primordial a la hora de acercarse a *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, del poeta nacido en Jamaica y residente en el Reino Unido Kei Miller, una colección de poemas que desafía la noción tradicional de diáspora. A través de la consciencia errante de una voz poética dual, Miller explora la experiencia cambiante de sujetos migrantes dentro del nuevo orden mundial. A lo largo de estos poemas, los movimientos transnacionales dan forma a una isla que todavía tiene que ser descubierta. Cartografiar es aquí considerado como un arte que hace algo visible. Esto mismo es sobre lo que discute el yo dividido poético, el Cartógrafo y el "Rastaman", al considerar Zion, una metáfora transcultural que representa imaginarios tanto occidentales como no occidentales. Los poemas se oponen entre ellos para, en ocasiones, servir de espejo y, otras, para contradecirse. Estos poemas están escritos tanto en inglés estándar como en inglés jamaicano, abogando por la necesidad de viajar para poder cartografiar el mundo. Estas voces poéticas dislocadas y que se encuentran a lo largo del texto proponen destapar la historia para ilustrar la manera en la que identidades transculturales están re-cartografiando el mundo bajo una nueva forma.

Palabras clave: Kei Miller, poesía jamaicana, migración, transnacionalismo, transculturación

ABSTRACT:

The idea of transit is paramount to approach Jamaican-born and U.K.-based poet Kei Miller's *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, a collection of poems that challenges the traditional notion of diaspora. Through the errant consciousness of a two-fold poetic voice, Miller explores the changing experience of migrant subjects within a new world-order. Throughout these poems, transnational movements shape an island that yet has to be mapped. Mapping is regarded as the art to make something visible. This is what a poetic divided-self, the Cartographer and the Rastaman, discuss about while considering Zion, a transcultural metaphor that stands for both Western and non-Western imageries. Contrasting poems that sometimes mirror and sometimes contradict each other, and which are written either in standard or Jamaican English, advocate for the need to travel in order to map the world. These dislocated poetic voices found in the text will to unfold history to illustrate the way in which transnational identities are remapping the world anew.

Keywords: Kei Miller, Jamaican poetry, migration, transnationalism, transculturation

Globalisation, westernisation, cultural homogenisation, the legacy of the Enlightenment, among other factors, are influencing the way in which contemporary authors relate to certain non-mainstream imageries. A good example of how these concerns are illustrated in literature is Jamaica-born UK-based author Kei Miller's latest collection of poetry, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, published in 2014 and which won the Forward Prize for poetry and was shortlisted for both the International Dylan Thomas Prize and the Costa Book Awards. Among other themes and topics, this thought-provoking and eye-opening poetry book explores how borders are currently more permeable, whilst simultaneously being more impenetrable than ever.

Although the idea of transit is paramount to understand Miller's latest collection of poetry and most of his literary production, one should be aware of the fact that the author is not a diasporic writer himself in the traditional sense of the term, but rather a transnational subject – even though, as I shall explain later on, Miller defines himself as a migrant. Diaspora, as a concept for theoretical disquisition, will stand for a specific way of understanding world order and cultural representations, as well as for the author's transnational experience.¹ It is when we talk about these nuances regarding the term "diaspora" that we notice that a change in the conceptual paradigm has taken place over the last few decades. Due to the travel facilities that interconnect the world nowadays, being an immigrant does not imply that one will never be able to return to one's country of origin anymore. Actually, Miller has talked about his own experience as a migrant in different academic publications. He defines himself as a Caribbean migrant, although he acknowledges that migrant practises have changed in the last decades. Travelling, as he puts it, has lost its magic. Notwithstanding this and when considering the historical legacy of Caribbean peoples, he comments on the fact that: "We are, after all, children of exodus" (Miller, 2011: 15), an experience that has its consequences in their cultural imageries.

