

A Postmodern Collective: Deconstruction, Identity, and Faith in Robert Antoni's *Divina Trace*

Robert Antoni's *Divina Trace*, recipient of the 1992 Commonwealth Writers Prize, is one of the richest explorations of Caribbean lore and language to appear in many years. The novel is narrated by seven different voices--all members of the Domingo family--who circle around, retell, and revise the story of Magdalena Domingo, her union with Barto Domingo, and the birth of her mysterious frog child (called the crapo-child) on the island of Corpus Christi, Antoni's fictional re-creation of Trinidad, about a century ago. The voices include perspectives representing three of the major ethnohistoric elements of the West Indies--European, African, and East Indian; indeed, the central section of the novel, related by Magdalena herself, is patterned after the *Ramayana* but also reiterates, in yet another version, the main events of *Divina Trace*. As the voices speak, through memory, to the primary narrator Johnny Domingo, the myth that has accrued around Magdalena and her crapo-child becomes a way of understanding the island's cultural identity and, by extension, that of the whole Caribbean.¹

Edouard Glissant has observed that "[a]ll mimesis presupposes that what is represented is the 'only true reality.' When it involves two realities of which one is destined to reproduce the other, inevitably those who are part of the process see themselves living in a permanent state of the unreal. That is the case with us" (242). Certainly reality and truth are questioned throughout *Divina Trace*. Johnny Domingo, looking back at age ninety on the events surrounding the "crapo-myth" finds himself frustrated time and again by the conflicting versions of what he hears. He acts as a narrative filter through which the cohesion and contradictions of Antoni's Caribbean story must necessarily be questioned alongside the myth-making process.

The representation of myth and the process of its unfolding are crucial to this novel's understanding. Examining Antoni's creation of the "crapo-myth" reveals a paradox at the center of the novel, a paradox that undercuts the all too common suppositions made about current postmodern texts: that the meaning is there is no meaning. I am not talking about a close reading of the text but Antoni's own demand that the reader deconstruct it, thus engaging in a postmodern discourse, which, oddly enough, ultimately produces unity and meaning in the case of *Divina Trace*. My intent here is not to produce a debate over postmodernism itself or exactly what it is. Yet, establishing an understanding of some of its critical techniques and applying them to *Divina Trace* are necessary to understand Antoni's myth as a cultural collective unconscious, a Caribbean consciousness that exists outside reality, is constantly redefined, and simultaneously serves to define the Caribbean mind.

To show unique elements within *Divina Trace* with regard to the final end of postmodern analysis, it is necessary to examine a few elements that are crucial to the application of postmodern criticism on texts generally. Antonio Benítez-Rojo offers an adequate commentary for our purposes. In his view:

what lies at the heart of postmodern literary analysis: [is] a questioning of the concept of "unity" and a dismantling, or rather unmasking, of the mechanism that we know as "binary opposition"--the thing that sustains,

to a greater or a lesser degree the philosophical and ideological edifice of modernity. (154)

The intention of the postmodern critic, then, appears to be an unraveling of narrative threads by revealing their own contradictions in binary opposites with a view toward a proof of the inability of narrative to represent an accurate reality. The postmodern critic supposes that narrative attempts to create unity where there is, in reality, none. More often than not, the sense one is left with, as a result, is that of meaninglessness within the text. It is the same sense the reader of Thomas Pynchon's *V*. (Pynchon himself being widely regarded as the quintessential postmodern writer) inevitably encounters in an analysis of Stencil's quest for V. Known as "He Who Looks For V" (226), Stencil is obsessed with a search, presumably for a woman, that is doomed to be fruitless by his own refusal to find her. In essence, Stencil finds meaning in his own meaningless quest--the meaning is that there is no meaning.

