Of Metaphors and Maps: Cartographic thinking and the poetry of Kei Miller

by Michael Rose-Steel
It comprehends the earth by categorizing it in circles, triangles, oblongs and dots, unifying writing and image in a world picture at the centre of which lies Babylon


In 2014, Kei Miller published The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion (hereafter CWZ), a collection of poems that had the happy knack of being approachable, musical, intellectually intricate and ethically challenging. It therefore formed the perfect riposte (both positive and negative) to Jeremy Paxman’s much publicised attack on the supposed aridity, elitism and obscurantism of contemporary poetry. Miller’s collection won the 2014 Forward Prize, the competition for which Paxman was a judge, though the poet has also been short-listed for the International Dylan Thomas Prize, and won the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature for his collection of essay Writing Down the Vision, which charts the political and personal intersections of a life lived by writing. In many ways, Miller has achieved just what it was that Paxman claimed poetry had lost the ability to do – to engage and challenge a wide range of readers in a way that values and entangles the languages we inhabit.

At the heart of CWZ is the insistence that the ways in which we are able to talk create and constrain how we see the world, and what seems possible within it. The words we have access to, and the status we afford them, impact on not only what we see, but how and where we look. This is, of course, a widely noted idea, but by its own terms perpetually needs to be fleshed out anew through original examples and forms. What Miller has managed is to interlink clashes of culture, discourse and outlook in a way that is involving yet individual, and that remains irreducibly poetic. In the essay that follows I illustrate how maps and their associated metaphors can contribute to our thinking about language, especially the ways in which language can manifest as power, or challenge it. How can Miller’s poems bring our seemingly fixed, natural or objective means of seeing the world under new scrutiny? I argue that the ability of

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1 This paper developed from a joint presentation given with Esther van Raamsdonk at the 2014 Green Connections symposium, University of Exeter. I am grateful to both my collaborator and the constructive remarks of an anonymous reader of an earlier draft of this paper.

2 “On the Forward Prize for Poetry” September 2014. The typically punchy article generated more heat (and, perhaps, light) in public debate about poetry than almost any event since Donald Rumsfeld’s “Unknown Unknowns”. 

poetry to revivify our directions of thought may be an essential part of challenging the inertia of public discourse – and therefore key in tackling the apparent inevitability or inconceivability of eco-political issues.

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_The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion_ is largely composed of a dialogue of poems between the titular Cartographer, who has been charged with mapping the Island of Jamaica, and the Rastaman, keen to challenge the assumptions and systems behind this apparently neutral task. Through the moments that pass between the interlocutors, we are presented with the benefits of mapping – its precision and orderliness – but also its contrast to the brightness of local colour, the dark rumblings of history, and the unmappability of people – their infinite relations, unpredictability and “livity” (23). The key point of contrast is in the Cartographer’s resolution to map a way to the mystic city of Zion, about which the question that defines his discipline – Where is it? – makes little sense. Perhaps, at best, one could ask the related question – How do I get there?

Initially, the confrontation seems to be one of cultural asymmetry, as the Cartographer represents the scientifistic, abstract, Western, quantitative discipline of cartography, whose claim to objectivity belies a rapacious urge to count and classify, and the firmly local, historical, provocative Rastaman. The latter is loquacious, hospitable and distrusting, a determinedly human figure, wholly involved in, and protective of, the life the Cartographer would like to classify from above.

Miller has said that the poems play out two sides of his own mind, thinking of his homeland and his relationship to it (Reading given at the Contemporary Cornwall Poetry Festival July 2014). He certainly plays with his somewhat liminal status as poet and academic, and as a Jamaican writer based and published in Britain, and the book portrays some of the complexities and anxieties of this position. Although most might assume that the Rastaman is Miller’s closer avatar, he has admitted to more often catching himself thinking like the Cartographer. The creator of stories is, after all, an ordering force, of sorts. Through the characters’ dialogue, Miller can interrogate and interrupt himself, ask questions about what it is that

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1 Aside from a shared cultural background (Miller is not a Rastafarian but is generally sympathetic to the religion’s outlook) there are various hints of self-identification in the collection – the Rastaman’s PhD is from Glasgow University, for example, where Miller taught until recently. See Claire Armistade’s interview in the Guardian, “Kei Miller: ‘My productivity is linked to what could be called a disability’” 28 Sept 2014.
he does when he writes. It is noticeable that this collection contains more of the dialect of the Island than Miller’s earlier books. Partly this plays up the contrast between the two protagonists, as their language reveals their origins and interests, but it also seems to signal a degree of confidence in the poet’s identity – an identity that revels in its conflicting directions, its complicated cohesion. As Miller has said elsewhere, his position not only as a partial outsider, but as someone from a country that is “not the centre of the world” means being “blessed with a kind of double vision” (Writing Down the Vision 18); the narrative that, from within, seems inevitable can, from without, reveal the patterns that have shaped it, or the inconsistencies that lend it trouble and charm.

