

Hypertext and Robert Antoni's *Divina Trace*

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In writing on Robert Antoni's novel *Divina Trace*, I noted that it moved beyond traditional themes of Postcolonial writing in order to include within its scope other issues. While not avoiding Post-colonialism entirely, Antoni's novel opened itself to other discourses, such as that of postmodernism. Another discourse with which *Divina Trace* converges occurs in the world of hypertext. Jaishree Odin's article "The Performative and the Processual: A Study of Hypertext/Postcolonial Aesthetic" outlines several ways in which hyper-textual and Postcolonial writing overlap. I believe that *Divina Trace* with its emphasis on multiplicity, orality, and Post-colonial agency clearly exemplifies many of the shared hypertext/Postcolonial issues that Odin outlines.

Multiplicity:

Postcolonial subjects have developed from interplay between the colonizers and colonized, between the powerful and powerless, between the First and Third worlds. Jaishree Odin explains how the existence of this splintered "border subject" reverses traditional limited notions of subjectivity:

Border subjects, thus, live in two or more cultures at the same time. This has given rise to the notion of subjectivity defined in terms of multiple subject positions, which is a direct challenge to the earlier formulation of subjectivity as unitary and singular.

This multifaceted status as subject gives rise to the first feature which hypertext and *Divina Trace* share—the use of multiplicity. Just as Postcolonial writing (the expression of border subjects) seems to demand, hypertext allows for different voices and different subject positions all to share equal ground, linked as they are without a hierarchy that might determine one (voice, subject, theme etc.) more dominant than another. *Divina Trace* proves an excellent example of the multiple expressions of this unchained subjectivity. To begin with, in constructing the identity of Magdalena—and indeed of the island Corpus Christi—Robert Antoni relies not on one narrative perspective, but eight. Seven storytellers and the unifying narrator, Johnny Domingo Jr., participate in the development of Magdalena's story for the reader. This multifaceted subjectivity does not allow itself to be neatly consumed by the demands of traditional narrative, either. For although Johnny's ostensible task involves forming a cohesive story from what he hears, Antoni challenges him (and traditional conceptions of unified narratives) by causing the accounts of Magdalena to conflict with each other. Thus the "narrative" of *Divina Trace* forms a polyrhythm of different accounts playing off one another, each with their own cadence and unique quality.

Furthermore, Antoni's use of the multi-subject narrative structure produces a kind of Bakhtinian multi-vocality. For each narrator speaks with his or her own unique dialect or language (in the case of Hanuman). In this spread of accents and dialects we begin to see

the diversity of a Caribbean culture which may once have stood static and unified in our minds. This multi-vocality has been observed in hypertext by George Landow, as he cites Bakhtin's hyper-textual revisioning of Dostoevsky:

One would do well to pay heed to what Mikhail Bakhtin has written about the dialogic, polyphonic, multi-vocal novel, which he claims "is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other" (18). Bakhtin's description of the polyphonic literary form presents the Dostoevskian novel as a hyper-textual fiction in which the individual voices take the form of lexias. (36)

Odin also notes this multi-vocality, citing it as exemplary of the new space which hypertext and Postcolonial texts create for themselves, a space for which I believe **Divina Trace** makes a strong Caribbean claim:

The perpetual negotiation of difference that the border subject engages in creates a new space that demands its own aesthetic. This new aesthetic which I term "hypertext" or "postcolonial" aesthetic represents the need to switch from the linear, univocal, closed, authoritative aesthetic involving passive encounters characterizing the performance of the same to that of non-linear, multi-vocal, open, non-hierarchical aesthetic involving active encounters that are marked by repetition of the same with and in difference.

Hence, in both hypertext and Postcolonial works (such as **Divina Trace**) multivocal structures call out for diversity. They represent a refusal to be subjugated under one dominant discourse, a refusal to be silenced by one overpowering voice.

This multiplicity functions in another way to better represent fragmented subjectivity. As Odin explains using the example of Leslie Silko's **Storyteller**, the reader experiences diversity beyond conventions of multiple narrators:

Fragmentation and discontinuity also mark postcolonial literary and theoretical works because they are most suitable for representing the multiple subject positions that the postcolonial subject occupies. Silko's **Storyteller** combines many genres—photography, poetry, fiction, as well as telling and retelling of traditional Laguna stories—to produce an open weave of texts.

