

# Divina Trace and Polyrythm

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

## The Polyrythmic Structure of the Novel:

In his debut novel **Divina Trace**, Robert Antoni explores the possibilities of polyrythm to a greater degree than any previous West Indian author. His creation of a work composed of varied genres, accents, and media, all clashing against one another, in the end serves two key purposes for Antoni. First, it allows him to explore the interactions between storyteller and audience, and second, it frees his novel from some of the limiting binaries traditionally tackled by Postcolonial writers.

One encounters **Divina Trace's** polyrythmic structure with a first glance at the novel, for it comprises seven different versions of the story of Magdalena Divina (some in multiple installments), each as told to the unifying narrator, Johnny Domingo Jr. Each version -- related by such narrators as Mother Superior General Maurina, Prioress of the convent, Evelina, "obeahwoman" and servant of the Domingo family, or even Hanuman, the Monkey Prince -- represents the distinct dialect (or language) of its narrator as well as his or her unique perspective. Because Antoni passes the different stories directly from their narrator to Johnny, unmediated and unfiltered, they often contrast, conflict, and thoroughly confuse their young listener. Johnny struggles throughout the novel, much like the reader, to assemble the conflicting rhythms of these stories into one coherent composition, a neat legend of the black Madonna of Corpus Christi.

**Divina Trace** reflects the polyrythmic model in other ways as well. The use of multiple genres - storytelling (oral literature), epic poem, newspaper account, & letter - and different media (in addition to words, drawings, a picture from a medical journal, & even a mirror appears) implies a complex whole that Antoni has assembled from previously incongruous pieces. And thematically, the author brings many forces to bear against each other, such as the clash between religion and science that the Domingo doctors (Johnny and his father) must reconcile. Ultimately, faith seems to win out: "But before long Hanuman put down all such worry. In blindfaith he take up he pencil..." (p.216). The Monkey Prince, like the other characters, eventually realizes that only by possessing some faith can he hope to achieve this goal of reconciliation, whether it be in understanding the Magdalena story or hoping for a sympathetic audience for his own story. Thus this act of faith covers not only the characters within the story, but the author and reader as well, who must find some way to reconcile the walls separating them from each other.

## The Reader Joins the Novel:

Robert Antoni's choice to insert a mirror in the middle of **Divina Trace** serves more than to simply add yet another medium to his brew of signs and symbols. It also functions as a tool by which Antoni attempts to reconcile two other traditionally contrasting rhythms -- those of author and reader. For when the mirror appears (significantly in the middle of a

passage in which the words "write" and "read" are always combined together) the reader, "seeing in de page you own monkeyface" (205), joins the world of the book. Gone are the boundaries that the pages of a text traditionally represent, as now the reader lies within these pages. However, Antoni does not suggest that this placement gives the reader any more power or control. In fact, Dr. Domingo (Sr.) humorously mentions (referring to the story of the old man and the swallowed glass eye) "the old joke about looking in the mirror to find the asshole looking out," (299). Johnny Jr. also seems to pick up this notion. With consistent quotes such as "Now I could not help but listen. Now I could not help but hear my father's voice," (310) Johnny echoes the position of reader/audience as powerless to change the direction of the story, as a passive receptor -- a position that those working in the environment of hypertext seek to change. Nonetheless, though he acknowledges that he has not necessarily altered the power of the reader, Antoni has certainly shifted the relationship between author and reader slightly, by self-consciously drawing the rhythm of reading into his pages.

Antoni makes consistent reference to the process of publication, of overseas distribution, and the dominance of the First World (particularly America) in these matters. **Divina Trace's** polyrhythmic structure encompasses so many different aspects of the process of communication -- contrasting oral (the storytellers, rooted in the African influences on Caribbean culture) versus literate (publishing, Hanuman taking up "he pencil in blindfaith") processes, the concern with the reader in the novel -- that one cannot doubt that this work also serves as a meditation on the process of telling a story. Thus Antoni writes not only of how Johnny Domingo assembles various pieces in order to make sense of the history of Magdalena Divina, but also in essence of how the author himself has assembled diverse genres, characters, and media, and tackled the challenges of publishing in the First World, in order to bring us this novel.

### **Escape from Binary Post-colonialism?:**

Robert Antoni's brand of polyrhythm breaks from the manner in which other Postcolonial writers have made use of this model. Authors such as Earl Lovelace and Derek Walcott, for instance, set the rhythm of colonizer against that of colonized in their work. They seek to present the Caribbean as a place in which these two meet, and by placing the two forces (in Walcott's case) on equal ground within their work, perhaps hope to equalize them, to deconstruct the lines on which the opposition colonizer/colonized is based. Thus much of their work, both thematically and in terms of plot, concerns itself with binary oppositions that Post-colonialism produces.

Antoni takes a different approach. He gathers so many different rhythms together in **Divina Trace** that a simple one to one opposition cannot exist. Furthermore, the figure of the colonizer appears very little in the novel, primarily in Antoni's offhand comments about publishing or as an absentee power in Papee Vince's history of the Corpus Christi Day celebration. Therefore, the absence of this concern with binaries allows Antoni space to deal with other issues -- the relationship between storyteller and audience or an in-depth cultural history of the Caribbean, as revealed through the stories of Magdalena's background. The very fact that Antoni does deal (though in passing) with First World

publishing power, or the blame behind crop failures in West Indian farming, proves that these binaries still do apply in some ways, and still have relevance for Antoni's novel. But, in part because he employs the polyrhythmic structure to a greater degree than any of his predecessors, Antoni has created a new space for himself in which various issues, many of which depart from those of traditional Postcolonial subject matter, may take precedence.

## **References**

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