The Cartographer and the Rastaman also speak for two conflicting drives that inhabit a wider arena than the personal: they express the often oppositional urges to order and to remember; to control and to experience; to understand by law and to understand by identity. In particular one can find the attractions and dangers of a systemising worldview (or views). The illusion of neutrality in such an endeavour is a common target in the poems, for instance the pair of short poems numbered “iii” and “iv”:

iii.
The cartographer says
no –

What I do is science. I show
the earth as it is, without bias.
I never fall in love. I never get involved
with the muddy affairs of land.
Too much passion unsteadies the hand.
I aim to show the full of a place in just a glance.

iv.
The rastaman thinks, draw me a map of
what you see
then I will draw a map of what you never see
and guess me whose map will be bigger than
whose?
Guess me whose map will tell the larger truth?
The problems of the ethics of mapping, and the discipline’s own reluctance to engage with such concerns are well documented. For example, J. B. Harley in his seminal essay ‘Deconstructing the Map’ and in the later collection of his work in *The New Nature of Maps* (2001) has complained that even when conferences are held on the subject of ethics in cartography, the discussions tend to remain within the technical and commercial concerns of cartography itself – issues of copyright and competence remain central, while notions of unquestioned assumptions or their consequences (for those mapped) are considered marginal. Harley states that “Cartography seems to be uncritical of its own practices, and both their intentional and unintentional consequences” (198). And this despite the fact that for each map, “design is fraught with potential ethical consequences” (201). Some of these are highlighted in later parts of this discussion. For the moment, the quandary Harley sets will prove fruitful:

If we are truly concerned with the social consequences of what happens when we make a map, then we might also decide that cartography is too important to be left entirely to cartographers. (203)

This is not to suggest some special criminality or failure amongst cartographers. Rather, it points to the tendency of systems to be self-preserving and insular, and of institutions to protect and perpetuate their own form.

Since Harley’s ‘Deconstructing the Map’ first appeared in 1989 (followed by many other articles questioning cartography’s capacity for and assumption of objectivity) there have been a number of responses that have deepened and refined critical thinking about mapping. Harley’s (largely Foucauldian) identification of the ideologies and power structures that come between a map and the world it claims to represent has been extended to a more Derridean question of the very possibility of talking about a mapped world separate from its ‘creation’ in the map. Not only does the ideology of the map-maker disguise the truth of the world, but there is no truth of the world accessible to us by deconstructing the ideologies we can discern in the maps. Cartography’s “foundational ontology […] that the world can be objectively known and faithfully mapped using scientific techniques that capture and display spatial information” (Kitchin, Gleeson and Dodge “Unfolding mapping practices” 480) has increasing been eroded by questions of dominant discourses, the mapped subject, and connections between history, technology and purpose in mapping. Many post-modern critiques of cartography are naturally concerned with the development of power structures, especially
in a (post)colonial discourse, including how maps can “inculcate us into seeing and representing the world in highly selective (and, for the powerful, felicitous) ways.” (Clayton “Snapshots of a Moving Target” 19). Kei Miller is an eloquent contributor to these debates, particularly on matters of literature and Jamaican civil rights. His facility with key theoretical texts can also been seen in the employment of Sylvia Winter’s work in “xiv” of CWZ: “On How / We Mistook the Map for the Territory” (Ll. 9-10).

Even the ontological stability of maps themselves can be questioned (Kitchin, Gleeson and Dodge 481). Is the idea of ‘the map’ a coherent one, given the myriad methods, traditions and processes of mapping that we are increasingly recognising and applying? Matthew Edney has questioned whether the assumption of ‘the map’ as a single concept in Harley and elsewhere is not damagingly simplifying (“Cartography and its discontents” 11); perhaps the privileging of the graphical image of the map over other forms of visualisation or representation is an expression of the “ocular-centric” character of modernity and needs to be challenged (Clayton 21). In short, if a map is no longer thought of as a fixed picture of a world (not even one that it has helped to create, not just represent) it stands itself in constant need of generating and interpretive processes. “Maps and mappings are emergent processes and performances” (Gerlach 22).