This is not so with Antoni's novel. In establishing the crapo-story as a myth he invites the reader to move through the text alongside Johnny Domingo, sifting through the six different narratives (and Johnny's own narrative in the reader's case) searching for the truth about what happened. The story has its contradictions. The reader must wonder about certain questions raised between the narratives. Who killed Magdalena? Was it Dr. Domingo? Was it Mother Maurina? Did Magdalena kill herself? We must wonder too if Magdalena is dead at all. In Papee Vince's historical second narrative we are told that, "in fact Magdalena is still alive" (386).

Similarly, we are told in Dr. Domingo's reiteration of the crapo-story that Barto, after killing his son Gomez, "fired quick at his own head to end the whole confusion one time and finish" (276). In fact, this statement only compounds Johnny's confusion (as well as the reader's) when he is told, by Evelina, that "[his] granddaddy Barto is living still. He alive. Still. Living right dere in dat little mudhut in Village Suparee" (337). Papee Vince attests to the same. Moreover, the reader finds that Johnny himself may have killed his grandfather. Finding Barto in a small hut, he drinks rum with the old man and then admits that he "brought the bottle down on [Barto's] head with all my strength. With such force that it broke in [his] hand, even on [Barto's] soft skull" (340).

Perhaps the most significant contradiction within the text is revealed when the reader is forced to juxtapose Granny Myna's two narratives. As readers, we must question the request she has made of Johnny. In her first narrative we find that she has killed the crapochild by dipping him in a pot of boiling callaloo. On her deathbed she tells Johnny:

I am ready to lie down my bones in peace, peace that I have earn with sweating blood cold in the hot night, but I will never know peace so long as I have to be bury next to that crapochild. *Never!* But you will take him away Johnny. You will go for me tonight to Domingo Cemetery, and you will dig him up, and you will carry him away. Now I am ready to die. Go and call mummy and daddy. (19)

This request comes at the very beginning of the novel. It is what the reader supposes Johnny is to do until the very end of the novel where her dying request is much different:

I am ready to lie my bones down in peace, peace that I have earn with sweating blood cold in the hot night, but I will never know peace so long as I have to be bury with this rosary burning a hole in my hand. *Never!*

But you will take it to her, Johnny. . . . now I have hope of all my children carry on for me when I am gone, and you can ask no more than that in the end. Now I am ready to die. Go and call you daddy and mummy. (425-26)

The gift of the rosary takes the place of unearthing the dead crapochild here. Granny Myna's intentions are opposite from her initial hatred at the opening of the novel. Where her first narrative reveals her rejection of the crapochild and Magdalena, this passage suggests an acceptance as well as empathy for the suffering endured. In effect, Antoni undermines, with this contradiction, the most basic truth that we have taken for granted throughout the entire novel.

These are by no means the only contradictions revealed to the reader of *Divina Trace*. The text is littered with them, and their purpose seems to be essentially three-fold. First, they serve to undermine the sort of Western logic that we apply when reading a text--that is, "B" necessarily follows from "A" and leads to conclusion "C." There is simply no place for events taking place and not taking place at the same time, situations where we understand characters who are dead are not dead. Perhaps deconstructionists would point to this undercutting as a failure on the part of the text. A reader might easily say that the story simply does not make sense--that it serves as a proof that narrative is utterly inadequate in its effort to impose unity on an ultimately fragmented reality. But Antoni's text purposely undermines Western logic to explore Antoni's own conception of Caribbean consciousness, and that consciousness is not limited to Western conceptual frameworks, if only because of its multi-cultural origins.

Moreover, Antoni is not describing reality. The second purpose of the contradictions within *Divina Trace* is to develop the entire story as a myth rather than an accurate account of actual events. We must question the reliability of each of the narrators: Granny Myna seems to be biased by her own rejection of Magdalena and the crapochild; Maurina's sanity must be questioned; Dr. Domingo seems to shield his son from certain truths so as not to implicate himself in the death of Magdalena; and Papee Vince, probably the most reliable of all the narrators, admits that he is no more than "a simple storyteller" (341) who was not there for any of the events but speaks about them as if he were a historian. Moreover, Johnny is told by Papee Vince that "this story you hearing might be nothing more than a simple island folktale, telling of simple island folkpeople" (341).