Miller's vital experience, also reflected in his writing, is deeply influenced by issues of transit and globalisation since he belongs to a new generation of Caribbean writers who live between his country of origin, Europe, North America and other locations world-wide. He represents what the term "transnational migrant" encompasses. He was born in Jamaica and left the island, at the age of 26, to complete an MA in

Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2006 to later continue with his higher education in the USA, and, after being appointed as Reader at the University of Glasgow, he moved to London to work as a lecturer in Creative Writing. However, he keeps visiting Jamaica, as well as other countries, to meet his professional obligations.

As a transnational subject who travels around the world, Miller's migrant experience communes with Vertovec's definition of "transnationalism" as "a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders [...], certain kind of relationships have been globally intensified" (2009: 3). Miller indeed travels between specific sites, feeding the existing transnational networks within the trinomial family-education-career. Vertovec locates the origin of "transnationalism" as an economic and geographical phenomenon in the 1980s when massive migratory waves induced by the new-world scenario changed the way society is organised, assisted by new means of transport and communication. In this respect, Vertovec highlights that "in recent years transnationalism has become one of the fundamental ways of understanding contemporary migrant practices" (*ibid.*: 13). He differentiates between the "old" and the "new" migrant, establishing globalisation and the improvements in means of transport and communication as the main catalyst for this dichotomy.

The fact that globalisation is reshaping the paradigm around Diaspora Studies is unquestionable and the Caribbean, as a case study, is a good example of this. It seems clear now that, as Waldinger and Fitzgerald remind us,

Networks generate, not one, but a multiplicity of imagined communities (Anderson 1983), organized along different, often conflicting principles [...] On occasion, these imagined communities conform to the root meaning of transnational – extending beyond loyalties that connect to any specific place of origin or ethnic or national group. (2004: 1178)

In order to approach *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, it is necessary to recall migratory waves in Caribbean history, which seem to have functioned at two different levels since early colonisation. This is because Zion, as a metaphor, stands for those locations that have not been catalogued by the West, but exist in the

same way as the Caribbean existed before the arrival of colonial empires. Zion, as the Caribbean archipelago did, must negotiate several binaries due to the challenges posed by migratory movements in and out of the islands. In the Caribbean, one should consider, on the one hand, the arrival of European colonisers and the subsequent forced transportation of millions of people from the African continent to the Caribbean islands to work in the plantations. After slavery was abolished, indentured workers arrived from Europe and Asia, and they also suffered from the extreme working conditions that characterised the slavery system on the islands. On the other hand, the opposite phenomenon took place after the colonial system collapsed when thousands of people decided to emigrate from island to island, as well as to other American territories looking for better living opportunities. More recently and, above all after the end of World War II, people emigrating outside the islands have chosen the former metropolis and settled in the United Kingdom, as well as in the United States and Canada. These migratory movements frame the history rekindled in the collection of poems under scrutiny here.

It is due to this that, when talking about contemporary Caribbean diasporas, the concepts of home and belonging might be regarded as highly conflictive. As happens with other diasporic communities such as the Hispanic, Asian or Arab ones, linkages are nowadays built and reinforced by a new plethora of connections thanks to the internet, which allows migrants to be aware of what is going on in any part of the world, including their home country. Taking all this into consideration, it is not surprising that a new generation of Caribbean authors in the diaspora (Edwidge Danticat, Marlon James, Nalo Hopkinson or Caryl Phillips, to name some) try to represent, in their cultural fictions, this sense of transit shaped by their errant consciousness. Thus, transnational movements induced by an increasing globalised society demand a reconsideration of old paradigms. With this idea in mind, the following pages will approach Miller's latest collection of poetry, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, in order to analyse how the poetic voices of these poems re-write contemporary diasporic experiences, while locating themselves in another yet more up-to-date era, whose implications and consequences are still to be considered.

