

Pandering Caribbean Spice: The Strategic Exoticism of Robert Antoni's My Grandmother's Erotic Folktales

Eric D. Smith

University of Southern Mississippi, Long Beach, Mississippi, USA

Now translated into nearly half a dozen languages, Robert Antoni's *My Grandmother's Erotic Folktales* (2001) has eclipsed in sales his previous two novels,¹ the first of which, *Divina Trace*, was awarded the 1992 Commonwealth Writers' Prize and is now hailed as a landmark achievement in contemporary Caribbean fiction. In fact, an upcoming US edition of *Divina Trace* gestures toward the considerable international success of the more popularly accessible *Folktales* by featuring not the familiar black Madonna and child of the Overlook paperback edition, but a sensual female nude, recalling the (dubious) eroticism of the latter novel. Thus, critics of *Folktales'* mainstream success have accused Antoni of abandoning the high literary aspirations of his prior novels and pandering to western tastes through an appeal to Caribbean exoticism. One internet reviewer charges that *Folktales* has, in fact, "none of the dignity and grace" of Antoni's previous books and that this "long-awaited third book comes as a bit of a surprise and a disappointment".² The implication that Antoni's latest book is somehow a sell-out, however, invites us to look more closely at the way exoticism functions as a discourse in *Folktales*. I offer that Antoni's latest book might be profitably read alongside the concept of what Graham Huggan has termed "strategic exoticism", in which exoticist codes of representation are appropriated by the post-colonial writer and then cunningly redeployed as either a means of subverting those codes or laying bare inequities of power.³ With *My Grandmother's Erotic Folktales*, Antoni certainly stages a conspicuously

exotic performance, the international popularity of which speaks to its successful appropriation of exoticist codes of representation. Embedded within that exotic narrative, however, are subtle clues that point toward a subversive counter-narrative also at work in the text that forces us to acknowledge patterns of neo-colonial cultural consumption.

To observe the way in which *Folktales* has successfully positioned itself within an exoticist currency of expression, one need look no further than to popular reviews of the book, particularly those of American-based publications. *New Nation*, for instance, calls it “a collection of saucy stories that portray the spicier side of the Caribbean in a truly exciting way”. Elizabeth Hand of the *Washington Post* compares the scatological humour of *Folktales* with that of the Farrelly brothers and writes that “one leaves these tales feeling replete, grateful, and slightly dazed by the magic”. The book is, she suggests, “as surprising and luminous as a hidden tropical waterfall”. The *Seattle Times* suggests that Antoni’s latest work is “like the product of a long-ago Caribbean Eden, where comical lust and polymorphous perversity were part and parcel of an innocence that most of us have lost”.⁴ This parade of exoticist tropes (which would be at home in any travel brochure) is almost reminiscent of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European travel narratives, in which the Americas were rendered Edenic in their purity, lushness and naivety. Of course, the trope that calls the most attention to itself here is that of consumption, the Caribbean and its exotic culture figured as something to be devoured by the Western reader. And as expected, Antoni’s Caribbean fare turns out to be satisfactorily *spicy*.

Timothy Morton’s brilliant *The Poetics of Spice* can offer us some crucial insights here. For Morton, the importance of spice as a discourse resides in its figural/spectral nature. There is no definitive or objective content of “spice”, only spices of particular times and locations:

Spice is a complex and contradictory marker: of figure and ground, sign and referent, species and genus; of love and death, epithalamium and epitaph, sacred and profane, medicine and poison, Orient and Occident; and the traffic between these terms.⁵

Spice has been, at various moments throughout history, coffee, tea, sugar, curry, perfume, chocolate and so on, according to the context of its invocation. The chief criterion for inclusion into the family of spice is thus not that an object possess an exterior quality but that an object be essentially non-purposive, and thus *excessive* in nature.⁶ The rhetoric of spice extends therefore beyond the material realm, as Morton observes: “Spice is a linguistic and ideological operator rather than an essentialized object. It has only quasi-objective status: almond and dried fruits in the Middle Ages were classified as spice, along with the expected pepper, cinnamon