In this line of thinking, Gerlach’s concept of “vernacular” mapping is productive, as a refinement of some of the responses to Harley’s work, such as ‘counter’ or ‘indigenous’ models of mapping, which themselves often run into problems of appropriateness and appropriation, and the “micropolitics of contemporary cartography” (22). Though this is not a suitable space to look into this concept in depth, its core concepts are useful here: “Vernacular mappings are cartographies that in their ethos and practice are more vulnerable and susceptible to change and perturbation; cartographies that perform the unsettling of epistemological and representational certainties while affirming spaces for inhabiting and navigating the world otherwise” (31). By setting under question notions of ontology in favour of ontogenetic cartographies – created by and creative of their settings, technologies, voices and purposes – new possibilities of argument and relation are created. Vocabularies and visualisation technologies can be mingled,

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4 See, in extension of his published essays, his frequent and widely-debated blog posts, addressing colonial inheritance, gay rights, religious politics and émigré perspectives amongst other things: http://underthesaltireflag.com/
tested, refreshed by insisting that the “work is never complete” (27). If it is possible to continually keep our framing devices in mind, and to be open to other viewpoints and representations without being merely credulous, we will be able to produce and use new kinds of maps. (The ‘possible’ in the previous sentence is a genuine qualifier; a work that welcome many tongues may speak many languages, but may also produce nonsense, on occasion.)

In the remainder of this paper I will discuss some of the most effective elements of Miller’s collection, in particular his use of the vernacular, by which I include not only the quotidian language of The Island, but also local landscapes, shared memories and music. Without pushing the metaphor too hard, Miller’s use of the Cartographer character allows the collection itself to be regarded as a map. First, however, I want to briefly differentiate between some of the guiding lines of thought common to much of the cartography theory mentioned, and the notion of a vernacular that I want to employ. By drawing on Foucault in particular, but also in Gerlach’s case, Deleuze and Guattari, a post-humanist idea of the subject becomes possible, one that brings into view the power relations that shape our world and our view of it. These factors and the geometries thereof are fertile ground for analysis, moving away from notions of either a fully rational/objective or uniquely individual (Cartesian) representation of the world. Neither binary is sustainable. My own approach here, however, is a line of thinking that places a greater emphasis on notions of responsibility and reflection than most post-humanist models, based on a Wittgensteinian insistence of language ‘in use’, and drawing on work by Cora Diamond and Stanley Cavell, as illustrated below. This choice is partly due to a worry about unintended systematising by both Harley and those who sought to criticise his work (a fear also noted by Clayton (20)). It also reflects the thought that a degree of expressive agency is necessary in order to non-reductively deal both with Miller’s collection as poetry, and to carry on the kind of debate about language that makes the collection so timely. The approach insists on some notion of will or intention being in play if we are to take an expression as having meaning, and an openness being to altered by it when we claim to have understood it. New vernaculars can change our language, and in the process change the way we see the world and what we can say about it. But those vernaculars are not just new information; they require attunement to their production and presentation.

To take one example, it is increasingly difficult to talk about environmental concerns without translating them into an
economic model of cost benefit – x number of jobs lost or created; x billion pounds of investment needed, x% of GDP sacrificed or gained. News coverage reports on the economics of renewable energy and climate change, with other aspects of these issues reduced to local or human interest stories. This is clearly helpful for deciding on long-term projects or comparing different events; seeing the world through this lens creates a map that is comprehensible and scalable. However, if only what can be assigned a monetary value enters into the debate, so that a suitable cost-benefit analysis can be made, this radically simplifies the map of what is happening. If we have no measurement of action or damage done beyond cash equivalence, anything that sits outside this measure, or refuses to define itself this way, fades into anecdote or whimsy. And we (as both individuals and institutions) can be incredibly resistant to acknowledging this simplification. We have a wide-ranging and powerful tool, and tend to prefer the reliable scale of the tool to the less clear world that it measures and stands in for. We prefer – for reasons of efficiency, objectivity and tradition – to retain a privileged view of the world and how it works. And how, if everything that does not conform to this view is already ruled out, can we come to see things differently, to discover what we have missed out on?

