

# Robert Antoni: The Voyage In by Richard F. Patteson

If the imaginative writer's task, as Caryl Phillips has claimed, is to remember the forgotten when history has been distorted or broken, contemporary West Indian writers have certainly conceived an impressive variety of responses to that challenge. Olive Senior's meditations on the intricate interplay between traditional ways and the modernizing encroachments of the wider world, Zee Edgell's efforts to record and personalize the initial chapters of her nation's story, Shiva Naipaul's elegiac dissections of a displaced and disintegrating subculture, and Phillips' own small, vivid recuperations of personal and cultural history--all are manifestations of this larger project, a positive zeal to reattach to the Caribbean present an idea of a past that will give the present a new meaning. All of them, too, move toward this end through what Edward Said calls "the voyage in"--a "conscious effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories. . . ." For the Caribbean writer such a transformation of discourse is particularly complicated: in the West Indies, the past has been shattered into so many discrete pieces that the reconceptualization of history must be, at the very least, collective and composite--an evolving, creolized history for a creole culture. It is this kind of history, and the West Indian obsession with it, that Robert Antoni evokes in his prodigious, multifaceted novel Divina Trace--a circular, interconnected series of narratives about the past that is both internally coherent and as centrifugal in its expanding waves of signification as Antonio Benítez-Rojo's "repeating island," "unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth." Antoni's own "voyage in" is characterized, above all, by exactly the countercolonizing movement that Said describes: the incorporation of non-linear thought structures associated with south Asia and west Africa into the narrative design of a very Western form of discourse, the fictional family chronicle, transforming it truly into something rich and strange.

Although the repeated interpretation and reinterpretation of family and island past generates the narrative structure of Divina Trace, the novel also explores other issues related to the ambiguous interplay between past and present. Like Edgell, Antoni addresses the question of how personal and cultural identities evolve and grow, together, after the historical ruptures brought about by colonialism. The novel is, among many other things, an astonishingly complex and ambitious anatomy of the collective composition of human personality. The most emotionally compelling element of the novel, in fact, is the difficult struggle of the central character, Johnny Domingo, at the age of ninety, to understand who he is by examining fragments of island history and legend made available to him through memory, imagination, and dream. And critical to the island's sense of identity and independence is the figure of Magdalena Divina, whose story is inextricably entwined with that of Johnny's family, and whose role as Caribbean mother assumes--quite literally--mythic proportions. The myth that Divina Trace gradually produces for the reader is, fittingly, a highly syncretic one; the statue of

Magdalena Divina and the stories surrounding it have sublime meaning for Amerindians, Catholics, Hindus, and followers of West African religious traditions like Shango. Magdalena is the novel's principal embodiment of the creolization process that has become history's answer to its own dismemberment.

It is relatively easy to sketch out the areas in which Antoni's work can be seen as part of the same experiential territory as that of many of his West Indian contemporaries: the search for identity, the role of the mother, the creolization of Caribbean societies, the imagination's engagement with history, the importance of storytelling in the retrieval and transmission of culture. In Antoni's short fiction such similarities can seem relatively routine; in *Divina Trace*, one of the most ambitious, complex, and successfully rendered novels of the past several years, these themes are raised to an altogether higher power. The method of storytelling becomes a meditation on the intrinsic attributes of story itself, with all of its attendant retelling, variation, and elaboration. This aspect of the novel in turn raises questions about the shifting, variable quality of truth (as humans perceive it) and the nature of human consciousness. Beyond and beneath Johnny Domingo's reminiscences and dreams lie further questions: what is history? does an objective history even exist? what is the relationship between history, storytelling, and myth? what, indeed, is the relationship between imagination and reality?

Robert Antoni's grasp of the complexities of a Caribbean culture engendered by multiple histories derives at least in part from aspects of his own background. He was brought up in the Bahamas, the son of a Trinidadian physician who settled in Freeport after attending medical school in Canada. In addition to his parents and siblings, the Bahamas household included Antoni's paternal grandparents, and his grandmother in particular--the model for Granny Myna in *Divina Trace*--fired his imagination with tales of the old days in the southern Caribbean. Just as important to his artistic development is the fact that the family appears to have retained, and even cherished, its sense of West Indian identity, while the affections and loyalties of many other predominantly white creoles have inclined toward Europe. Edward Kamau Brathwaite has argued that novels like *Wide Sargasso Sea* that dramatize the problems of white creoles do not really represent the West Indies because they do not directly address the experience of the predominantly poor and black masses. The implication that no work in this category can be construed as authentically West Indian has been vigorously challenged by the Caribbean's pre-eminent literary critic, Kenneth Ramchand, who deplores drawing such exclusionary lines based solely upon non-artistic considerations. Not only does Brathwaite's formulation seem to rule out figures like Phyllis Shand Allfrey, Michael Drayton, and H.G. deLisser, but it clearly marginalizes the many brilliant Caribbean writers of East Indian origin. In Brathwaite's defense, it must be admitted that West Indians of mainly European heritage have produced very few writers of quality who have associated themselves primarily with the West Indies. Antoni's work, however, is nothing if not authentically West Indian. Everything about it--the command of vernacular speech, the evocation of place, and above all the mastery of the cultural nuances of Glissant's "métissage without limits"--marks Antoni's fiction as a major imaginative effort at "understanding this Caribbean"(368).

Antoni's short stories are unmistakably the work of an apprentice writer surveying and staking out a stretch of newly-discovered terrain, but they are no less a part of that

terrain than is Divina Trace, and they provide a useful introduction to the more baroque features of the novel. Two of the best are "Two-Head Fred and Tree-Foot Frieda," which takes place in the Bahamas, and "My Grandmother's Story of the Buried Treasure and How She Defeated the King of Chacachacari and the Entire American Army with Her Venus-Flytraps," which, like Divina Trace, is set on the island of Corpus Christi, Antoni's fictional version of Trinidad. "Two-Head Fred . . ." is an initiation story that dramatizes a boy's traumatic passage from the realm of childhood magic to the republic of hard adult fact. Billed as an excerpt from the novel in progress that would become Divina Trace, "Two-Head Fred . . ." actually was never part of the longer work and in fact was written three years before Divina Trace was even begun. The main character is Addy, an eleven-year-old boy spending part of his vacation with his family at their summer house on Deep Water Cay, Bahamas. With them is Zoe, their longtime housekeeper, who, as Addy explains to his curious friend Jook Jook, has "'lived with us since Christopher and I were babies.'" Zoe helped raise the two brothers, but so, in a way, has Jook Jook, who every summer does "odd jobs" for their father and takes the boys "fishing, conching, and misbehaving." Jook Jook, Addy explains, is "the greatest conch and woman jooker in all the world"(87-88). This summer he takes an interest in Zoe, who has accompanied the family on their holiday for the first time.