and nutmeg”.⁷ Spice is thus a rhetorical and social signifier, a means by which the Other is differentiated from the powerful as excess. Morton also points out, however, an opposite (or oppositional) tendency in the rhetoric of spice. James Guillray’s 1791 cartoon, “Barbarities of the West Indies” – part of the British middle-class “blood sugar” campaign protesting the use of sugar produced by slaves – shows a grim British plantation foreman stirring a boiling cauldron of sugar-cane, out of which jut the splayed arms and legs of an African slave, thus inverting the old cannibal stereotype. The caption reads, “I’ll give you a warm bath to cure your Ague & a Curry-combing afterwards to put Spunk into you”.⁸ Morton points out that this caption contains a “macabre pun” on *curry* as both a way to “prepare” a horse and to “cure” the slave’s idleness.⁹ There is also the aggressive sexual suggestiveness here of putting “Spunk” into the slave, fusing those images of cannibalism/consumption, spice and sexuality into a frightening tableau of domination that, however, critically redeploys the very tropes of Caribbean exoticism normally used to justify such violent acts of oppression. I want to suggest that in *Folktales*, Antoni similarly exploits the rhetoric of spice to his own purpose, specifically, that of criticizing American neo-colonial dominance.

One of the most basic elements of Caribbean exoticist representations (and, indeed, those of other former colonies as well) is that of *excess*, in both its positive manifestations of plenitude and its negative manifestations of moral transgression.

The myth of the Americas as a cornucopia was a common one in British travel narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like depictions of the Spice Islands, the Caribbean was seen as a land of “miraculous, spontaneous production,” in which, like Eden, the earth gave up gratuitously and *without labour*, its various fruits.¹⁰ Thomas Carlyle’s controversial “The Nigger Question” (1849) provides a stunningly clear example of this rhetoric of Caribbean excess:

Sitting yonder with their beautiful muzzles up to the ears in pumpkins,¹¹ imbibing sweet pulps and juices; the grinder and incisor teeth ready for ever new work, and the pumpkins cheap as grass in those rich climates: while the sugar-crops rot round them uncut, because labor cannot be hired, so cheap are the pumpkins.¹²

Indeed, Carlyle’s justification for slavery relies exclusively upon this notion of West Indian excess and moves easily between the rhetoric of labourless plenitude and that of moral transgression:

The black African, alone of wild-men, can live among men civilized. While all manner of Caribs and others pine into annihilation in presence of the pale faces, he contrives to continue; does not die of sullen

irreconcilable rage, of rum, of brutish laziness and darkness, and fated incompatibility with his new place; but lives and multiplies, and evidently means to abide among us, if we can find the right regulation for him.¹³

Beyond the implication here that the Carib does fall prey to these deficiencies (or excesses) of character, it is interesting that the African can be spared this fate through proper *regulation*. Furthermore, writes Carlyle, “To save men’s bodies, and fill them with pumpkins and rum, is a poor task for human benevolence”,¹⁴ implying that the West Indian slave has no innate ability to control the excesses of his appetites without the paternalistic intervention of the British through slavery. Not surprisingly, we also find Carlyle’s invocation here of the rhetoric of spice as a marker of advanced civilization, as a sign of separation between the boundless unbidden excess of the islands and the precisely engineered fruits of British ingenuity:

Who it may be that has a right to raise pumpkins and other produce on those Islands, perhaps none can, except temporarily, decide. The Islands are good withal for pepper, for sugar, for sago, arrow-root, for coffee, perhaps for cinnamon and precious spices; things far nobler than pumpkins; and leading towards Commerces, Arts, Politics and Social Developments, which alone are the noble product, where men (and not pigs with pumpkins) are the parties concerned!¹⁵

Further invoking the rhetoric of spice, Carlyle suggests that prior to the advent of European explorers, “those Islands had produced mere jungle, savagery, poison-reptiles and swamp-malaria: till the white European first saw them, they were as if not yet created, – their noble elements of cinnamon, sugar, coffee, pepper black and grey, lying all asleep, waiting the white enchanter who should say to them, Awake!”¹⁶ It is this perceived inability of the native to properly harness and exploit the surplus that necessitates and justifies the heroic European interventions of colonialism and slavery.