When reading *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, those familiar with

Miller's poetic and narrative styles will identify the diversity of topics and mastery of language which typically characterise his literary production. Migration, exploitation, colonial behaviour, uncanny scenery and, of course, humour are some of the themes and topics that bloom from the heartfelt metaphors included in this collection. The analysis of some of these poems bears witness to the new patterns and typologies of migration that emerge from within the transcultural space created by the author through the two different poetic voices that shape the collection. The book combines these in an unavoidably related manner through a series of poems and poetic sequences which describe an island that is still to be mapped.

This divided-self comprises the rational point of view of the Cartographer and the spiritual contribution of the Rastaman who meet on the island where they debate. The Cartographer is an intruder and the Rastaman is native to the land. The Cartographer travels to Zion to "discover" it and the Rastaman is familiar with the place where he was born. The Cartographer is limited by the knowledge he has acquired by academic means and the Rastaman has learnt important lessons through experience. These are the two antagonistic voices that appear in the poems, showing the juxtapositions between Western and non-Western imageries. As some of the poems reveal, the history of this place, together with its geography and society, is the result of colonisation, diaspora, migration, hybridity, otherness and multiculturalism. Zion, which is the name given to this transcultural metaphor, still needs to be discovered; it is a world that is constantly being reshaped and redefined; it is a world which, according to the poetic voices, is regarded as a work-in-progress that is still trying to establish its definitive form.

The Cartographer and the Rastaman represent two different cultures and contrasting points of view, and that is why some of the poems mirror each other while others involve contradictions. It is after opposing these dissimilar approaches that the reader reaches the transcultural level found in this multi-layered collection of poems. Western and non-Western imageries are obviously the two catalysts for these different points of view to appear, together with their characteristic styles and topics. In a similar fashion, mythical references intermingle with anecdotes where flamboyant language mixes with a colloquial style in the Jamaican dialect.

In "The Shrug of Jah", one of the poems that opens the collection, the poetic voice describes the genesis of the Cartographer's quest by using a convenient epic style in order to explain how "In the long ago beginning / the world was unmapped" (10).² Thanks to these inaugural verses, the reader can notice the mirror structure mentioned above which, due to its visual effect all over the page, is aimed at illustrating the chaos that motivates the Cartographer to map the world to which the poem makes reference:

[...] A world
which did not know
if it would stay
or go.
No.
or go.
if it would stay
which did not know
A world [...] (10)

The constant use of negatives in almost every single line suggests a need to think the world anew. The poetic voice, which in this case corresponds neither to the Cartographer nor to the Rastaman, but to an elevated self, explores how the world described in this poem was underestimated by the deity: "It was nothing really [...] he hadn't thought [...] was neither here nor there [...] A world which did not know [...] No." (10). This world was unmapped, yet it existed and, only through the reconsideration of its very nature, the Cartographer will be able to fulfil his purpose of mapping it.

However, and in order to map this world, the Cartographer needs to follow a meticulous methodology, which is exactly what the next poem, "Establishing the Metre", aims at founding. It is at this early point that the two poetic voices are introduced: "Like tailors who must know their clients' girths / two men set out to find the sprawling measure of the earth" (11). By creating a sense of movement ought to the construction of a rhetoric that serves this purpose, the poem indicates the need to travel in order to shape the world. This is what these two poetic voices do; they travel from Rodez to Barcelona and from Barcelona to Dunkirk, and it is after all this travelling that they can calibrate distances. But this rhetoric of movement also establishes limits, which are indicated through the visual layout of the poem. The verses are accurately indented in a strategic way to shape its poetic dimension. It is after studying the distances and their limits that these two men "found a rhythm

/ the measure that exists in everything" (11).