The story really has two plots that advance simultaneously and converge near the end. During the month a romance develops between Jook Jook and Zoe, but while this is happening, Addy is busy fending off the monotony of daily life on a small island, which he describes as "anything . . . but exciting"(87) and "pretty boring"(97). Always eager to transform quotidian reality into something more interesting, he reflects, "I had lots of time on my hands; ideas were already taking shape in my head"(87). The most important of those ideas is a plan to follow Jook Jook and Zoe around until he sees them "'in action'"(91). His imagination is further stimulated by Jook Jook's tall tales of a two-headed dog (Fred) and a woman with three feet (Frieda) who rides a bike and sells toe jam. Addy includes these figures in the cast of characters he already knows, making no distinction between fact and fiction. Ten-year-old Christopher is Addy's opposite number, a pragmatist and wet blanket who is always tugging him toward phenomenal reality and conventional morality. Christopher says flatly, "'There isn't any Three-foot Frieda,'" and when Addy asks him if he wants to help catch Jook Jook and Zoe in the act of jooking, Christopher primly declares, "'I'm not interested in spying on anyone. It's not right'"(91).

The month passes slowly for Addy, who fails, in spite of all his efforts and hopes, to see anything resembling jooking. On the last day, however, he has his chance. Hiding in Jook Jook's boat, he manages to follow them to McClean's Town, where he slips into his friend's house and hides in a hanging closet made out of a tall box. The closet is jumbled and cramped. Just as Zoe and Jook Jook enter the house, Addy knocks over and partly spills a bottle of rum stashed on the floor. He swallows "several mouthfuls"(99) of it to calm his nerves, then begins to sweat and feel dizzy. When he takes another swig of the rum, his equilibrium is shattered by a comical collision of the imaginary and the factual:

The closet began to spin. I closed my eyes. Two-head Fred snapped at me, Why you do dis, boy? Why you do dis to me? I screamed. Zoe screamed. 'Tief in de house! Tief!' I tried to shove out of my closet. It flopped over, trapping me

inside, rum spilling, Zoe screaming. Tree-foot Frieda kicked me. How you could do me dis mischief, chil'? How you could neglec' me so? Commotion filled the house: the sounds of people rushing, crying, yelling. (99)

The ideas that have been "taking shape" in Addy's head have to do with a very adult, and in a sense very practical, activity--sexual intercourse. Addy has tried to domesticate the adult world by bringing what is for him the most mysterious part of it within the borders of his youthful imagination. But his attempt to witness joking--to see the thing itself as it actually exists--leads him abruptly out of the familiar neighborhood of childlike "ideas" and into the unpleasant foreign territory of responsibility and guilt.

The pas de deux between imagination and phenomenal reality is also central to "My Grandmother's Story of the Buried Treasure . . .," and it is this element as well that links the short fiction most fundamentally to Divina Trace. Unlike "Two-Head Fred and Tree-Foot Frieda," "My Grandmother's Story . . ." also shares with Divina Trace a locale (the island of Corpus Christi) and several characters, although the time frames of the novel and the story are not an exact fit. In the story Granny Myna mentions that she was married in January 1913, while in the novel she is already a wife and mother by 1899. At some point during the composition of the novel Antoni seems to have decided to push the Domingo family history further back into the past. But even within Divina Trace he manipulates the temporal dimension to such a degree that his elaborately recorded chronology undoes itself at virtually every turn. Read by itself, without reference to events in Divina Trace, "My Grandmother's Story . . ." is a fairly straightforward account of a comic (almost a mock epic) confrontation between Granny Myna and a charlatan who tries to steal her money by exploiting her interrelated faith in science and belief in the supernatural.

This rascal, the "King" of Chacachacari, appears at Granny Myna's door one day "dress up like he playing mas in Carnival" with "a big ruby upon the forehead flashing, and earrings dangling, and rings rings rings"(285), although Granny Myna immediately notices that "even with all the jewels and paraphernalia he have so, the only clothes he wearing is dirty old dungarees . . ."(285). The contrast between the two styles is important; it establishes a pattern of interplay between what is and what might be that runs through the whole story and gives it resonance. The King tells Granny there is a hoard of gold bricks hidden on land she was forced to give up "to make the American Base during the war"(281) and assures her that what lies beneath the ground is still legally hers. The King, with his retinue of small Indian boys, appears as a figure out of a magic world of remote times, legendary places, and buried treasures--which is exactly the impression he wishes to convey. But Granny Myna remains skeptical. She has seen too much of Caribbean reality, distorted by rum and Coca Cola and the Yankee dollar, to be readily taken in by this parody of Caribbean romance.

The King's scheme is too complicated to summarize in detail, but the core of it involves an angel who guards the treasure and who must be propitiated by burning ten thousand dollars in his presence. Granny Myna skillfully interrogates the King about the nature of the heavenly being, and on this subject she is on familiar ground. Was it male or female? she asks. The King replies that it was a "man angel" because "he see the parts"(289). While it is obvious that this angel is concocted by the King to trick the old lady out of her money, the reality of angels is not questioned by Granny Myna. In fact, she suspects the king of lying precisely because she does believe in them: "So right then

I know no to believe nothing the King say, because the truth, if you ever see an angel--and I seen plenty in my time--is that they are all smooth"(289). To corroborate this point she consults the family scientist, Uncle Olly, "a professor of bones and rocks"(290), who assures her that "yes, angels is smooth"(292). After several twists in the plot Granny Myna and Uncle Olly become sufficiently mesmerized by the "magic"(288) of the King's metal detecting device to give him all the money they can scrape together, but when she at last realizes the full extent of his deceit, Granny Myna brings all her wit to bear, including a knowledge of bush medicine, on the task of defeating and humiliating her foe.

In addition to introducing several characters from Divina Trace, "My Grandmother's Story . . ." contains a wealth of detail about the customs and history of Trinidad, very thinly disguised as Corpus Christi. But its real achievement lies in the sophistication underlying its humorous treatment of the clash between Granny and the King. The King is a pragmatist with a vivid imagination and no moral compass, while Granny is an imaginative and religious woman with a keen, pragmatic mind. Everything in the story (like Uncle Olly's scientific observations on a supernatural being's anatomy) suggests that unequivocal distinctions between the phenomenal and the extra-phenomenal worlds are naive at best. Granny Myna believes in angels, but what initially convinces her to give money to the King is his demonstration of the metal detector. This "magic" machine and the bogus angel are two small manifestations of an idea that is much more fully developed in Divina Trace: the frequent ambiguity of the conjunctions between science and religion, reason and faith, "fact" and imagination, history and myth.

### Divina Trace: The Tale of Telling

#### i. Combructions and Confufflations

Even a preliminary exploration of Divina Trace requires a good bit of circling around, doubling back, overlapping, and returning to terrain already trod, if only because that is the way the book itself is constructed. The form of Divina Trace resembles Benítez-Rojo's description of the Caribbean itself:

If someone needed a visual explanation, a graphic picture of what the Caribbean is, I would refer him to the spiral chaos of the Milky Way, the unpredictable flux of transformative plasma that spins calmly in our globe's firmament, that sketches in an "other" shape that keeps changing, with some objects born to light while others disappear into the womb of darkness; change, transit, return, fluxes of sidereal matter.

Divina Trace is, like Henry James' characterization of Conrad's technique, "a prolonged hovering flight of the subjective over the outstretched ground of the case exposed." The subjectivity of the seven voices that speak to Johnny Domingo as he pieces together his family history makes the "case exposed," in this case, an intricate medley of shifting events, relationships, and dates. The text is further complicated by the duality of the voice that links together and in a sense contains all the others, that of Johnny himself,

recalling the sensibility of youth from the perspective of old age. Johnny's own words are powerfully infused with childhood fear, and ninety years of wisdom acquired through experience, in both American and the Caribbean, have not extinguished that terror.

