

# "Our Literature": Robert Antoni's *Divina Trace*

David P. Lichtenstein '99, Brown University, Contributing Editor, Caribbean Web

## Outdistancing the Sources:

Now I was getting angry, "But what about **our** books? **Our** literature?"

He took a deep breath. "Well," he said, "I suppose nobody ever found the time to write out those ones neither, much less the need. Because why the ass would anybody in they right mind want to read a story "dead", that they could hear in a hundred different **living** versions - each one better than the one before - on any street-corner or porch-stoop they happen to stumble. Then again, I suppose you have to know yourself pretty good before you can write out any storybooks, and that is something we are only now beginning to learn. Because son, I will give you another biological-historical truth. Another one that those historians always seem to forget when it comes to understanding this Caribbean: son, you never truly grow up until the death of you second parent, whether that death is natural, psychological, or the result of bloody murder. Only **then** can you come to know yourself. And in fact, we only just finish matriciding we mummy-England the other day." (368)

Thus, more than three-quarters through his tangled novel *Divina Trace*, Robert Antoni has (whether intentionally or not) a kind of watermark for his work to achieve. And indeed, *Divina Trace*, perhaps more than any other Caribbean novel, pushes its way into the position of keystone for this new tradition. For Antoni's novel simultaneously sheds limiting notions of traditional Post-colonialism, embraces Post-modern themes, all the while remaining perhaps the most essentially "West Indian" novel written yet.

To be fair, other works have paved the way for such a novel. Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*, for instance, delves deep into the history of the Caribbean and brings it to life by embodying it literally in the present. And while Harris takes great strides towards the establishment of a new tradition by setting up binaries such as colonizer versus colonized, or past versus present, and then deconstructing them, Antoni takes an important step further. For he has created a West Indian world so diverse, so multifaceted, that no binaries exist to be deconstructed. In his collection of versions of the story of Magdalena Divina, a black Madonna, no voice predominates, no oppressive force exists to be "written back to" or struggled against. Without a center, the peoples of the margin each occupy their own space, without the constant struggle of difference and resistance. And truly, the absence of these binaries of power separates Antoni's novel from the work of so many of his predecessors.

Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, thirty years later, also figures as a seminal text in developing a new Caribbean literary tradition, for it takes the West Indies, more specifically the island of St. Lucia (where Walcott was born), as its center, and simple Caribbean fishermen as its heroes. Furthermore, *Omeros* uses the metaphor of the sea swift as link, drawing

together different communities -- American Indians, Africans, the Irish, West Indians, etc. - from different shores, all of whom have struggled against an oppressive, colonizing force. Thus Walcott, like Harris, displays a syncretic vision that seems so necessary to founding a Caribbean tradition from such varied sources. Walcott, in addition to taking on binaries in much the same way as Harris, resorts to the Greeks (precursors of the Great Canon of Western Literature) in order to valorize his protagonists. This again sets him apart from Antoni, who instead relies mainly on the stories told by his West Indian characters to elevate Magdalena Divina to saint status -- of which the reader is doubtless convinced **despite** the rejection by the Western Authority on Sainthood, the Catholic Pope. When Antoni does resort to myth, his sources spring not from the West, but rather Indian lore (a strong influence in Antoni's ancestral home, Trinidad - for which Corpus Christi is a thinly disguised stand-in) in the story of Rama and Sita. Antoni even goes so far as to invent his own mythology as developed in Hanuman's legend of the Monkey Tribes.

### **Goodbye Postcolonialism, Hello Postmodernism?:**

The structure of Robert Antoni's **Divina Trace** reveals both how it has (to some extent) fallen into line with a postmodern agenda and how it has broken free from some of the common, limiting concerns of Post-colonialism. **Divina Trace** comprises seven different versions of the story of Magdalena Divina, a black Madonna figure, as told to Johnny Domingo, who through his family (nearly all of whom have been intimately involved with Magdalena in some way or another) has inherited both the stories and the weight they imply, hanging upon his shoulders. This fragmented structure positions **Divina Trace** as a premier example of a polyrhythmic text that allows Caribbean writing to exist beyond the realm of Postcolonial theory.