This idea of transit to shape the world takes us to the concept of "dislocation" which suggests that migration, regardless of its nature or conditionings, has an immediate effect on the individual. This effect is manifested in the creation of a special sensitivity towards the identification of the self in relation to the different places that one has inhabited. It is in one of the keystones of Postcolonial Studies, *The Empire Writes Back*, where Ashcroft et al. postulate this term to highlight how migration or transterritorialisation nurtures the deconstruction of an essentialist sense of identity and fosters the subsequent reconstruction of it under the form of a new hybrid sense of self.³ This is exactly what happens to the Cartographer and the Rastaman who, through the central poems of this collection, discuss the convenience of reconsidering the connection between the self and the circumstances that have shaped it. It appears that the Cartographer's dislocation from physical and cultural referents is the motivation for him to dig deeper into the landmarks that history has left in the territory that he is attempting to map.

The sequence of poems entitled after the titular name of the collection, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* and which is scattered all over the book, gives evidence of how the Cartographer and the Rastaman discuss the art of mapping. The subtitles that accompany some of the poems of this sequence organise this dialogue in which the two points of view represented by the participants become noticeably divergent. In this sequence, the Cartographer starts explaining his job, which he defines as an art "to untangle the tangled, / to unworry the concerned, / to guide you out from cul-de-sacs / into which you may have wrongly turned" (16). However, the Rastaman has his own concerns and he challenges the Cartographer's perception of the territory he is working on:

[...] the mapmaker's work is to make
visible]
all them things that shoulda never
exist in the first place]
like the conquest of pirates, like
borders,]
like the viral spread of governments.
(17)

The fact that the Rastaman seems reluctant to accept a one-dimensional interpretation

of the Cartographer's duty is more than evident in some of the central poems of the sequence. In one of these poems, after an intricate debate, the poetic voice "wonders / if on his map he made our roads a little / smoother, a little straighter, as if in drawing / he might erase a small bit of history's disgrace" (29). In point of fact, mapping a territory entails a high degree of manipulation. Mapping is also re-writing history, something that can be done by deleting what is shameful and by highlighting other aspects in benefit of some people and to the detriment of others "in the brutal / architecture of history" (33). Language is paramount for a cartographer, and it is in the interpretation of the landscape and the historical landmarks of a territory that conflict appears. Thus, borrowing Walcott's allegory, one could argue that the land is history.⁴

In a similar fashion, the poetic voice of "Unsettled" renders the dichotomy between cultures in order to "consider an unsettled island" (13) and its content. The constant repetition of the adverb "inside" warns the reader about the importance of the content of this island, which unavoidably conveys us to slavery times through historical references to "the tall sentries of blood - / wood and yoke-wood and sweet-wood" and "the carcasses / of slaves; inside - a crawling / brawl of vines, unseemly / flowers that blossom from their spines" (13). It appears that reading the present must be done in relation to the past and the Cartographer, as if he was a historian, must perform the task of making the past comprehensible for the present assisted by bi-directional historical references.

As highlighted by Gallagher and Greenblatt when considering the existing connection between history and literature, these two seemingly different areas of study must be approached from an interdisciplinary methodology in order to have access to the deconstructed narratives that history hides. Scholars must unfold these silences found in history since "literary language uniquely exposes to scrutiny a textuality that operates everywhere and throughout history" (2000: 14). The will to unfold history is represented in "Unsettled" through the constant repetition of the prefix "un-" in adjectives such as "unflattened", "unsugared", "unchecked"; a poetic strategy that becomes overwhelming by the end of the poem due to the last lines:

[...] This is no paradise -
not yet - not this unfriendly, untamed
island -]

this sanitised, unstructured island -]

this unmannered, unmeasured island;]
this island: unwritten, unsettled,
unmapped.] (14)

The uncertainty of the territory that the Cartographer is trying to map is marked in the poem by the uncertainty that the use of the prefix endows. History, together with its imposed silences, favours the indeterminacy of this island.