The arrangement of voices in Divina Trace is concentric, like the winds surrounding the eye of a hurricane. The first five "narrators"--Granny Myna (Johnny Domingo's paternal grandmother), Papee Vince (his maternal grandfather), Evelina (the family's black servant), Dr. Domingo (Johnny's father), and Mother Superior Maurina (Granny Myna's older sister)--all "speak" to Johnny, through the medium of his memory, in prose. Near the middle of the book Magdalena--the focal point of Johnny's ruminations--recites in her southern Caribbean dialect a two-part verse variation on the Indian epic, the Ramayana, which is simultaneously a variation on the plot of Divina Trace. Between the two halves of Magdalena's poem, and at the dead center of the novel, lies an even more oracular utterance, the narrative of Hanuman the Hindu monkey god. Hanuman, in his "calypso-simian tongue," a non-syntactical, highly associational flow of words and syllables, spins out his own version of the "subplot of the monkey tribes" found in the Ramayana, a part of the epic that is probably older in origin than the primary story of Rama and Sita. This section, as Antoni describes it, "provides a transition between the two halves of the book, which are constructed as mirror-images, and it stands apart as an encapsulation of the novel as a whole." Following the second half of Magdalena's poem, the novel's five prose narrators finish their accounts in reverse order: Mother Superior Maurina, Dr. Domingo, Evelina, Papee Vince, and Granny Myna.

The middle of the novel--Magdalena's poem and Hanuman's monkey talk--is its most forbidding stretch of territory: a verbal version of the tangled Maraval Swamp at the end of the path called Divina Trace. In the poem Hanuman himself asks playfully, "Where are dere monkeys enough to read it? Where, in truth, are dere monkeys patient to trudge,/ Dis mudthick-mudswamp of monkeylanguage?"(215-16) Hanuman's section suggests a level or source of consciousness beneath or prior to rational thought, and therefore a prelinguistic, even perhaps prehuman, origin of storytelling and myth. Later in Divina Trace Johnny Domingo himself recalls thinking, "[T]his 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). Johnny's odyssey through the novel's voices takes him at last into this inner swamp--deep into himself--and what he encounters there is crucial to his understanding of his own identity. When he emerges from it, and into the comparative light of the rest of Magdalena's poem, he is ready to retrace his steps back through the other voices that have spoken to him. The poem itself is much more than a witty, Caribbeanized retelling of the events in Divina Trace. As one of the oldest stories in human history (as well as one of the most widely known), the Ramayana serves as a prototype--a particularly pertinent one in that it arose out of an oral tradition and exists in many different written versions. Philip Lutgendorf characterizes the epic as "a meta-story never exhaustively encompassed by any one text but always inspiring new and variant readings." Finally, the Ramayana, like Divina Trace, records the birth of a myth out of storytelling, and its inscription on the consciousness of a people. As Amer Hussein put it in one of the most perceptive reviews of the novel, "The voice of a myth, recounting a myth, lies at the heart of this chronicle of the creation of a myth."

Although the plot of Divina Trace is constantly evolving as the different voices speak to Johnny Domingo in his memories and dreams, the plot does possess a determinate core, and that core is Johnny's search for the plot. All of the voices recorded in Divina Trace, along with Johnny Domingo's frequent commentaries on them, are recalled in one long night of rumination--the night before Johnny's ninetieth birthday--but they have traced themselves on the slate of his mind over a period of decades. At first he thinks of the process only in general terms as "a collection of voices merging and separating, and occasionally falling into rhythm with my own quick breathing"(82). Later, reflecting on Mother Superior Maurina's version of the story, and how it came to him, he realizes how much more is involved:

First it was only the isolated words: short phrases, fragments of a language which I knew belonged only to her. And as the years progressed and I continued to listen I began to hear whole passages, coming to me from somewhere out of my childhood--from somewhere out of that vast storehouse of words and images constantly disassembled and reassembled and surfacing again mysterious, new--so that now at the end of ninety years of blind hearing I can sit here and listen to the whole story . . . (157-8)

And what is that story? As Papee Vince is fond of saying, the facts are these: Long before Johnny Domingo was born, when his father was a young man just back from medical school in London, an adolescent girl named Magdalena emerged from the bush, joined Mother Maurina's convent, and seven months later gave birth to a child said to be half-frog and half-human, although it may only have been anencephalic. Magdalena herself died immediately afterward, under circumstances that are hotly disputed, and the child, christened Manuelito Domingo, lived for just three days.

Even these "facts" do not go wholly uncontested, and as the tale is fleshed out with detail, revisions and additions multiply. Magdalena first appeared in the town of St. Maggy's when she was thirteen (according to Mother Maurina) or fifteen (according to Papee Vince). She was brought up in the bush among Warrahoons (Amerindians), yet she sported a Hindu tilak in the middle of her forehead. Johnny's own family members regard her as the illegitimate child of Barto, Johnny's paternal grandfather, and Mother Maurina, his sister-in-law (who is herself probably one-fourth Amerindian). The frogchild (or "crapochild," as he is frequently called) Manuelito was apparently the equally illegitimate issue of Barto and his own daughter, Magdalena. Dr. Domingo, Johnny's father, swears that Magdalena's hymen was imperforate--yet she was pregnant and gave birth, evidently through Caesarian section. Dr. Domingo also insists that Magdalena committed suicide (after seeing the baby) by holding her breath, even though he acknowledges that such a feat is "impossible"(116). Later, Mother Maurina admits to suffocating her daughter with a pillow. Still later, Papee Vince (or, it must be stressed, Johnny's recollection of Papee Vince) reveals that Magdalena did not die at all, but was nursed back to health by the Warragoon bush doctor, Brito Salizar, who may have been Granny Myna's grandfather. As Johnny turns these matters over and over in his mind, he is acutely aware that the legend of Magdalena Divina associated with a statue in a nearby chapel "belonged to a time much older than Mother Maurina"(39). How then, he wonders, could the Magdalena known to his father and grandparents have been, as they claim, the woman behind the myth?

Johnny Domingo's effort to find answers to this and many other questions is the novel's constant. The basis of his inquiry is epistemological, and like the search for V. in Pynchon, it is complicated by a seemingly endless proliferation of signs. Johnny's confusion is evident from the novel's first episode, in which he recalls making his way down the ten miles of Divina Trace to the Maraval Swamp clutching a large glass bottle containing Magdalena's supposedly dead frogchild. It is the night before his thirteenth birthday, and his Granny Myna has asked him, on her deathbed, to remove the frogchild's body from the family plot so that she will not be buried next to her late husband's bastard. At the end of this section Johnny remembers opening the bottle, tilting it, and watching the creature, miraculously alive after so many years, swim into the dark waters of the mangrove swamp. The incident, whether real or imagined, haunts Johnny Domingo his entire life; it is, in his mind, the experiential link that connects his own story to that of Magdalena and through her, to the entire island. But as information about the frogchild accumulates, so does Johnny's bewilderment.