As in any hypertext document combining sound and images, **Divina Trace** employs a variety of forms and sources to pay homage to the complex roots from which it emerges. Antoni's text encompasses letters, storytelling, discourses on history, pictures, a mirror, and even epic poetry. The last, the epic poem, adds yet another hyper-textual dimension to this tribute to the diversity of the Caribbean. For in retelling the Ramayana, Antoni both reconnects with the Indian roots in the West Indies and develops a living, dynamic connection with the past. Odin finds this hyper-textual interplay marked by sharp cuts between past and present, in Silko's **Storyteller**:

The textual play of two narratives, the old and the new, the past and present, the oral and written is accompanied by yet another type of rupture brought about by sudden shifts of time frames—the distant past, the near past, the present are all juxtaposed in a non-linear fashion.

Similarly, **Divina Trace** cuts from the mythological epic of Rama and Sita to stories that Johnny hears as a boy, to Johnny's thoughts as an old man (where the novel begins) to Johnny's monologues at a variety of ages, as the reader witnesses his growth. The narrative is thus fragmented in time, with each piece, each story, each monologue, possessing its own unique setting and background—just as Postcolonial subjects do.

In sum, hypertext, as Odin explains, allows or even encourages a revision of common conceptions of the subject:

Artists of both print and electronic media use strategies of disruption and discontinuity to create visual and textual narratives that are multi-linear and where meaning does not lie in the tracing of one narrative trajectory, but rather in the relationship that various tracings forge with one another. Shelley Jackson...and Leslie Silko..use similar strategies to represent the multidimensionality of hyper-textual/postcolonial subjectivity...The unitary subject of the modernist era is thus transformed into the nomadic subject no longer passively contemplating the artist's expression but actively involved in shaping her experience.

When a character or subject can be represented by various narrative threads, all linked together but without the neat sense of order and unity that hierarchy offers, one's conception of any character/subject as unified or homogenous becomes problematic. In this way, Antoni challenges his readers and his narrator Johnny not to limit Magdalena (the black Madonna of Corpus Christi) to one essentialized, dead character. Rather, she comes to life best by seeing her reflections in the eyes of each of her storytellers. The narrative of Magdalena's history is thus opened and presented in all its rich complexity, all its folds, twists, and contradictions.

Orality:

Hypertext aesthetic is rooted in active and interactive reading like oral storytelling. Multilinear narratives of hypertext can be regarded as a return to oral storytelling which Walter Benjamin reminds us “permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings” (93). Benjamin's lamentation about the death of storytelling in the age of information finds its apotheosis in the birth of hypertext, since hypertext marks the beginning of storytelling once again.

Here Jaishree Odin drives home the relation between hypertext and storytelling. This relationship springs from hypertext's allowance for a new dialogue between author and reader; a dialogue emphasized by storytelling and shut out by print. Earlier in his article,

Odin demonstrates how Leslie Silko uses storytelling as a reflection of the living text, one that permits greater interaction between narrator and audience:

Leslie Silko's print narratives also reflect hyper-textual strategies such as resisting the fixed unilinear status of the written word in order to embrace the open, multivalent, ambiguous nature of the spoken word... Just as in storytelling, the context and the participants constitute an important element of the direction the story takes, so it is with Silko's works where the reader's positioning determines the trajectory that she traces through the weave of texts.

Divina Trace, too, relies on storytelling to meditate on the interaction between author and reader and to give Antoni's words new life. The most common narrative structure of the novel involves Johnny listening to someone (his father, grandfather, the Mother Superior...) speaking of the history of his family and Magdalena. But this history belongs not only to the past, as Odin comments that

Oral storytelling operates at two levels—at one level it is the representation of an incident that happened a long time ago and at another it is the actual enaction of the incident itself. Due to its improvisational character, the storyteller, the participants and the occasion are all important to determining the direction the story will take. This interacting whole does not aim to describe some final state to be reached, but the process itself which has fluid boundaries in an essentially open structure.

Although these stories of Magdalena come from the past, nonetheless the story has endless ramifications and reflections in the present. Johnny has inherited this story with all its questions of faith and doubt, of science and religion, and thus in sorting through this story Johnny sorts through his own beliefs. Delving into this family story, Johnny develops his own take on the heritage which he receives in pieces from his elders. In a sense, he shapes his heritage just as much as those who transmit it to him. Thus Johnny, like Odin's border subjects whose "essence lies in the act of becoming rather than being," through the oral history he receives, grapples with that history's relation to the present. Like many Postcolonial authors, the interaction between Johnny and his narrators involves an effort to refigure the past, to draw it in a contemporary form into the present. Odin cites Homi Bhabha in his explanation of how this past-present dialectic works in Postcolonial art:

Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent "in-between" space, that innovates and interrupts performance of the present. The "past present" becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia of living. (**The Location of Culture**, 1994, p.7)

Here Bhabha notes that Postcolonial theme which even Robert Antoni could not escape from, the need to grapple with a difficult history and find salvation, even hope, for the future. But Antoni does find this hope, in part because of his hyper-textual creation of a dynamic past-present relationship. The dialogue of this relationship in **Divina Trace**

relies on the greater interaction between narrator and audience that storytelling allows. Thus, this emphasis on orality proves essential to Antoni's ability to rework the past, to turn the history of the Caribbean from a tragedy of disempowerment to a living, ongoing process.