History and territory are also paramount in the second sequence of poems that shape this collection. This sequence, entitled "Place Name", offers an interesting insight into the history of some Jamaican place names. The names of these places, which are softened with hints of humour in many cases, mark those conflict areas with clear references to brutal historical events. For the Cartographer, studying the history of these hostile zones leads to the art of mapping, and he does this with the invaluable assistance of the Rastaman. The Cartographer must read the silences and the blanks left in history behind these landmarks. Mapping, as highlighted earlier, is also a form of manipulating history in benefit of some and to the detriment of others. Colonial legacy, violence against the native population and the slaves brought to work on the plantations, diaspora, subalternity, among other topics, can be found latently present in the poems of this sequence.

As already mentioned, language plays a fundamental role and it is in the names given to certain places where one can detect the extent to which landmarks become metaphors for the past and for the present. Place names represent the hybridity of an island that has overcome significant historical challenges. The two-fold meaning of certain squares, streets or just some random places bear witness to the complex process of identity formation which took place on the island and which, according to the poet, is still trying to find its definite form. This process of constant reformulation is related to the well-known concept of "hybrid identity". Bhabha defines this in his *The Location of Culture* (1995) not only as a term that makes reference to a bi-directional exchange that takes place when two or more cultures come into contact, but also to the uneven dynamics of imbalance that this exchange entails, be it from a social, cultural, linguistic, economic or even political point of view. It seems that Miller approaches his natal Jamaica in *The Cartographer Tries to Map*

a *Way to Zion* with a hybrid vision: with the eyes of a local, the Rastaman, and with the eyes of an outsider, the Cartographer. That is after all the effect that diaspora has in almost every single individual.

Moreover, diaspora unavoidably forces a process of transculturation, understanding this in the anthropological way pointed out by Fernando Ortíz in his classic *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, originally published in 1940. According to him, the concept of "transculturation" refers to the process of adaptation and transformation that took place in the Caribbean after the colonisation of the islands. As one can imagine with a simple consideration of the complexity of Caribbean history, the term "acculturation", which is often applied to colonised territories, was not suitable for the Caribbean context. This is due to the complex mixture of influences that gave rise to a new hybrid product that manifested differently depending on the island in question. Therefore, the substratum of pre-Columbian civilisations, together with European colonisation and the African/Asian influences that arrived later along with those who were taken to work on the plantations, are indispensable parts of Caribbean identity.

Similarly, new diasporas are reshaping Jamaica anew, implementing a step forward in its transculturation. According to Malinowski,⁵ who wrote the prologue to Ortíz's book, the process of transformation on the Caribbean islands described by Ortíz is an inherent part of the functional consideration of cultures. For diasporic subjects, the culture of origin and the host culture will necessarily be affected in some way or another, giving place to a new hybrid cultural product that will appear as a result of such an encounter. Literary transculturation has been noticeable over the last decades due to hybrid cultural fictions, above all those coming from the Caribbean. As pointed out by Rama (1982), transculturation perfectly represents the process of Caribbean cultural plasticity or *ars combinatoria* that is manifested in literature through a narrator who becomes a mediator between two different cultural influences.

As mentioned above, Miller has acknowledged the fact that migration has deeply marked both his hybrid consciousness and his creative writing. Writing either fiction or poetry is, for him, connected with the art of crafting materials together. It is due to this that, when referring in his 2014 essay "If I could write

this on zinc, I would write this on zinc"⁶ to the different creative projects that he has had (such as the one about writing literature on a piece of zinc for which he was awarded the Rex Nettleford Cultural Studies Fellowship), he explained the way in which he maps all these ideas together in his mind before making them seem plausible. Mapping is also an indispensable side of writing; writing is like finding new avenues of research, like opening hidden paths that might lead to amazing places and stories.

The divided-self found in *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* through the Cartographer and the Rastaman is a good example of what Rama refers to as a partial alienation from the culture of origin, represented in the poetry book by the need to map this unsettled island. There is a strong presence of external components in the poems, which manifests itself through the foreign eyes of the Cartographer. As Adamson and Demetriou point out, "[c]ontemporary diasporas are defined by a national or cultural identity, yet differ from nation-states in terms of their organizational and spatial logics" (2007: 489). It is for this reason that this approach to *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* advocates the need to open new avenues of empirical research in order to study the way in which transnational identities are remapping the new world order. As a matter of fact, the old paradigm around Diaspora Studies is being challenged by new diasporic practices and identities. Miller, as both a writer and an academic is contributing to drawing a new cartography of contemporary diasporas.