That his bewilderment might itself be part of the story's dynamic does not become clear to Johnny until very late in Divina Trace. Once again, the explanatory voice is that of the novel's historian and most nearly impartial narrator, Papee Vince:

I can only give this story back to you the way life give it to me--the way the story asks itself to be told--with all its many deceptions, and combructions, and confufflations. Because all that is as essential to the telling of this story--as essential to the understanding of it--as any amount of poetry pile up in the po beneath you bed. . . . 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)

Papee Vince makes two vital points here: the "deceptions" of story reflect those of reality, and every story is a product of the creative minds of both teller and listener. Furthermore, if Magdalena's story is really Johnny's own, the architecture of the novel, with its overwhelming emphasis on Magdalena and her child, argues that the most important parts of all our stories do not lie in the routine events marking our lives, but within our imaginations. The linear, rational, conventionally "realistic" elements of Johnny Domingo's biography--his alienation from the Church, his decision to become a doctor, his education in the United States, his marriage and children, and his return to Corpus Christi to practice medicine--all emerge, almost as asides, from the interstices between blocks of narrative recounting his family history. It is important that Johnny has come back to the Caribbean, but it is the magic and terror of the Caribbean past, swarming in his thoughts, that has brought him there.

The "combructions and confufflations" of Divina Trace certainly mirror an uncertain and fluid reality. Increasingly in the second half of the novel, however, Johnny Domingo's own imagination appears to play a role in shaping, and even distorting, the events purportedly described by others. At several points he confuses memory with dream, as episodes from his later life intersect, in his mind, with scenes from his early childhood. His recollections are strewn with anachronisms--K-Mart's, VCR's, and Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets that can exist only in Johnny's memory, not in those of his long-dead relatives. One of those family members, Papee Vince, even refers to his own death when he "says" to Johnny, "[I]f you recall the chronology of this story, you will remember how Evelina sheself wouldn't be dead fa good few years to come, and in

fact, I myself would be dead a good few months before her"(346). Many of these elements, including the frequent repetition of words, phrases, and whole paragraphs, belong to the topography of an old man's past-plagued mind. But not all of the text's problematic features can be explained away so easily. The "chronology of this story" fiercely resists untangling. If Johnny Domingo is ninety years old in 1999, as he repeatedly claims, he would have been born in 1909; but when he leaves Corpus Christi on his eighteenth birthday, the year is "1938"(234) according to a letter from his father. And although Johnny says that Granny Myna was ninety-six when she asked him, at age thirteen, to dig up the frogchild and throw it in the swamp, if he was born in 1909, the incident would have taken place in 1922. According to Papee Vince, Barto left Granny Myna "a widow at the age of thirty-six"(397)--in 1899. The dates simply do not add up. Indeed, it would be a violation of the whole tenor of the novel if they did. There is no reason why time should be any easier to wrestle to the ground than any other aspect of the novel's reality. Moreover, the refusal of the novel's chronology to unfold in a linear and consistent pattern contributes to the sense of dimensions beyond the immediate reach of human perception, as in the Ramayana itself. Describing the Hindu epic, R.K. Narayan says, "The time scheme . . . is somewhat puzzling to us who are habituated to a mere horizontal sequence of events. . . . One has to . . . get used to a narrative going backwards and forwards and sideways." Time in Divina Trace, reflecting Benítez-Rojo's characterization of Caribbean culture, "unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of clock and calendar."

Chronology, like the varying and conflicting accounts of the events themselves, constantly dissolves and is reassembled, suggesting an irreducible indeterminacy in the very fabric of human experience. Dr. Domingo puts it bluntly: "Is your reality any less real than my own? All this confusion begins before we open our eyes, before the first stories begin to tell, so how can we *ever* expect to understand it?"(102). Yet the telling of stories, and their virtual reification as myths, is the strategy by which human beings and human cultures try to understand and tame the unfamiliar and the uncertain. Antoni has long been interested in the evolution of storytelling into myth as a response to the "confusion" inherent in human experience. In an unpublished paper comparing "the myth-making process" in Absalom, Absalom! and One Hundred Years of Solitude he enumerates several techniques used by both Faulkner and Garcia Márquez to transform their stories into myth. Among them are the use of "primeval, regional settings to achieve a universal context," the frequent repetition of events "to impart a sense of mythic importance," as well as "the repetition of names and personality traits," the "disruption of temporal continuity to place the stories in the realm of discontinuous, universal, or mythic time," and the employment of the devices of "oral narration." Antoni eventually used all of these techniques in Divina Trace; the list, in fact, serves as quite a useful introduction to his own work. But it is in another unpublished essay that Antoni most openly identifies the path he takes in Divina Trace:

In it I attempt to create the myth of my own origins, of my own family history, and I attempt to create it around the figure of a mother-goddess who has long inspired me: she is La Divina Pastora, the black madonna who features in the Catholic church of Siparia, a small East-Indian village in southern Trinidad.

Mark Kurlansky relates a revealing incident that occurred when he was a passenger on a catamaran off the north coast of Jamaica in 1973. A man singing and playing a banjo on the boat fell overboard and drowned. When the catamaran returned to Montego Bay, "Everyone on the pier seemed to know what had happened, but they still wanted to hear the story. Knowing the story and telling it is the Afro-Caribbean version of immortality." Kurlansky goes on to say, "I never learned his name. It was the story that was important. A man was gone, he left behind his story." When people tell stories about themselves they participate in the construction of their own cultural identity, both individually and collectively, and this process is particularly important in the Caribbean, where historical disjunctions and ethnic diversity have intensified the "métissage without limits" that is the region's most elemental characteristic. Antoni's myth in Divina Trace grows out of a series of stories told by and about members of a single family, but it comes to encompass much of Corpus Christi's history and all of its principal religious traditions--the Catholicism of the European colonists, the Hinduism of indentured workers imported from India, and the belief systems brought to the "New World" by African slaves.

The "mother-goddess" around which the myth gathers in Divina Trace, La Divina Pastora, is an object of devotion little known outside of Trinidad. C.L.R. James has described her simply as "a small image of some two feet in height which stands in the Roman Catholic Church at Siparia." She is "nothing more than a symbol of the divine" to many, but to others she "possesses limitless powers. . . ." A more recent account, in a travel guide to Trinidad, fills in some detail. The devotion to Mary as Divine Shepherdess was brought to South America and the West Indies by Capuchin monks from Spain. As the years passed, Hindus "and other non-Catholic groups" adopted her as their own, the Hindus even identifying her as the goddess Kali. In the novel Papee Vince expounds upon the significance of the fictional black madonna's appeal across the ethnic and religious spectrum. The statue has appeared "to the Pañyols as Divina Pastora, to the Amerindians as Akambo-Mah, to the Africans as Mamma Latay, to the East Indians as Kali Mai." All that was required, he explains, for her truly to become Corpus Christi's own patron saint was for her "to resurrect and reunite she previous four incarnations . . ." (377), and this was accomplished through her association with Magdalena Domingo.