Further establishing this "crapo-narrative" as myth are the techniques used in *Divina Trace* that parallel those that Antoni himself noted in an unpublished essay he wrote on myth-making in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Antoni wrote that "Marquez's structure is based on temporal discontinuity, mythological time" (12). Similarly, *Divina Trace* distorts time throughout the narrative. In Mother Maurina's second narrative we are told that Gomez was ready to "settle he stakes for only a VCR" (268) and in Granny Myna's first section, Johnny, as a young boy, asks the "oldman" what he is dressed as: "'Who you is?' I asked. 'Robot?'" (15). These events take place near the beginning of the century, when VCR's and robots weren't even around. Perhaps the most striking distortion of time comes in Papee Vince's second narrative when, as a parenthetical aside, he interrupts his own current retelling of the crapo-myth to explain to Jimmy that

of course, if [Jimmy] recall[s] the chronology of the story, [he] will remember that Evelina herself wouldn't be dead for a good few years to come, and in fact, I [Papee Vince] myself would be dead for a good few months before her. (346)

So Papee Vince, already dead, is telling Jimmy the crapo-story. We might explain this in the fact that Johnny is remembering all this nearly a century later, but nonetheless, all of these examples serve to distort the chronology within the story.

Antoni, in his unpublished essay on Faulkner and Marquez, also claims that the two writers "allude to Biblical myths, and in doing so they imply the universality of their own stories, and seek to elevate the importance of their stories by associating them with already established myths" (5). *Divina Trace* does the same thing on a complex level. We find that the "crapo-myth" is associated with more than one pre-established myth. It serves to parallel the story of the Virgin Mary and her child throughout, and at the same time, in the center of the novel, Magdalena herself reiterates her story in the form of the *Ramayana*, revealing analogues to Hinduism. Further, in Evelina's narratives, we see ties within the "crapo-myth" to obeah mythology, where Barto serves as both Papa God and Eshu.

In effect, the crapo-story "unfolds like a dream" ("The Myth-making Process" 12), producing the effect of myth according to Antoni, but it is grounded in reality at the same time. In *Divina Trace* this is made clear in a statement Johnny makes during his first discussion with Mother Maurina: "*This must be a dream, because nothing in real life feel so sweet as these pants breezing up against you legs, and nothing could squeeze you so hard as these hardbacks*" (130). Here Antoni mixes dream and reality in Johnny's own realization that what he is experiencing must be a dream because it's so real--another contradiction.

Third and finally with regard to the contradictions in *Divina Trace*, the reader is implicated, almost instinctively, through the process of attempting to make sense of the contradictions throughout the text, in the search for the truth that Johnny himself engages in. The deconstructive process itself demands we search for meaning in the crapo-story as Johnny himself does. Indeed, both the reader and Johnny are doing the same thing: sitting in one place or another and imagining the different narrators telling their version of the story. That is what the novel asks of the reader. In effect, the overall narrative frame of the novel is chronologically simple: Johnny sits up all night remembering events and stories from the past, he leaves his house the next morning, on Corpus Christi day, travels to the chapel at the edge of the swamp, and puts a rosary from Granny Myna around the neck of the statue of Magdalena. What draws the reader into the text must necessarily be the conflicting narratives offered by the various narrators via Johnny. Moreover, one has to look no further than the center of the novel to realize to what extent the text incorporates the reader into the story and the search for truth it demands. Finding the mirror-page and the phrase "SEEING IN DE PAGE you own monkeyface . . ." (205), makes clear Antoni's intent to implicate the reader, or perhaps more clearly, assimilate him/her into the unreality of the text.