This multi-vocality (each narrator speaks with his or her own dialect, and at least one -- Hanuman, monkey prince -- uses an entirely new language which Antoni appears to have invented) also forms the first sign of **Divina Trace** as a postmodern novel by linking it to Bahktin and even the world of hypertext. Another indication comes in Mother Maurina's admission of the superficiality of her story:

This black book you holding in you hands full to the cover overflowing with nothing more than front-page stories steal repetitious from the **Bomb** incomplete chronological disorder with the table of contents at the front listing the whole of this great fortnight of thirteen headlines of apparitions.(259)

The Mother's confession seems to reflect the postmodern concern with multiple versions of a nonexistent original (like the simulacra) scattering the truth across their surface. Only in pulling all of the pieces together -- as Johnny must do in trying to unify all of the stories he hears -- can one arrive at a sort of conclusion, though only approximate -- as absolutes of truth no longer exist in a Post-modern world. Finally, the novel's use of varied media including drawings and even a mirror (another hint at postmodernism's preoccupation with reflection) signify another link with post-modernity and hypertext, as

each have broken down walls between one media and another, or even between author and reader, just as Antoni does.

Despite these postmodern associations, it would be ridiculous to assert that **Divina Trace** is not a Postcolonial novel. The very fact that its author hails from a former British colony, and its subject matter details life in such a colony, assures the novel's Postcolonial status. But this falls short of limiting the novel to similar themes as other Postcolonial Caribbean works, such as deconstruction of binaries (center/margin, colonizer/colonized, etc.), language problematics, interrogation of the First World, rejection of imposed western culture, etc. Indeed, Antoni's novel does accomplish some of those aims, but rather than writing of how he has accomplished these, as many other writers have done, he instead takes them as a starting point and thus frees himself to tackle a wealth of issues (the postmodern concerns above, the tension between science and religion, the power of myth in family heritage, etc.) from his personal West Indian perspective.

Several marks point to Antoni's escape of traditional Postcolonial issues. First and perhaps most significant, Antoni has not begun with a structure of binary opposites and then proceeded to knock them down. Rather his fragmented story permits no space for limiting binarisms to exist. Each of the seven different versions of the story contradicts another in some way, but the sheer number of them prevents the reader from considering any one version the true version, the main narrative, nor any storyteller as central, opposed by a subversive margin. Antoni further evades traditional Postcolonial issues by minimizing the presence of empire altogether. No colonizing characters, such as Prince from Earl Lovelace's **The Wine of Astonishment** or even Major Plunkett from Derek Walcott's **Omeros**, appear in **Divina Trace**. While the Pope does make an appearance to negate Magdalena's official status as saint, Antoni renders his judgment superfluous by presenting it after a wealth of conflicting evidence. Finally, unlike Postcolonial peers such as Walcott, V.S. Naipaul, or even Jamaica Kincaid, Antoni does not rely on allusions to the canon to spice up or elevate his prose. He does refer to Joyce and Shakespeare, but rather than humbly pay tribute to these greats, he twists them to fit his own text:

"Wanderloo," he now sololoquize. "Tutupaia, ono toque? Twoolly tisenoble tabear teasing stones of orangutudinous fortune? Thomasi? Presbytis obscura? Aye, rub de rub!" (200)

Here he has filtered **Hamlet** through the voice of Hanuman, the monkey prince, and thus deprived Shakespeare of the colonial authority and power on which his (character's) words once rested. References, such as this, dot Antoni's text, continually asserting the centrality and power of his novel over that of the Canon, continually appropriating its words for his own use.

### **Caribbean Agency:**

Despite Antoni's general minimization of it in his novel, the West does play one important role within **Divina Trace**. For no work so self-conscious of its textuality, and so aware of its audience, could ignore the question of how it will reach that audience: who will publish this book? Antoni raises this question again and again:

Allday at you writingdesk, lefthandinyoupan, who ga publish dis monksense?  
garillaorgy! **Francoisi Review?** (199)

But soon de monkey did pause again,  
Something now more to consider:  
How might he story be publish abroad?  
Where are dere monkeys enough to read it?  
Where, in truth, are dere monkeys patient to trudge,  
Dis mudthick-mudswamp of monkeylanguage? (215-216)