Of the three religious traditions that shape and vitalize the myth of Magdalena Divina in Antoni's novel, Christianity is the most prominent, both because the cult of La Divina Pastora originated with missionary monks and because the Domingos themselves are Catholics, and their history on Corpus Christi is intimately, if not always amicably, linked with that of the Church. The name of the island itself has religious significance, and the island's biggest celebration--almost a National Day--is the Feast of Corpus Christi. In Divina Trace the festival honoring Magdalena coincides with that holiday, which is celebrated on Holy Thursday, so that several important elements of Christian doctrine and worship--the Mass, the Blessed Virgin, the Passion--come into play. The Carmelite convent and St. Maggy's Cathedral are the hubs of Catholic power and influence on the island, but there is a major difference between them. The cathedral is the official seat of a Church whose headquarters are in Europe; the convent, which promotes the cult of Magdalena under the direction of Mother Superior Maurina, comes to embody nascent nationalistic feelings among Corpus Christi Catholics. But even from

the time of its establishment (by none other than Barto Domingo), the convent has been seen as a kind of rival to ecclesiastical authority centered in Rome. As Mother Maurina recalls, "[T]hey said Barto is going into competition now with Papa God in He cathedral on the other side of the square"(138).

Mother Maurina, according to the voice of Papee Vince, "was the first to tell this story. This story of Magdalena Divina. She was the only one to know it complete, perhaps even better than Magdalena herself"(383). Her central role in the novel not only reinforces the Catholic core of the syncretic myth that accrues around Magdalena, but it also allows Antoni to indulge in some further forays into mythic territory. Maurina's own version of the story--some of which approaches stream of consciousness--is emotionally charged and frequently lurid. She insists that the frogchild was "the son of Papa God" (not Satan, as Evelina believes), and that his mother Magdalena was a saint. The proof lies in the fact--agreed to by everyone and confirmed by Johnny's father, Dr. Domingo--that her hymen had never been penetrated: "Magdalena have this special veil of the church to protect her, that no wajanck could never push herself inside no matter how hard he try"(132). The frogchild himself dies, is buried while still alive, is dug up and thrown into the swamp, is kept in a bottle in Uncle Olly's lab, or is boiled in a callaloo and served to the Domingo family for dinner--all depending upon which account is "true." But it is Magdalena--as virgin, daughter, and mother--not her child, who becomes the object of the cult, and Mother Maurina appears to be largely responsible for encouraging its growth, even asserting that Magdalena's name was given to her in a dream by an "oldman dress up head-to-toe in tin paper shining beautiful as the angel Gabriel"(144)--the same angel who announced the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary.

During her sections of the novel Mother Maurina's religious ecstasies are scarcely distinguishable from her sexual ones, and she (or Johnny's memory) also frequently conflates elements of her own story with those of her alleged daughter's. The most startling passage of this kind is Maurina's account of herself watching Barto and Magdalena make love. Syntax and memory alike take on new and strange forms as Magdalena's experience seems to become Maurina's own:

. . . standing here at the end of this bed looking down again through the dark murky water of my dream with my feet to my knees in the mud of my own terrible passion without escape, here looking down again through the dark water seeing myself again my own beautiful daughter struggling helpless here in the mud of my own hopeless longing to lie again beneath my husband-father-son-of-my-son in nomine Patris Filii et Spiritus Sancti . . . . (154-55)

The rest of this reverie defies expository analysis. Suffice it to say that Mother Maurina's imaginative appropriation of these events as she describes them is simultaneously orgasmic and sacramental. Barto, in her mind, is lover, father, son, angel, Holy Ghost, and perhaps even Papa God himself.

Robert Antoni's unpublished paper on Joyce and Freud sheds a good deal of light on the psycho-sexual implications of the myth that lies at the heart of Divina Trace. In analyzing the similarities between Freud's recreation of "the Primal History Scene" in Moses and Monotheism and Joyce's version in Finnegans Wake, Antoni concludes that the mother figure is "conspicuously missing," or at least highly attenuated, in both. One of his purposes in Divina Trace is to restore "the absent mother" to her rightful place in the "earliest of primeval memories handed down to us as part of our phylogenetic

inheritance." In Freud's formulation, social organization began with the sons' reinstatement of the father's prohibitions (against copulating with their mother and sisters) after they had killed and eaten him. Antoni argues that although Freud's emphasis is on the father and the sons, "the mother's position in the Oedipus complex is as . . . important as the father's, at least insofar as she is the forbidden object of desire . . . ." In Antoni's reformulation, the horde of sons, after killing the father, rape the mother. Later they repent and give the mother "an exalted status" equal to that of the dead father. These modifications of Freud's scheme, Antoni believes, would help explain the evolution of mother-goddesses from ancient times to the present, including Christianity's conception of the Virgin Mary as quasi-divine.

Antoni tries to rehabilitate the mother figure in Divina Trace by incorporating his revision of Freud's ideas into the genesis of his own Caribbean myth. For example, there are several accounts of a gang breaking into the convent and raping Magdalena. The gang is led by Gomez, St. Maggy's Chief of Police, who may be the son of Mother Maurina and Barto. In this context the conflation of Maurina and Magdalena becomes very important, since Gomez and his "brother" policemen can be said to violate both their sister and their mother. Similarly, Johnny Domingo's recollection (or more probably, his dream) of finding his grandfather Barto still alive and shattering his skull with a rum bottle re-enacts the murder of the primal father. The preoccupation with Magdalena's virginity and her imperforate hymen is just as pertinent. If the killing and eating of the father is ultimately expiated by the elevation of a totem meal to divine status (as in the Eucharist), then the original rape of the mother could have been expiated by having "the primeval mother declare herself eternally virgin." In this way "the Mother could dissolve our guilt for the primeval rape, since as Virgin she was herself proof it had not occurred." In Antoni's multi-layered myth Magdalena is both Mary and Magdalene, Mother of God and (in Papee Vince's words) a "consecrated whore"(49).

The two other principal strands of Corpus Christi's religious inheritance--those brought to the island from India and west Africa--are less pervasive than Catholicism in the fabric of Divina Trace but are just as integral to the novel's meaning and design. The Hindu element is concentrated in Magdalena's verse declamation, a syncretic and idiosyncratic retelling of the Ramayana. The Ramayana was first written down in Sanskrit by the poet Valmiki about two thousand years ago, but the legends it records are much older. Valmiki's "original" text tells the story of the noble lovers Rama and Sita, the ideal couple of Hindu tradition. Although the poem's length (some twenty-four thousand verses!) and complexity make it impossible to summarize adequately, a few words about the plot are essential to suggest, at least, its relationship to Divina Trace. In the Ramayana Rama is the son of Dasaratha, the king of Ayodhya, by his wife Kausalya. Dasaratha also has two sons, Lakshman and Satrugna, by his wife Sumitra, as well as one, Bharata, by his wife Kaikeyi. When he attains adulthood Rama marries Sita, foster-daughter of the king of Janaka. Sita lives in the city of Mithila, nicely transformed by Antoni into "Mythmythilia." Eventually Rama is banished for fourteen years through the trickery of the jealous Kaikeyi, who is ambitious for her own son. During their exile, Sita is kidnapped by Ravana, the demon ruler of the island of Lanka. The monkey demi-god Hanuman and his monkey army help Rama rescue Sita, and during this period Hanuman tells the embedded story of the monkey race--a subplot that parallels, to some extent, that

of the main one but which is probably much older. Some versions of the Ramayana continue the story of the couple after their triumphant return to Ayodhya. In these accounts they are separated again because of unfounded suspicions that Sita was unfaithful while held captive by Ravana, but they are ultimately reunited in the heavens. To many Ramayana bards such a conclusion must have seemed appropriate, since Rama and Sita were incarnations of the gods Vishnu and his wife Lakshmi.