The first gesture toward this rhetoric of excess in *Folktales* appears on the title-page, where we discover to our amusement that the full title of the book we are holding is not simply the comically unsettling *My Grandmother’s Erotic Folktales*, but that it is also sub-titled with the breathlessly prolix *With Stories of Adventure and Occasional Orgies in Her Boarding House for American Soldiers During the War, Including Her Confrontations with the Kentucky Colonel, and Tanzanian Devil and the King of Chacachacari*. The chapter titles are no less self-indulgent, including, for example, that of chapter five:

Further Adventures of the Kentucky Colonel and the King of Chacachacari, and How My Grandmother Became a Disk-Jockey and the First Female Calypsonian, and Managed by Accident to Decode a

German Message so America Could Win the War, *including* Gregoria la Rosa's Story of the Time She Got a Pin-Cushion Stuck Inside Her Bamsee, and My Grandmother Attempted to Operate and Almost Pulled out Her Whole Asshole

Antoni has commented on this titular expansiveness, claiming that he "liked the idea of a title which feels as if it wants to *consume* and overflow the boundaries of the cover".¹⁷ Again, this overflowing of boundaries is both a justification for colonial occupation and a threat to it. As Morton suggests by reference to the Derridean *pharmakon*, the spice is both poison and cure, evidenced, for example, by Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* (1544), which features a map of India with a laden pepper bush in one corner and a scowling cannibal in the opposite.¹⁸ Thus, Antoni's excessive full title is both endearingly comical in its awkward appropriation of English and Western literary conventions and somehow unsettling. It anticipates the not-quite-correct efflorescence of Myna's Caribbean English, which she uses both to play the fool and to shrewdly outwit her adversaries. Moreover, it connects the exotic excesses featured within the book to language and thus to the book itself as a *spicy* consumable.

Excess features most prominently in *Folktales* as a symptom of Caribbean food culture. Indeed, the book is curiously preoccupied with food and superabundant consumption. Characters in the stories eat until they are immobilized or sick, and food almost always plays a central role in the plots of each tale. In one story in which Granny Myna and Gregoria are convinced by the Kentucky Colonel to go into the pizza business, the eating of pizzas takes on an almost orgiastic urgency:

Now they brought in a pepperoni pie and a next one with onions and black olives. . . . Then they brought in a next pie for us and this one had a fried egg floating in the middle of it, and swimming around in the tomato sauce was the little anchovy fish, and of course *we had to drink* a next round of *cerveza*. Next we ate a pie with mushrooms, then one with green peppers, then another with rings of pineapple and bacon on it. And just when we thought we were all going to *die* if we ate another slice of pizza, another sip of *cerveza*, Tony brought in a next *deluxe* pie that he said was his *specialty*, and this one had on it all the other ingredients of all the other previous pizzas piled up together . . . so of course we couldn't *help* *weself* but try a next little slice each of Tony's specialty pizza, and of course more *cerveza*.¹⁹

After this marathon pizza consumption, Myna and company "could only sit there groaning with all we bellies bloat-o beyond belief".²⁰ *Folktales* is filled with such scenes of over-abundant consumption in which the eating subject has no control over the amount of his or her ingestion, though perhaps more significant for my purposes here are the

representations of the consumption of Caribbean “spice” by the American interlopers.

Myna cooks each evening for the US soldiers in her boarding house, who flatly refuse to eat anything but traditional Caribbean fare, as she relates: “my boys didn’t want to hear nothing about no American cooking, nor English, nor Chinee, nor nothing so – but only *West Indian* that was all they wanted to eat . . .”²¹ Considering adding a “nice fat agouti” to the pot of sancoche that she is cooking for the soldiers, Myna decides against it when she discovers that the Kentucky Colonel (*the* Colonel Sanders) will be attending dinner:

But now I stood there a moment studying Gregoria holding up this animal dangling by the tail – and smiling a big smile one ear to the next because for her, agouti was the *sweetest* meat in the world – when all in a sudden I realized that we could *never* feed this agouti to the Colonel Sanders. Because the truth, if you ever eat an agouti – despite the fact that it is a great delicacy for any West Indian – the truth is that it’s nothing more than an overgrown rat living in the forest. And even though I knew well enough my soldiers would think it a big adventure that Gregoria and me have served them a rat to eat – and I could hear them saying already this was surely something to write home about – there was no way we could take a chance with this Kentucky Colonel. . . .²²