Agency:

In my essay on **Divina Trace**, "Our Literature", I noted how the novel created a new form of Caribbean agency for itself and other works to come. One might think that convergence with hypertext would mean becoming subsumed by a larger, western-dominated, homogenizing school of thought. However, the structure of hypertext (a structure mimicked in certain ways by **Divina Trace**) prevents such dominance, as Odin explains:

Theorizing the hypertext environment in terms of the performative and the processual denies supremacy to any cultural text as no text can exist apart from the living experience of these texts.

In similar fashion, **Divina Trace** offers a conception of a universe in which binaries imposed and created by the west no longer exist. Instead, the novel puts forth a heterogeneous and nonlinear narrative that reverses trends of unity and a dominant discourse traditionally found in print texts. **Divina Trace** seeks agency for the Caribbean by using this nontraditional structure to give voice to a variety of people from the region. No longer will the Caribbean be silenced by more powerful voices; no longer will one voice be expected to speak for an entire region. This novel functions much as George Landow describes hypertext:

In terms of hyper-textuality this points to an important quality of this information medium: hypertext does not permit a tyrannical, univocal voice. Rather the voice is always that distilled from the combined experience of the momentary focus, the lexia one presently reads, and the continually forming narrative of one's reading path. (**Hypertext 2.0**, p. 36)

Thus we can describe a few key elements of **Divina Trace** that allow it to both converge with hypertext and still maintain a new voice for the Caribbean. First, the structure with multiple narrators and multiple voices (much like a hypertext document created by several authors) permits no one voice to take precedence over others and thereby silence them. Further, it forces the Caribbean to be conceived of not as a single unit, but rather a diverse conglomeration of characters and cultures. Second, Antoni's reliance on storytelling and oral history makes clear that the dynamic interaction between narrator and audience, so obvious in a hypertext document where the reader must determine her own path through a text, underscores the existence of the novel. Finally, Antoni's persistent investigation and revision of the past through the eyes of the present keeps **Divina Trace** at once decisively modern and yet allows a refiguring of the past, so essential to those struggling still with the blights of West Indian history. In the end, the worry about this Postcolonial novel losing its voice to a larger discourse proves

unfounded, as that larger discourse of hypertext has in fact only added to the agency that **Divina Trace** seeks.

Afterthought:

Although we can talk about the convergence between the aesthetics of Post-colonialism and hypertext, we cannot actually talk about Post-colonialism as it appears in hypertext, for, at last count, it does not exist. Computer technology in Postcolonial nations does not match even that of the United States, which itself has not yet been able to spread access to this technology very far. I could find very few statistics on internet usage in the Caribbean region—which in itself points to an under-representation of the West Indies in this medium. The Atlanta Constitution (August 23, 1998) did publish an article (on Jamaica's new thirteen-year-old technology adviser) that claimed a mere 35,000 to 40,000 of Jamaica's 2.5 million people (1.4 to 1.6 percent of the population) used the internet. By contrast, United States estimates range from thirty-five to forty-five million people, 12.9 to 16.7 percent of the population. Furthermore, a study conducted by the Cyberatlas company found that, as of 1997, 99 percent of internet servers came from North America, Western Europe, or Asia (primarily Japan) -- again signaling that the Third World has thus far been left out of the "globalization" that the internet promises. I'm still looking for better information on the access available in the Caribbean—if you have any information email me.

Although we set out to develop a correspondence between two potentially divergent schools, those of hypertext and Post-colonialism, we thus run the risk of assuming Postcolonial literature will or should appear in yet another form to which it has no access. We risk making assumptions about the literature based on the access that those of us writing or even reading such internet material enjoy. And thus we must not only be careful in our assumptions, but also push to make this access as widespread and universal as possible. For the web to truly fulfill the potential its capabilities promise, access must greatly increase, so that this converge between Post-colonialism and hypertext may exist on the practical as well as the theoretical level.

References

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