This is only a small part of the epic's plot, but it is enough to demonstrate the uses to which Antoni puts it in Divina Trace. Nearly all the characters in Magdalena's Ramayana are surrogates for figures in the novel, and Antoni has subtly shaped her retelling of the ancient poem so that its plot corresponds at many points to that of Divina Trace. For instance, since Rama and Sita parallel Barto and Magdalena, Sumitra and Kaikeyi are converted from stepmothers to wives, so that they can serve as analogues to Maurina and her jealous sister, Granny Myna. Perhaps more significant than these kinds of modification (and there are many) is a change that is almost theological: in Antoni's version, Rama is an incarnation of Shiva, not Vishnu. This much more fundamental alteration of the Ramayana seems designed to emphasize the connection between Magdalena and Kali, who was the wife of Shiva. La Divina Pastora, the actual prototype for Magdalena Divina, has been worshipped as a manifestation of Kali by the Hindus of Trinidad, and in Divina Trace she is said by Papee Vince to be one of Magdalena's avatars. It also seems fitting that Barto as Rama should be an incarnation of Shiva, the Destroyer, rather than Vishnu, the Preserver. There are many other correspondences between Magdalena's Ramayana and the various accounts of her own story that form the rest of Antoni's novel; virtually the entire plot of Divina Trace, in fact, is retold by her (in Caribbean dialect and with many Caribbean references) as if it were the tale of Rama and Sita. As a literary act in itself, the poem brilliantly exemplifies (as, indeed, does the whole novel) Benítez-Rojo's dictum that a "syncretic artifact is not a synthesis, but rather a signifier made of differences." In this part of the novel the figure at the center of the novel's myth tells the story directly as a myth, incorporating into the texture of the ancient story elements that give it life for a new, composite culture. It is this cardinal theme in Magdalena's Caribbeanized Ramayana--the genesis of myth in storytelling and the power of myth to enter history and shape cultural identity--that binds the poem most closely to the rest of the book.

Evelina, the Domingo family's black servant, is the medium through whom Antoni introduces the novel's third major constellation of religious traditions. Both of her sections of the book are filled with talk of African gods, obeah, and the curse brought on the family by Barto and manifested by the birth of the frogchild. Although her grandmother Aiyaba may have worshipped the Yoruba gods alone, Evelina, the daughter of a Shango priestess, practices a syncretic religion that combines a modified Catholicism with African beliefs. In the early days of slavery in the Caribbean the displaced Africans tended to use Christian saints as surrogates for the African gods who were the true objects of their devotion. Over the years various kinds of amalgamations occurred throughout the region. The close association of Ogoun with St. Michael and of Eshu with Satan, for example, is found both in Trinidadian Shango and in some of the other African-derived syncretic sects. Eshu in particular is quite at home in Divina Trace. His connection with Satan probably derives from his reputation as a mischief maker and lord of misrule. "The early missionaries and their converts," Phillip Allison points out,

"regarded Eshu as the Devil, but he should be more properly regarded as the spirit of chance and uncertainty . . . ." Henry Louis Gates agrees, finding that Eshu's characteristics include (among others) "parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation . . . ." It is not difficult to detect the presence of many of these qualities in Antoni's text, but there is even more. Gates also argues persuasively that Eshu "is the Yoruba figure of the meta-level of formal language use, of the ontological and epistemological status of figurative language and its interpretation." He is, as well, "the guardian of the crossroads, master of style and of stylus, the phallic god of generation and fertility, master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane." Gates' characterization of Eshu and his many roles gives this playful African god as rightful a claim as any in the Christian or Hindu pantheons to be called the presiding deity of Divina Trace.

Evelina's version of the story is rather different from either Mother Superior Maurina's or Magdalena's. Instead of seeing Barto as a hero--Christian angel/lover or avatar of a Hindu god--Evelina portrays him as another kind of incarnation-- a man possessed by the devil. The frogchild, she tells Johnny, is "beget by dis wajank-diab who is Satan self, who . . . beget dis diab-crapochild and bring down he curse pon you, pon all Domingos, pon dis whole island of Corpus Christi, pon all de earth"(69). Evelina swears that Manuelito, who is indistinguishable from Eshu in her mind, still lives beneath the ground in Domingo Cemetery, but that he cannot come out "to reap combruction"(84) if Johnny will come to the graveyard each year on the night of the crapochild's birthday (April 16) and work the obeah spell that she teaches him. A good part of Johnny's terror in this scene derives from his conviction that he has already, three years earlier, dug up the frogchild and loosed it on the world--an event Evelina knows nothing about. In the language of her Yoruba forebears Evelina invokes the powerful god Ogoun and tries to banish the trickster Eshu. She prays in Latin to St. Michael himself, pleading with the warrior-archangel to thrust Satan into hell. Evelina certainly comes by her interpretation of the story, and her hostility toward Barto Domingo, naturally enough. She is herself, it seems, the illegitimate daughter of Barto, who was at least indirectly responsible for her mother's suicide. Evelina found her mother's body in a canefield, "and me," she says grimly, "could only always hate he fa dat"(322). Johnny also appears to learn from Evelina that her African grandmother Aiyaba was actually owned by Barto. Not long after these revelations--in the dream-order of Antoni's narrative--Johnny Domingo remembers, or dreams, that he has killed his grandfather Barto--rapist, slaveholder, and patriarch. The "confufflation" of religious, psychological, and political implications involved in the ritual murder (whether real or imagined) of this man--a source of near-mythic authority and object of both fear and adoration--can scarcely be exaggerated.

The political power of the Magdalena myth as a whole grows directly out of the syncretic nature of its origins. Because the cult of Magdalena, in its very genesis, partakes of the "density of codes" that Benítez-Rojo astutely identifies as intrinsic to the Caribbean, it is able to speak to the culture in a language it already intuitively understands. The changing of the name St. Mary to St. Maggy, Mother Maurina's unsuccessful attempt to have Magdalena officially canonized, and the subsequent de facto canonization of her by the peoples of Corpus Christi--all are part of the process by which the culture produces the myth that will redefine and ultimately liberate it. When the myth

takes hold in Divina Trace (or, in Papee Vince's account, when Mother Maurina, as storyteller, brings Magdalena's story "to life"), the island is "miraculously transformed." It is "a single moment in history, a rebirth, not simply fa Mother Maurina's Magdalena in the black madonna, but fa Corpus Christi sheself"(384). The island, in effect, becomes Magdalena Divina's child. And even though Corpus Christi continues to contend with the social ills resulting from "half a millenium of Colonial and Church subjugation," the people manage "to come back to life every year fa one day"(395). It is not irrelevant that the saint honored on that day is a woman. Restitution of the mother figure to her rightful place of honor is the act that, at least for Corpus Christi, takes some of the sting out of those centuries of colonial/ecclesiastical/patriarchal domination, and perhaps restores to the culture a trace of its spiritual and psychic balance as well.