The narrator and story-assembler Johnny Domingo realizes the unfortunate answer to these monkeyquestions as well as their telling condemnation of the status of the Caribbean:

It was during this fractured moment, in a flash of insight, which I came up with the definition of the Caribbean which I'd been searching for. A definition found in all of our literature, and written between the lines of every tourist pamphlet: it is whatever America wants you to be. (303)

However, the mere fact that this book does exist, put out by an American publishing company, rife with Trinidad's dialect and usage, signals that the Caribbean -- while still not possessing the money or power to publish and distribute its own works -- now enjoys greater freedom and respect within the confines of First World publishing. Thus even as he acknowledges the superior power of the West, Antoni has brought the Caribbean one step (perhaps several steps) closer to joining it on the world's stage.

As I studied in Barbados, I became aware of the reluctance of people in the Caribbean to join a homogenizing, international postmodern movement which denies the importance of individual history and personal testimony. But here I find perhaps the truest measure of the success of **Divina Trace**. While the novel does ignore some Postcolonial, and embrace some postmodern, issues, this all comes under the process of gaining great agency for the West Indies. As mentioned above, the sheer fact of the novel's publication, rife with such Caribbean English words as "crapo" or "viekeeve" (and hundreds of others unfamiliar to the First World) signals a new infusion of the Caribbean voice in the global market. But **Divina Trace** goes beyond conventions of language to access West Indian subjectivity. Papee Vince's background to Corpus Christi Day functions as a mini history lesson -- but a distinctly Caribbean one, one not found in any textbook published as yet. The most obvious clue comes in his use of "we", as in "So now we turned to copra," (374), to signify that his is a history of West Indians told by West Indians. The history focuses not on politics at the macro level, but on the trials of West Indian laborers and the

crops they grew. Furthermore, within this Caribbean history Papee Vince attacks those who helped to keep the region in a subordinate economic position:

Because of course, even though Corpus Christi cocoa is known the world over, nobody has never yet heard of a single tin of Ovaltine, or a Cadbury, or a morsel of chocolate coming from this island. Not by a chups. We economy is still dependent on Europe. (373)

Interesting though that Papee Vince blames Africa as well as Europe for the Caribbean's floundering, signalling his intent to not only give a Postcolonial history but a uniquely Caribbean one. Indeed the novel as a whole really traces Caribbean history, as it locates the background of Magdalena Divina not in the bible (nor even in the Indian traditions consistently referenced) but in Corpus Christi and its own history, proving to whom this story belongs:

And I remember thinking even then that the reason is because this story does not belong to this voice. To these voices. This story belongs to that moon. To that black sky and that black sea. This story belongs to the same foul smell of the swamp when the wind blows. (310)

During my time in Barbados, I also attended the launch of (British publishing company) Faber and Faber's Caribbean Writers Series. Great, I thought, yet another western company has found a way to exploit and market the Caribbean at no profit to the region. Why isn't this the launch of a Caribbean publishing company?

Robert Antoni, as it turns out, was one of the keynote speakers at this function (ironically standing in for Wilson Harris). During his speech, he retold the story of the ingested glass eye found in the pages of **Divina Trace**. Although I didn't realize it at the time, this story represented Antoni's feeling that, short of my somewhat naive dreams of Caribbean economic independence, great strides have been taken. Sorting through all the "cacashit" (as his narrators frequently refer to his novel) of Antoni's work, one finds at the bottom: an eye. Or rather one finds an **I**, a uniquely West Indian I, born out of a Caribbean stomach that for too long had been stuffed with the "Imperial **Canon**", finally possessing the voice with which it can assert itself.

This Caribbean "I" has managed to incorporate somehow themes both of post-modernity and Post-colonialism. But it cannot be characterized completely within either school. For as **Divina Trace** asserts, this I belongs to the poly-rhythms of the West Indies. This novel signifies a new maturity for the Caribbean, a newfound possession of its voice and its agency. **Divina Trace** makes its mark as a syncretic force that has filtered the west and the east, post-modernity and Post-colonialism, through the voices and minds of the Caribbean archipelago. It belongs ultimately not to one of these schemas, nor even to Robert Antoni, but to "the same foul smell of the swamp when the wind blows."

## References

Antoni, Robert. **Divina Trace**. New York: Overlook Press, 1991.