Combating resistance to seeing things differently, especially reflecting back on oneself or one’s institutions, is thus both difficult and essential, and may necessitate not a changing only of the information we hold, but the way that we see – are able to see – what that information tells us. As Eric Bulson claims in Novels, Maps, Modernity, “Maps will only get us lost if we know how to read them” (131); and that is a question of mastering a language, not only facts.

In Philosophy and Animal Life, there is a debate between Cora Diamond, Stanley Cavell and John McDowell about the extent to which seeing the world differently can be equated with having access to certain information – translatable into the making of rational arguments – or whether, at some point, bringing another into seeing the world as I do must become a matter of persuasion. Although the three philosophers take slightly different positions on this issue, I take persuasion here as used in Wittgenstein’s later work,5 where this might include giving examples, modelling behaviour, or simply saying ‘this is what I do’. These

5 e.g. Philosophical Investigations §334; On Certainty §262, §612.
activities are something distinct from merely demanding assent or convincing by logic; they appeal to the person to be persuaded on a basis of mutual understanding, or the possibility thereof. It involves asking the other person to take a kind of risk, to allow the possibility of another way of seeing. In *Philosophy and Animal Life* the chief catalyst for discussing different modes of persuasion is J. M Coetzee’s lecture/novella ‘The Lives of Animals’, which not only places a piece of creative writing into the place normally reserved for academic argument, but also has a protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, who struggles to make clear to those around her (and perhaps herself) the horror she feels at the treatment of animals under modern industrial farming practices. She has the same information about animal welfare that anyone else in society might glean, and yet is surrounded by what seems to be a willing blindness by society concerning the misery and death that is inflicted on other living things every day: “in a huge communal effort, we close our hearts” (Coetzee 133). She cannot argue her case by means of theory or statistics; she feels, in McDowell’s phrase, “unhinged” (*Philosophy and Animal Life* 134) from the world. Similarly, Cora Diamond reads Coetzee’s novella not as a kind of disguised argument for a particular point of view (as other critics have done) but as a form of persuasion, one that relies on calling to the reader to recognise in Costello a fellow human, to see that we too might be troubled in this way; to take the risk of knowing what it is like to be another person, an animal, a victim (73–74). By showing examples, or creating believable behaviour that we can understand, even if it remains different to our own, Coetzee changes how we can see the world, even if nothing that was not already open to view has been revealed.

In such ways writing can become a means of fracturing or escaping the kinds of regulating views on the world we tend to embed ourselves in. It is this same consciousness of a break between argument and persuasion, and between worldviews that Kei Miller’s collection exhibits. Mingling characters and symbolism, an attention to history and sound, and the collision of patois, academia, a certain “Caribbean logic” (*Writing Down the Vision* 16), music, humour and autobiography, Miller opens up several new directions of thinking. “What I do is...”

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6 The complexities of this text and the debate surrounding it deserve more space than I can give it here, but it has been addressed substantially elsewhere. See, for example, Stephen Mulhall’s *The Wounded Animal* (2008), and Rupert Read’s review of that book in *Mind* (April 2011).
says the Cartographer – and likewise the Rastaman reveals himself in his hospitality and his sermonising, his challenges and his unease. The collection invites us to experiment in our outlook, to remember how to remember what has become organised and taken for granted.

In this context of re-visioning, I will discuss two of the motifs of CWZ: roads, and place names. These are ‘vernacular’ not only in terms of their everyday language, but also as locally shared landscapes, memories and events.

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Roads wear their histories into their landscape. Far from being neutral connectors between places, differentiated on the map only by their colour coding, the routes we chose for crossing a landscape have many purposes and effects. Just as lines drawn on a map are not merely neutral or representative, but in their “unfolding effects and affects [...] are performative” (Gerlach “Lines, contours and legends” 26), roads are more than markers of travel; they have history, agency, and a shaping phenomenology. Miller speaks the character of movement about the Island, including how one might pass along:

- secret roads and slaving roads,
- the diring roads, marooning roads
- [...]
- cow roads and cobbled roads
- the estate roads and backbush roads
- [...]
- causeway roads and Chinese roads
- [...]
- press-along, soon-be-done,
- the not-an-easy, the mighty-long (“Roads” Ll. 1,2,6,7,12, 16,17)

Beyond the type and task of a road, the route may reflect something very other. Poem “xi”, relates how a road was built curved, to please the ego of a plantation owner’s wife,

so that Miss Musgrave on her carriage ride home
would not have to see
a nayga man’s property
so much bigger than her husband’s (Ll.11-15)