The nature of the holiday itself is significant, and it should be noted that virtually every major episode in Divina Trace takes place on, just before, or just after it. The Magdalena/Corpus Christi fête is the novel's version of Carnival, complete with parades, steelbands, and "playing mas"(126). In Trinidad, Carnival's ritual enactment of alternative reality has a powerful transformational effect on the whole society, as it clearly also does on that of Antoni's fictional island. But Antoni is careful to make his carnival truly transformative only insofar as it transcends the officially sponsored Christian holiday and assumes, in Bakhtin's words, the attributes "of becoming, change, and renewal." In his analysis of medieval European carnival, Bakhtin distinguishes between "the official feasts" of the period, which "sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it," and legitimate folk carnival, which "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order." This is the carnival that Corpus Christi Day becomes when it is infused and regenerated with the power of the people's own myth; and for Antoni, this is the carnival that lies at the very heart of creolization throughout the Caribbean: an open-ended, spontaneous, improvisational, and culturally authentic exaltation of the power of imagination to refashion reality.

Papee Vince correctly insists that Magdalena's "most salient feature" is "she universality, the all-embracing all-comprehending expansiveness of she great love. . ."(347). Her mysterious origins and ambiguous ethnicity only reinforce the that universality; she is whatever her votaries need her to be. The Magdalena cult is specific to Corpus Christi, but its quality of "all-comprehending expansiveness" relates it to the essence of the Caribbean. Benítez-Rojo makes much the same point in his discussion of the Cuban devotion to the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. The Virgen, whose origins are as syncretic as Magdalena's, can be read as particularly or exclusively Cuban; but the cult can also be read "as a meta-archipelagic text, a meeting or confluence of marine flowings that connects the Niger with the Mississippi, the China Sea with the Orinoco, the Parthenon with a fried food stand in an alley in Paramaribo." Johnny Domingo's journeys--to the swamp, into himself, into his past, to the world beyond the Caribbean and back again--are part of that dynamic, part of that confluence. Above all, it is his telling and retelling of the story that places him within the ceaseless, meta-archipelagic ebb and flow of Caribbean culture. Evelina bestows this project on him as a sacred duty: "And if dere is anybody could explain all dis confusion to dose yankees, dat dey understand who we is and where we come from dat we can scarce even understand weself, it could only be you"(313).

### iii. In the Labyrinth of Banyans

The swampy matrix of storytelling in Divina Trace is human consciousness itself, and Johnny Domingo's journey into the mangroves and mud of his family's past carries him just as deeply into the thickets of his own mind. It is a personal "voyage in," but one that has cultural and political implications because the consciousness he confronts is creolized at its very core. At one point, unable to decide whether either Mother Maurina or her account of Magdalena is real, he reaches out to touch Maurina's headdress and conceives that act as touching his "own imagination," which he calls the "farthest extremity of my deepest, most sacred self"(156). Only a few pages later, just before the beginning of Magdalena's poem, he elaborates on the nature of that deepest self. Recalling the night when he opened the bottle and watched the crapchild swim into the dark waters of Maraval Swamp, Johnny reflects,

My aloneness had been suddenly violated, split in two by that swimming frogchild, as though in that frogchild I had suddenly seen myself, my other self, the constant companion of my ongoing silent conversation, my twin brother. I had seen the other I. Not the imagined I but the I of my imagination: the imagining I. The third eye in the middle of my forehead through which I saw myself--the Hindu tilak in the centre of my consciousness with which I heard myself, my essential self, God within. . . . (170)

The third eye is a recurring motif in Divina Trace, but all of them (including a hilarious account of a glass eye in a man's anus) are in a sense only traces--prefigurations or echoes--of this one: the I that sees what the eyes cannot. Johnny externalizes his imagining I as the frogchild Manuelito because it is such a monstrosity--a part of himself so unsuspected, so alien, so mysterious, that it seems not even to belong to him.

But it does belong to him, and Johnny instinctively understands that he must face it again:

Now . . . I know the only way to find that frogchild still hiding somewhere alive in the labyrinth of those innumerable mangrove banyans, is . . . to surrender myself up to this monkey of my imagination and let him speak, even in his own impenetrable monkey-language--to turn around and go back to the beginning once more. (172)

The implicit association here of the monkey imagination with the frogchild/"imagining I" is reinforced in Magdalena's poem when Valmiki, (the traditional author of the Ramayana) and the monkey god Hanuman gaze "on each other as if in a lookglass"(184). In the second half of the poem, when Hanuman (who has previously served only as a scribe) is charged with completing it, he ponders its characters and realizes how to proceed: "Only when Hanuman inform dem each,/ With he mirror-form simple enough/ . . . Did Hanuman begin to dress he story in Valmiki shacksloka"(215). That is to say, Hanuman can compose the rest of the epic himself only by reaching into his own monkey imagination, "informing" the story with it. These lines provide a crucial link, too, between storytelling and interpretation, suggesting as they do that each story as read and interpreted is a new story told.

When Johnny thinks about the "farthest extremity" of his "deepest, most sacred self"(156), he moves into territory much stranger than the ancient legends lying behind

the Ramayana. He calls it "a source deeper than my conscious mind, deeper than reasoning"(157). Antoni attempts, through Hanuman's tale of the monkey tribes, a direct literary representation of that wellspring of consciousness. It is possible to go through this section and string together enough phrases to form a reasonably intelligible account of the Ramayana's Hanuman subplot. But those phrases are insistently interwoven with a dizzying welter of words and other signs relating in manifold ways to Divina Trace and the monkey imagination that informs its characters. While this part of the novel is saturated with signification, its meanings are not accessible to the usual strategies of reading and interpretation because it is a verbal facsimile of the disorganized, pre-verbal flux that Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic. At the very center of Hanuman's speech is an aluminum mirror-page: a startling objectification of the non-verbal core of consciousness and a means by which the reader must, literally, "inform" the story with his own "mirror-form." The symbolic is, to simplify Kristeva's explanation rather coarsely, the regulation of the semiotic into the logic and order of discursive language and rational thought. According to Kristeva, "the two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the types of discourse . . . involved"; but it is perhaps not too naive to view the semiotic, being necessarily pre-verbal, as a kind of matrix (from mater, mother) out of which the symbolic arises, through struggle, and upon which it depends for its nourishment. The myth of Divina Trace fulfills itself in many ways.

The cognitive acts produced by Kristeva's dialectic can be seen as storytelling at its most elemental: the means by which we define ourselves both as perceiving subjects and as objects within a wider reality that includes us but which we can know only through our perception of it. The entire vast concentric edifice of Antoni's novel is an elaborate attempt, or series of attempts, to extract a trace of definition from the formless semiotic swamp. By retracing in his own mind stories he has heard, or imagined, about the island's history, Johnny Domingo constructs a composite cultural identity of which he is a part. The telling of the stories must be collective because the Caribbean reality that those stories ceaselessly yearn to define is itself collective, a "multiple series of relationships"; and the telling must be speculative because the story of the past, like all other stories, is fashioned by the imagination. If the recuperation of a disputed past by multiple and mutually contradictory voices (Said's "voyage in") lacks the solidity of historical discourse proceeding from received authority, it also lacks official history's distortions. As Glissant explains, history as a linear, hierarchical formulation "is a highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone 'made' the history of the World." To perpetuate the fantasy, "the collective memory was too often wiped out," and the Caribbean writer (as we have seen in the case of Caryl Phillips) must "dig deep" to retrieve fragments of it. The goal of this collective, tentative, and distinctly non-authoritarian evocation of a scattered past is nothing less than the construction of a Caribbean consciousness, and the conception of history-as-story underlying the enterprise is not simply the restrictive, "othering" discourse of the West but a magically transformed one--fluid, changing, and potentially liberating.