WORKS CITED

- ADAMSON, F.B., and M. DEMETRIU. (2007). "Remapping the Boundaries of 'State' and 'National Identity': Incorporating Diasporas into IR Theorizing". *European Journal of International Relations* 13: 489-521.
- ASHCROFT, B., G. GRIFFITHS, and H. TIFFIN. (2004). *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. London and New York: Routledge.
- BHABHA, H.K. (1995). *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- GALLAGHER, C., and S. GREENBLATT. (2000). *Practising New Historicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- MALINOWSKI, B. (2002 [1940]). "Introducción". In *Contrapunteo Cubano*

del tabaco y el azúcar, F. ORTÍZ. Madrid: Cátedra, 3-10.

MILLER, K. (2014). "If I could write this on zinc, I would write this on zinc". *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 49 (3): 333-341.

---. (2011). "Imagining Nations". *Moving Worlds, a journal of transcultural writing. Special issue on Locating the Caribbean* 11 (1): 14-20.

---. (2014). *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*. Manchester: Carcanet.

ORTIZ, F. (2002 [1940]). *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*. Madrid: Cátedra.

PROCTER, J. (2007). "Diaspora". In *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, J. MCLEOD (ed.). London and New York: Routledge, 151-157.

RAMA, Á. (1982). *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*. México: Siglo Veintiuno.

VERTOVEC, S. (2009). *Transnationalism*. London and New York: Routledge.

WALCOTT, D. (1980 [1979]). *The Star-Apple Kingdom*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

WALDINGER, R., and D. FITZGERALT. (2004). "Transnationalism in Question". *American Journal of Sociology* 109 (5): 177-95.

NOTES

¹ Procter defines the term "diaspora" as a two-fold concept: "as naming a geographical phenomenon – the transversal of physical terrain by an individual or a group – as well as a theoretical concept: a way of thinking, or of representing the world" (2007: 151).

² Subsequent references to the text are to the edition included in the bibliographical section and will be cited parenthetically by page numbers.

³ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin focus on how Eurocentric views have conditioned the cultural and political development of post-colonial nations. Accordingly, the Caribbean, as a case study, perfectly represents the process of identity reformulation implied by the term "dislocation" since migration is an inherent characteristic of its history. This reformulation of Caribbean history and culture from a non-Eurocentric perspective is also illustrated in the way certain communities relate to the folklore of their culture of origin from the diaspora. As highlighted in the above publication, diasporas, transterritorialisation, exile, or any other migratory movement appear

to promote "a valid and active sense of self [which] may have been eroded by *dislocation*, resulting from migration." (1989: 9, emphasis in the original).

⁴ I am here referencing a widely-known poem by Derek Walcott, "The Sea is History", which starts with the following lines: "Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, / in that grey vault. The sea. The sea / has lock them up. The sea is history" (1980: 25).

⁵ Malinowski, who is considered to be the re-founder of British social anthropology, wrote the prologue to Ortíz's *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, focusing on Latin American cultural perspectives not as passive entities but as creative constructions composed by a series of idiosyncratic values in continuous motion.

⁶ Miller acknowledges the obvious influence of Michelle Cliff's widely known essay "If I could write this in fire, I would write this in fire", in which the author describes her growing-up in Jamaica surrounded by a milliard of stigmas inherited from colonial times. The echoes of the past, together with the challenges of the present, condition Cliff's narration, raising it up to its climax when the author addresses her audience with a series of reflections that open the gate to new questions.

CONTACT: malonsoalonso@uvigo.es

Título: La retórica del movimiento: explorando el arte del mapeo en *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* de Kei Miller