

The impact of roots
and identity in the
cartographer tries to
map a way to zion



**ASSIGN
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The rastaman never gets involved “ with the muddy affairs of land”, he would rather proudly explore his Jamaican roots in order to overcome the constant clash inside hybrid beings. The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion is the epitome of the instability of hybrid identity and as such, it brings us to reflect upon the roots and identity of the personas, i. e. the rastaman and the cartographer. Kei Miller explores the past as well as both the physical and spiritual places which constitute his roots in order to illuminate the present. However, a significant part of The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion evinces control over the emotions implied by roots, as the persona learns to embrace the British culture and admits both a rastaman and a cartographer lie in him.

It takes some retrospection, in this case the probing of the intangible, spiritual, or physical place we come from to truly understand who we are and why we are acting in a certain way in the present. Therefore, Kei Miller draws towards his home and heart, referred to as Zion, in order to find a certain harmony and comfort in the face of adversity, in this case, the clash of cultures or to a larger extent, post-colonialism. In the poem in which the rastaman gives a sermon, the use of the religiously connotated noun “ sermon” has two meanings: either it is a religious talk which gives us the indication that Miller is on his way to understand where he has come from and ready to be in communion with himself or sermon in the sense of a long or tedious piece of admonition. The first meaning reminds us of the beginning of the poem: “ the rastaman says: to get to Zion you must begin // with a heartbless, a small tilt of the head, a nod”, in which Zion is the place you find after a long quest for peace and harmony, whereas if the meaning

of a long or tedious piece of admonition is retained, we can stop after “ to get to Zion you must”, for in this case, the whole poem giving instructions on how to get to Zion is pointless, like a sermon — you do not get to your roots, but you do sometimes have to find them. Indeed, there is no use in trying to find Zion for “ lions who trod don’t worry bout reading Zion. In time is Zion that reach to the lions”, the metaphor of lions, being us, implies that Zion is not a place which you find but rather a state of mind which finds you at the right time.

Kei Miller’s literary works convey a sense of insurrection, as they denote a lack of will to comply to the Western world’s cultural and linguistic requirements and expectations. Hence, it is as if Kei Miller was evoking an irreplaceable bond with our home — both homeland and spiritual place, our principal roots —, which is however being challenged by the timeless post-colonial matters such as hybridity and the sudden shift of culture. The inherent character of identity is put forth in the collection *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*. Kei Miller refuses to abandon his identity and forget his origins even once he lives in the Western world; this is demonstrated by the use of Jamaican patwah in each poem whose speaker is the rastaman. In *Quashie’s Verse*, “ quashie” being a person who is of low breeding and class in Jamaican patwah and in this poem referred to as “ He // who can no longer // measure by kend or by // chamma or by ermijja”, the combination of patwah use and enjambements strikingly convey a sense of belonging to the Jamaican community and a disapproval of the Western conventions: Kei Miller refuses to use official, academic British English, thus as a reader, we feel as if he was using a way to display disapproval of the

colonizing country. Moreover, the use of enjambements reinforces the idea that Kei Miller refuses conventions. In his 2012 PhD thesis, *Jamaica to the world: a study of Jamaican (and West Indian) epistolary practices*, it reads: “the descendants of all the various race groups began to forge a unified identity and see themselves as Caribbean people, then it is they also begin to migrate - to separate themselves from the islands which had finally become home”, the inherent character of identity is highlighted with the phrase “unified identity”, which blends together unification, an ensemble, and identity, which is strictly personal and proper to an individual by definition. The metaphor “home” referring to the Caribbean islands and the fact that Caribbean peoples are forced to leave their hometown refer to colonialism and denote a certain bitterness during postcolonialism from the colonized populations’ behalf.

In *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, Kei Miller’s roots highly influence Kei Miller’s writing and journey to the eternal Zion, inasmuch as his mentioning of roots is emotionally driven. We even notice a sense of progression throughout the collection in terms of the impact of roots, for there is a rise in tension. Such a tension is caused by the evident reclaiming of territories and disapproval towards colonists’ behaviour and actions. For example, in the poem in which the rastaman disagrees, disapproval is made obvious from its very title: “disagrees”. As a reader, we do not know why the rastaman disagrees, therefore there is a sense of wait created as the justification is being postponed, thus being longed-for. The following passage of the poem is crucial to the understanding of Kei Miller’s views on colonialism and mapmaking: “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". We feel tension, as it is obvious the rastaman's emotions are involved in the simile "viral spread of governments". He compares colonialism to a disease, thus something which no-one wants to exist in the first place, like a cancerous cell within an organism spreading or, at a larger scale, a virus spreading in a population; this simile is emphasized by the anaphoric repetition of the comparative adverb "like" and the harsh sounds echoing when we read the consonants in "viral spread of governments". Such harshness in those consonants' sounds can be likened to colonizers' firm grip and unrighteous mindset. Thus, the mapmaker's work is to make visible the consequences of disasters which occurred under colonialism.

Nonetheless, Kei Miller stays thankful to England, an ex-colonizer and current hosting country of the poet, as he embraces the English culture he henceforth considers as part of himself. Naturally, in this respect Kei Miller's roots have an impact neither on the poems nor on us, as readers. In the same poem, in which the rastaman disagrees, surprisingly, Miller is showing evidence of attachment to one of his homelands, after all: Britain, in "— like board houses, and the corner shop from which Miss Katie sell her famous peanut porridge". Here, Kei Miller accepts the British culture for he openly refers to a traditional British meal, furthermore the importance of this Britain-dedicated part of the sentence is emphasized by the use of a dash; he respects Britain and considers its culture and moors. It can also be argued that roots do not have an impact in some of the poems, for example in which the cartographer asks for directions, for conversations between rastaman

and cartographer occur within Miller's mind: the rastaman speaks, to which the cartographer answers: " Yes". Miller is indeed both a rastaman and a cartographer at the same time, and all of this is just an illustration of the internal conflict of a hybrid being.

Kei Miller explores his ancestors' past and his own roots to elucidate the mystery of identity and draws towards his heart to acquire a whole new exclusively placid and lucid vision of reality, to which adds the revolt of Jamaicans, who are strongly bonded thanks to the inherence of one's roots. The impact of roots evolves throughout *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, giving birth to a self acceptance as a hybrid individual, consequently the duality between the emotional rastaman and the rational cartographer is being accepted, as Kei Miller realises he has both in him. Both personalities are complementary, thus the newly wise Kei Miller is being found by Zion, a place where mapmakers and immapancy adepts match, in short where harmony resides.