"A magical notion of reality," Glissant points out, "is based on beliefs hidden deep in the collective past." Even in his short stories Robert Antoni's reading of human experience encompasses more than the empirical, and in Divina Trace a vast reality of

possibilities emerges from the re-creation of the past by the collective imagination. It is a reality incalculably enriched by ubiquitous encounters between the natural and the supernatural. The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is perhaps the most obvious of these epiphanies, if only because it is implicit in every reference to the island's name. Corpus Christi is the feast that celebrates the Eucharist, in which the humanity of the participants becomes consubstantial with the divine nature of Christ. In a bizarre parody of the Eucharist, Granny Myna boils the frogchild in a callaloo (or so Johnny remembers her telling him) and serves him to her family for Christmas dinner. His name, Manuelito, is a diminutive form of Immanuel ("God is with us")--the name of the Messiah as prophesied by Isaiah. But all sorts of gods, angels, diabs and demons (not just Christian ones) parade through the carnival of Divina Trace, and many of them are equally at home in heaven and on earth. Eshu, the trickster deity so feared by Evelina, is also the Yoruba messenger god and the guardian of crossroads and boundaries, and the mediator between this life and the next. He crosses those boundaries at will. Rama and Sita, in Antoni's version of the Ramayana, are human incarnations of the gods Shiva and Kali. The very idea of incarnation (or the conjunction of this world with a dimension beyond it), so closely bound up with the novel's central myth of Magdalena and its effect on Corpus Christi, becomes a metaphor for all the ways in which the magic latent in imagination can transfigure human experience.

The little statue of the black madonna with which Magdalena has been linked is believed to be the incarnation of several different goddess figures, including the Virgin Mary, but it is the coalescence of all these avatars into Magdalena Divina, a patron saint for all the people of Corpus Christi, that marks her story as a new myth belonging to a new creole culture. Papee Vince explains the process with reference to the relationship between Magdalena Domingo and the statue:

Magdalena did not precede, or anticipate, or in any way inspire the creation of this black madonna. She did not give birth to this statue: the statue, or more precisely history, gave birth to Magdalena. And history took she life too--long before she was dead--only so that history could give Magdalena a second birth, could bring her back to life in this black madonna which preceded her. (381-82)

Born out of history, out of the stories ordinary human beings living within history tell, myth re-enters history through a tracery of beliefs and values that form the nucleus of culture, and it works as a cohesive force within culture precisely because it is seen to embody those same beliefs and values. But more than that, the infusion of history with the ahistorical impulse of faith has a transubstantiative effect, both within individual lives and in the lives of civilizations. That is why Papee Vince is deadly serious when he says to Johnny, "You see son, it is not so much the telling of this story. It is the believing in it"; a story told without belief is just "windballs and airfritters"(396).

Divina Trace re-enacts the process by which stories told collectively, as folktales, can gather into the contours of a myth, but it also probes, through the meta-narrator's relentless journey into his own psyche, the unfathomable source of storytelling--and belief--in the individual creative mind, as well as that mind's kinship with the cultural matrix to which it belongs. A form of incarnation, or at least a variation on the concept, comes into play here, too. Johnny Domingo looks down through the corridors of his memory at the living frogchild and sees a version of himself. Resorting to the lexicon available to him, he calls it "the imagining I . . . my essential self, God within"(170).

Johnny's quasi-Blakean characterization of his imagination as God parallels other links between consciousness and divinity that can be found within the teeming mythologies of Divina Trace. Eshu--a god closely connected with language and interpretation (as well as with misinterpretation)--is frequently depicted holding a calabash that contains "the very ase with which Olodumare, the supreme deity of the Yoruba, created the universe." Gates translates ase as logos, in the sense of "understanding," or "the audible, and later the visible, sign of reason." And in Magdalena's version of the Ramayana, the very composition of the poem results from the conjunction of consciousness and divine intervention. Valmiki first hears the tale of Rama in a dream, while dozing beneath a "sacred samaan tree"(175) but he is unable to cast it into poetry until the goddess Kali gives him the ability to do so, suggesting that the raw matter of story can be articulated as art only through a catalyst believed to be extrinsic to the normal circuits of the conscious mind.

The branches of Valmiki's samaan tree spread over much of Divina Trace, as it does over much of the Caribbean itself. The samaan, or rain tree, is native to the region and has long been linked with fertility in Amerindian lore, possibly because its leaves fold closed at night allowing rain to fall (and therefore vegetation to grow) under it. For many in Latin America and the West Indies, the tree evokes political liberation and rebirth as well because of its association with Simón Bolívar. In Antoni's novel the samaan witnesses all forms of creativity--biological, religious, political, as well as artistic. According to Evelina, Barto impregnated Magdalena under the great samaan tree beside Maraval Swamp, thus hastening the birth of a myth that would galvanize Corpus Christi culturally and politically. And near the end, after he has spent the whole night remembering, Johnny Domingo goes for a walk, falls asleep beneath that tree, and dreams the words that begin Divina Trace. Both the crapchild of myth and the crapostory that embodies the myth are engendered, appropriately, under the same tree, on the edge of the same swamp. But his uniquely Caribbean identity--that mysterious communion of consciousness, creativity, and faith that Johnny finds in his own inner swamp--is finally something that can be approached only through the obliquities of metaphor; all he can do is circle around this enigma, continuing to tell and retell the story that reveals itself to him as an endless orchestration of voices, their registers indefinitely suspended, as in a dream, somewhere between the harmonic intercessions of archangels and the inchoate croaking of frogs.

"Every boundary line is a myth."

**Wilson Harris, Palace of the Peacock**

When Johnny Domingo says, "*There is no end to any of this. There is only beginning, and between, and beginning again*"(62), he describes not only the plot of Divina Trace but the Caribbean itself, for the region's cultural discourse, as Benítez-Rojo observes, is always additive, never subtractive or delimiting:

The literature of the Caribbean seeks to differentiate itself from the European not by excluding cultural components that influenced its formation, but rather, on the

contrary, by moving toward the creation of an ethnologically promiscuous text that might allow a reading of the varied and dense polyphony of Caribbean society's characteristic codes.

The evolution of Caribbean identity and culture is a process with many beginnings but no true end. For that reason alone, a traditional conclusion to this book--a synthesizing summary or a reductive listing of themes--seems to me as inappropriate as the proclamation of a thesis would have been in the first chapter. From Mackandal to Mrs. Mabel Morgan, the metamorphic task of creating a new world, richer and stranger than any Prospero himself might have conceived, has depended on the magic of Caribbean storytelling--a magic that the critic's "conquistadorial" categories of thought cannot even truly understand, let alone violate. Becoming Caribbean may well be "an intellectual dream," but as David Dabydeen has eloquently written, "Folk that know bone/ Fatten themselves on dreams/ For the survival of days." The multifarious dream of Caribbean consciousness originates in the collective--often painful--experience of generations and emerges as the transformative "arts of the narrator" in story after story, text after text. The waves and echoes of West Indian voices can be traced in the passages of all those artists--not just the ones explored in the preceding pages. The world those storytellers weave is a protean world--a work in progress constantly being added to, filled in, repaired, rewritten, and increasingly invigorated, in Wilson Harris's words, by "the pursuit of enduring cross-cultural spirit in arts of dialogue with unsuspected and supportive myth."