The race-divide that structured the island’s history is not a surface-level phenomenon; it is pressed deep into the infrastructure, becoming harder to change with every iteration of its processes. “Some kinds of ghostly line . . . can have very real consequences for peoples’ movements” (Irwin et al. “The City of Richgate’ p 62, cited in Gerlach 26). The “serpentine” flow of Lady Musgrove’s Road now causes pandemonium on the modern city’s commuter route, as its needless turns restrict and complicate traffic (L.10). This unexpected addendum to the colonial past (interestingly at odds with the Haussmann-ish rationalisation of the landscape one might sooner anticipate) acts as a reminder of the entrenchment that decisions undergo, and institutions facilitate. The Cartographer notes reluctantly the “thoughtless” (L. 26) lay out of the street, wishing he could put right the injustices of history with his mapping; straightening and smoothing roads “as if in drawing / he might erase a small bit of history’s disgrace” (L. 35-36).

But for whom, and to whom, would he speak and draw? The map, however superior to reality, cannot improve the traffic, or undo its knotty history. The character of the landscape is as much a factor of its past as its present topography and culture. Miller depicts Jamaica as a place where “every road might buck yu toe”, a statement of roughness that is as proud as it is imperfect (“v” L. 5). The Island carries its past in its roads and people and language.

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Perhaps no element of language better preserves its history within itself than a name. In some ways a name steps outside of our purely descriptive language and becomes a marker, a word imbued with the solidity of its object. Even in transfer to another time or place, something of a name’s original may remain. In “ix. in which the

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7 This is of course a point about our use of names, and their ability to accumulate meaning. It is not a metaphysical claim about ‘how names work’ or an equating of naming with a linguistic ostensive definition, as (arguably) happens in the Augustinian model that Wittgenstein uses to kick-start the Philosophical Investigations. My point is that the application of a name automatically refers to a thing, circumstance or history outside of the word itself in a way that other forms of speech (usually or as emphatically) do not and that this aspect is often consciously used by poets as an intimation (or imitation) of solidity and specificity. See for example the way Wallace Stevens’ “The Idea of Order at Key West” profitably ensnares a philosophical debate about existence, nature and linguistic expression in the quotidian setting of a shorefront. Miller in his collection here is both making use of this naming convention and drawing attention to its operations – and how they can be questioned.
cartographer travels lengths and breadths” Miller says of Jamaica “this island spreads out as a palimpsest / of maps: for here is Bethlehem; here is Tel Aviv; here / is Gaza; also Edinburgh; Aberdeen […] all of here is Babylon” (Ll. 15-19). Here Babylon, the great wash of terrestrial sin and power, covers the land, the Cartographer’s possible world. It is not only the inescapability of the world and its names that Miller notes here, but how deliberate our actions are to maintain this inescapability – transporting names from one world to the next, re-siting the known and well mapped, as though a name could replicate its namesake. Different maps, different histories, overlay each other, the curves and bumps of each affecting the next.

Alongside these transferred memories and famous names, Miller contemplates the ways in which what was once current and meaningful has become forgotten, corrupted, or adapted. A number of the poems in the collection muse over place names – their likely origins and the stories that grow up around them. In ‘Shotover’ a house that once had the grandiose name of Château Vert has acquired a new history, relating itself more intuitively to the local tongue and the recollection of slave-owner violence:

Shotover – so named because our people, little acquainted
with French, could make no sense of Château Vert. And
talk truth, Mr Backra, dat was too stoosh a name for
your house. ‘Green and fresh,’ you said. No – it did just
mildew and old; a house which, like yourself, has since
returned to the fold of Portland’s earth. But oh Mr
Backra, if through the muffle of mud you should hear us
traipsing on your ground, one of us asking – how it come
about, the name? you will discover that when victims live
long enough they get their say in history: Well sah (an
old man answers), dem dere backra days, bucky-master had

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7 As well as being, perhaps not co-incidentally, the origin of the earliest known map of the world (see Jeremy Brotton A History of the World in Twelve Maps 2-3).
was to catch back the runaway slaves, so
him would draw for
him long musket and buss gunshot over dere,
and gunshot over
dere, shot dissa fly pashie! pashie! all bout
de place. And so
comes we get de name.