This implies an almost second person point-of-view in the text, skillfully breaking down assumed barriers between author, protagonist, and reader, and pointing toward another concern of postmodern literary criticism--what Benítez-Rojo explains as

[a]nother of postmodern literary criticism's concerns [which] lies in demystifying the concept of the author, and erasing the "creator" aura with which modern criticism endows him. For the poststructuralist critic, looking at the literary task from the postmodern standpoint, the author, far from being the creator of worlds, is a technician or artisan whose job is controlled by a preexisting discourse. . . . (153)

And what is the result of a "demystification" of the author in *Divina Trace*? It necessarily must point toward a text that is informed by an entire society and, indeed, that is what *Divina Trace* is. In essence the "crapo-myth" has no single author, but rather, several authors, all of which tell their own "true" version of it. The "truth" of these stories lies in what Papee Vince tells Johnny:

I can only give this story back to you the way life give it to me--the way the story ask itself to be told--with all its many deceptions, and cumbrucations, and confufflations. *Because all that is essential to the telling of this story. . . .* No son, I can only give you this story the way life offer it up, and try my best to remain truthful to all three: to the story, to myself, and to you. . . . Because of course, in the end, as with any other tale told of man or monkeys since the beginning of time, *you can only tell your own story. You can only hear your own story too.* (342, my italics)

Here we find that the contradictions are essential to the story, and the different versions are required. In one sense all of the versions attest to a communal text, a myth that is representative of an entire society. Truth and falsity do not matter here, only the mix of narratives and how they define the community itself. This is further made clear in Papee Vince's reiteration of the history of the statue itself. Key in this history are all the cultural marks that the statue displays: the Madonna and child suggest European Christianity; the mark in the middle of the forehead suggests East-Indian origin; its blackness suggest African or perhaps Creole craftsmanship.

In another sense the story requires revision by all who tell it. The story must evolve and be constantly redefined by those telling it because "you can only tell your own story." The "crapo-myth" serves to define a society and at the same time is redefined by those who tell it then. Both cultural and individual identity are coupled within the myth and its retelling. Further, Papee Vince says of Magdalena's refusal to the canon that: "We took the rejection of Magdalena as a rejection of Corpus Christi sheself, as a denial of we very existence" (387). Johnny also admits his own intimate tie with the crapochild "as though in that frogchild I had suddenly seen myself, my other self, the constant companion of my on-going silent conversation, my twin brother" (170). Surely then, the myth works on both levels within the text--culturally and individually.

The "crapo-myth" lies at the core of the novel in Johnny's own quest for its truth and thus his identity individually and culturally. As Robert Hussein puts it: "The voice of myth, recounting a myth, lies at the heart of this chronicle of the creation of a myth" (21). Readers arrive at this realization, alongside Johnny, deconstructing the myth itself. As a result of that deconstruction we must place the crapo-story outside of the real world. The events described by the different narratives do not add up or cancel one another out. We may be fairly sure that some of those events are true, that something happened seventy-seven years ago which Johnny is recollecting, but we cannot be sure what that something was. In the end we are left with one choice: to believe or not to believe. Here lies the

ultimate paradox within *Divina Trace* and the key to its uniqueness. It is a Kierkegaardian “leap of faith” arrived at through a postmodern critical reading of the text, a reading that intends to nullify meaning within any system of representation and reveal that system’s disunity. The contradictions themselves, the very senselessness of the conflicting narratives encourage the reader to make this leap. Kierkegaard writes that “the movement of faith must continually be made by virtue of the absurd, but in a way, please note, that one does not lose the finite but gains it whole and intact” (37). Thus the meaning (in the Kierkegaardian sense it is union with the infinite or God) that we acquire from a movement of faith is achieved through the absurd or the contradictory nature of the choices with which one is faced. Kierkegaard’s example, Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac, illustrates a movement of faith achieved through Abraham’s simultaneous belief that he had to do God’s will (sacrifice his son) and that God would not allow his son to be killed--a contradiction (see pages 34-7). Antoni’s narrative contradictions elicit a similar movement from the reader.