Place names mutate, build new associations,
hide shameful events, signpost the
forgetfulness of a society. Throughout Miller’s
collection one can trace the scars, both
obvious and subtle, of European expansion
and slave-trading, but also the grafting on
of new meanings and connections. The
implications of being able to name the
markers of one’s environment are played out;
not only is the presence of colonial culture
noted, but also the ways that place names
carry the spirit of a landscape (“Wait-A-Bit”),
the local ironies and stories (“ix”) and, like
Shotover, how a name can be a repossession.

There is, of course, a fundamental difference
between naming and being named, which
this poem treats with Miller’s usual sharpness
and humour. A thing named – whether
place or person – becomes answerable to
those who apply the name. A name – what
gives someone or something a place within
the language and culture – can be a form
of limitation and exclusion, as much as
an empowerment, especially if the name
is imprinted in a language not shared by
what is named. Those excluded from the
language, through economics, education or
social division, may become thinned to the
surface of that name, or made invisible by
its covering. This concern is given voice in
the Rastaman’s denunciation of cartography
in “xix”, as his rhetoric surges against the
cartographer’s embattled certainties:

Map
was just a land-guage written gainst I&I
who never know fi read it […]
Map was just Babylon’s most vampiric
orthography. Better I&I never learn fi
overstand
what was nutt’n more than de downpressor’s
pig latin (Ll. 3-5, 8-10)

The most immediate application of this
association between mapping and oppression
is naturally the context of the poem’s setting,
the legacy of colonialism. Elsewhere the Rastaman has worried about how the drawing of maps has “gripped like girdles / to make his people smaller than they were” (“vi” Ll. 7-8). Where the name (or map) stands in for what it represents and replaces it as what can be talked about, it begins a process of exclusion, of railroading the possibilities of discourse. But can writing – specifically here the practice of poetry – become another kind of mapping, one that holds back from the monosemic systematising of the uninvolved glance, the cartographer’s ideal?

We might ask; what would it be like to have a map in many hands? What would it be like to read it?

In this sense, CWZ is itself a map, the poems marking points in a landscape, directing our view towards particular characters, moments or moods. One of the reasons why they work so well as a collection is the unity of location, most usually locating us at ground level, on a very human scale. But the experience of inhabiting a location is not one of understanding a single meaning or setting; although still mastered by Miller’s inimitable voice, the poems switch locale and viewpoint, come into argument, address the reader differently, and twist linguistic codes to suit their moment of expression. The poems share a topography, but the guide changes with each step of the journey.

Bulson notes the impact of topographical writing on the reading experience – the reader’s urge to orient themselves against an externally available cityscape. As a particularly modernist technique, the naming of places (rather than their description) generates a space that might be known, or that one might get lost in. Bulson’s account, centred on the modernist novel, pays most attention to the mapping out of action over time that constitutes a novel, and how this map can be realistic, affirmative or disorientating (107-115). Miller’s poems at times reverse the process of structuring the literary space through names, by bringing those names themselves – their histories, stories, secrets – under scrutiny. What does a name mean, and to whom? The land is made more real by delving beyond the street sign or a house name, into the land upon which it has been placed. And this delving can naturally take the form of stories as powerfully as mapping or archaeology; when Miller recounts the history of the place called “Swamp” (35) his sketch conjures more of the flux and cupidity of humanity, of his wide-eyed headshake about the place than cartography could capture. This is one reason to treasure the subjective nature of literature, and Miller’s poetry: the details, images and gaps in a poem become much more than a surface of a map; they respond to a different key. In bringing to bear these different ways
of reading a map, personal experience can militate against simple classifications and reductionist thinking. The prescribed channels become deltaic as alternative memories and outlooks are allowed to interplay. Bulson speaks of “disorientation” as a desired outcome of writing, similar to Shklovsky’s poetic estrangement, though carried into a more narrative or world-building mode of operation. It can be “a way to resist prescribed ways of imagining the world, it is a technique and an effect that can counteract capitalist abstraction and the forgetfulness of history” (130). This isn’t quite what is happening in Miller’s poems, certainly not to the reader – though the cartographer undergoes something of this kind, as the world refuses to lay itself out for him, like a scrunched-up rug. Miller is not withholding or undermining information, but rather continually adding snapshots, voices and bright moments that tug us in different directions; we can orient ourselves by them, but cannot chart a straight course. This is less a disorientation than a distraction – both in terms of our continually refocused attention, and in the sense that we lose traction on what had appeared to be secure and at hand for our manipulation. There is always another layer, another word to add to what we encounter.