As with Johnny, the reader has no logical basis for accepting the “crapo-myth” as anything more than a few conflicting narratives given to us by lunatics, biased narrators, and those who were not there. But faced with the choice and the realization that the value of the myth (in all of its many forms) does not lie in its truth or falsity, the reader is left with little apprehension about saying, as Papee Vince suggests, “*Yes. I believe*” (62)--words that reverberate throughout the text and are realized by Johnny when he finally places his grandmother’s rosary around the statue’s neck. Certainly a reader has no more apprehension in accepting this story than, say, believing in the story of Christ, which is given to all Christians in four different, somewhat conflicting versions.

What we are left with after this “leap of faith” is, in fact, a sense of unity in the completion of Johnny’s quest and meaning in the myth itself. This meaning lies outside of any system of logic, as it is grounded in faith and made by virtue of the absurd (i.e. the contradictory elements of the crapo-myth). It is the realization of a sense of what it is to be Caribbean, a sense of a Caribbean consciousness. That consciousness parallels Jung’s own notion of a “collective unconscious.” Jung states that “[t]he obvious application of mythology and religious motifs in a dream” point toward “the activity of the collective unconscious” (*Two Essays* 158). And both mythology and religious motifs play a large part in Antoni’s text.

Moreover, *Divina Trace* serves to encapsulate a sense of “Caribbeanness” in its own self realization of the “crapo-myth” as fiction. In the realization that the myth holds meaning in its very unreality, in its revision of the story, and mixing of cultural identities within it, we realize that the story creates identity as well as represents it culturally. Here we can draw another analogue to Jung’s concept of the “collective unconscious” where he writes of Goethe’s *Faust*:

It is not Goethe that creates *Faust*, but *Faust* that creates Goethe. And what is *Faust*? *Faust* is essentially a symbol. By this I do not mean that it is an allegory pointing to something all too familiar, but the expression of something profoundly alive in the soul of every German. (*Spirit* 103)

We get this same sense of cultural identity in *Divina Trace* when Johnny asks Papee Vince why there is no books of Caribbean literature. Papee Vince replies:

Because why the ass would anybody in they right mind want to read out a story dead, that they could hear in a hundred different *living* versions--

each one better than before--on any streetcorner or porchtopy they happen to stumble. (368)

While the stress in this passage falls on an oral tradition, the concept of "Caribbeanness" is the same as Jung's with regard to "Germanness." Antoni refuses the acknowledgment of a written text simply because the Caribbean one must necessarily be oral--thus the multiple, fragmented narratives of *Divina Trace*. Antoni's crapo-story is timeless, as Johnny notes: "[t]here is no end to any of this. There is only beginning, and between and beginning again" (62). The story exists outside the real world, and yet it evolves with each retelling of it as a mythological cross-section of the Caribbean mind, both defining and being defined by each generation. It serves as a representation of a Jungian concept of "collective unconscious," or perhaps in a more metaphysical sense, a Cartesian model of cultural mind, from which all may draw and store knowledge.

Ultimately, *Divina Trace* encourages and resists postmodern analysis at once. It invites attempts to deconstruct the myth created by Antoni, yet those attempts are diverted by his text's shift to the unreal world of myth. The cultural "Caribbean" meaning of the text rests in the Kierkegaardian notion of the paradox of faith in which there is "an interiority [in Antoni an imagined myth] that is incommensurable with exteriority [the facts or reality], an interiority that is not identical" (Kierkegaard 69). And that paradox undercuts any attempt to eradicate meaning. As Papee Vince explains to Johnny:

You see son, it is not so much the telling of this story. It is the *believing* in it. Because no story told without faith is any kind of story a-tall. It is windballs and airfritters, and anybody who takes even a taste knows the difference. Even before they begin to chew. (396)

¹For an excellent summary of *Divina Trace* see John C. Hawley's article, "Robert Antoni's *Divina Trace* and the Womb of Place," in *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 24: 1 (1993): 91-104

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