Beyond the obvious appeal to a grotesque exoticism here – the notion of the foreign delicacy as something abhorrent (or excessive) to Western tastes and for that very reason, desirable – there is the more subtle issue of to whom this aside is addressed. Ostensibly, the entire narrative of the book is being told to young Johnny Domingo, Myna’s grandson, yet Johnny, we know from *Divina Trace*, grew up in Corpus Christi and is almost certainly familiar with local cuisine and the custom of eating agouti. Thus, Myna must be speaking to a reader for whom the eating of agouti is as alien a practice as it is to the American soldiers. In other words, Myna is speaking directly here to the book’s intended audience: America, the consumers of Caribbean culture, food, oil, spice, and indeed the very book we are reading. It is no coincidence, after all, that after nightly satiating the soldiers’ appetites for spicy West Indian food, Myna must also satisfy their appetites for tall and bawdy Caribbean tales. And we should not forget that her primary reason for doing so (unknown to her audience) is not merely to entertain, but to divert the attention of the soldiers away from the brothels that were by now a serious social problem on the island, a topic to which we shall return shortly.

This obsessive concern with food and consumption, however, is closely and purposively related to our next example of unruly Caribbean excess, that of the excessive or grotesque body. As in his two previous novels, Antoni here deploys the bodily grotesque as a gesture toward the

permeability of Caribbean cultural borders. Perhaps the most comically memorable instance of the grotesque body in *Folktales* is the fancifully aetiological “Tale of How Crab-o Lost His Head.” Like many of the stories in the book, this one turns upon a central double-entendre in which a banal object is paired opposite its *spicy* verbal cognate. Here, “Crab-o” is the name of an anthropomorphized crab and, less obviously, island nomenclature for “penis”, both of which are “beheaded” in the tale. In an appropriation of the Rumpelstiltsken motif, a young orphan girl, Moyen, is adopted by a woman renowned for her timeless beauty and sexual allure throughout Corpus Christi. The woman resides alone (she is rumoured to have killed her parents) in the huge estate house of an old Portuguese plantation, which has on its grounds almost every fruit tree imaginable. Moyen, who arrives very hungry to this veritable paradise, is permitted to eat only from the “Eden mango” tree until she is able to guess the woman’s true name. She is given three chances daily and fails each time. Thus, she is forced to eat only the mangoes, and Antoni’s description of her monotonous feasting provides yet another example of exotic excess, for once she tastes them, she cannot control herself and must eat until she is sick:

After five or six of those big eden-mangoes, of course, Moyen had reached she limit. Still she continued slicing off more cheeks. She continue criss-crossing the orange flesh, turning rosy cheeks inside-out and biting off the cubes of flesh, until she have consumed the entire pile of mangoes And even though Moyen was satisfied by now, she climbed up in the tree again to shake down twenty or thirty more mangoes.²³

Moyen astoundingly consumes, against her volition and better judgment, between forty and fifty mangoes, then violently vomits them over the side of a cliff. The very next morning, still nauseous from the previous day’s engorgement, she unwillingly submits to the same ravenous hunger while doing the woman’s laundry at the rock pool: “Of course, after that first taste Moyen could never hold sheself back. She began to chew and suck and swallow as fast as she could manage, the juice dripping down she neck and over she budding tot-tots, one fat mango and then the next” until she throws up on the grass and cries herself to sleep.²⁴

The sexual overtones here are obvious, and it is inevitable that Crab-o himself should at this point make an appearance. Moved by the girl’s weeping, and having overheard the woman’s name on the occasions when she would sing while bathing at the pool, Crab-o compassionately intervenes and tells the girl the woman’s true name: Yan-killi-ma Kutti-gu-ma Yan-killi-ma Nag-wa-kitti, which, translated from the Yoruba tongue, means “You will kill me My love You will kill me My beautiful one”.²⁵ In order not to incriminate Crab-o, Moyen

promises not to guess the woman's name right away. As they retire to the house for the evening, however, Moyon cannot resist and proudly tells the woman her name on her third and final guess of the day. Enraged at having her secret thus divulged, the woman proceeds immediately to the pool to behead Crab-o, the only living creature who could have known her true name. Not satisfied with this singular act of violence, she then takes her cutlass to her stable of international lovers, each of whom is identified by a series of crass cultural stereotypes: Mr. Chan, the Chinese grocer, has a corkscrew-shaped crab-o and cries *ha-chong!* at climax; Pierre, the French tobacco-planter, has a crab-o that curves to the left and weeps at climax; Ram-sol, the Hindu roti-man, has a long, thin crab-o and at the height of his ecstasy releases a meditative *ommmmm!* There are several others, including Felix the African, Clifton the Englishman and Salman the Muslim. The most central of these lovers, however, is Ernesto the American,²⁶ who has by far the smallest crab-o, yet whose stentorian climactic declaration, "*God bless A-mer-ica! Land that I love! Stand beside her! And guide her!*," is the loudest and boldest of all.²⁷ Each of the lovers loses the head of his crab-o to the woman's swinging cutlass except Ernesto, the "Yankee tourist from the windy plains of Illinois", who flees back to the US to write a book titled *The Sad Story of the Savage American Practice of Circumcision*, in which the tale is reversed:

And it has brought the biggest boom ever to we tourist industry. Because in no time a-tall the whole of America was telling this story too, even despite its confusing, backwards title. In no time a-tall even the travel brochures began to include – just beside the pictures of golden parrots, and green monkeys, and sparkling white beaches – precise descriptions of what, today, has become the most cherished of *all* we national treasures. Johnny, it is none other than you own decapitated Caribbean crab-o.²⁸

The clever reversal in this story involves, again, the sexualized Caribbean excess, the uncircumcised penis. My interest here, however, is the way in which this story commingles passions of both an erotic and culinary nature. Moyon's sexual maturation is coded as uncontrollable physical hunger, and her initiation into sexual womanhood (her knowledge of the woman's secret name, which presumably steals the latter's beauty and power) is marked by a bloodied crab-o, which is both a phallus and a famous Caribbean food item, each an element of the *spice* eagerly sought by tourists to the Caribbean. This exotic doubling occurs throughout the book, offering the reader/consumer both anticipated elements of Caribbean spice while also obsessively iterating the theme of cultural consumption and lampooning exoticist narratives.

The first story in the book, for instance, plays upon a parallel between

the venus flytrap and its female anatomical analogue. By secretly mixing the “blood” from the plant into their food, Myna is able to endow the prostitutes who entertain the American soldiers with the apposite powers of the venus flytrap, thus immobilizing them. As she says,

You see, the old time legend went that the blood of this plant had magic sexual powers, and if a woman tasted even one *drop*, when the man went inside she pussy would clamp down shut straight away – *bam!* – and he would never get out again, not until the sun rose the following morning. That is to say, not until the sun came *up*, could he go *down*.²⁹

This instance of the bodily grotesque, however, is provocatively echoed in a later story, in which the theme of uncontrollable passion is pointedly reiterated. In the story of the venus flytraps, the ingested “blood” of the exotic plant (the *spice*) exercises an unbidden and irrepressible mastery over the body. The body’s surplus desire cannot be managed by the will of the mind and acts independently of it, much like the subjects in Carlyle’s essay.

In a later story, we find a more threatening echo of this theme, one that recalls the concomitant fear and desire of the Other latent in exotacist narratives. In the final chapter of the book, Myna and Gregoria confront the conmen, the Kentucky Colonel and the Tanzanian Devil, for the second and final time. Fearing that the two would again escape with Myna’s savings, Gregoria offers to trap the Tanzanian Devil by surreptitiously feeding him “stay-home” mixed in with his *pelau*. Myna details how this particularly exotic dish is prepared:

Sweet heart of Jesus! I wasn’t even sure what this *stay-home* was all about, but I knew from the sound of Gregoria’s voice that it was something I didn’t want to know nothing much about neither. She said the first thing she had to do was to go in the bush and pick some green *caraili* – that was a bitter bitter kind of fruit shaped like a bumpy cucumber, that sometimes we called it *womb-fruit* – and then she could boil this *caraili* in a tea and take some, and that would bring on she menses. And Johnny, sure enough hardly had Gregoria returned from the bush for her to make this tea and drink it down, when she menses started to flow. Next she boiled up a big pot of rice, she put it to drain in the sink, and then Gregoria rested the colander of rice on the floor in the corner of the kitchen. Now she slipped off she panties, she raised she skirts up a little bit, and she spent the next half-hour squatting over that rice, the big smile on she face!³⁰

In this twist on the first story of the book (the symmetry here characteristic of Antoni’s previous two novels), the actual menstrual *blood* of Gregoria’s own “venus flytrap” immobilizes those who ingest it by rendering them so sexually enamoured of the source that they are without the will to resist. In the confusion of their scheming, however,

Gregoria and Myna switch the normal pelau with the *stay-home* pelau, resulting in the latter's greedy consumption by the US soldiers:

Well! Those soldiers tasted only a little taste of this pelau, and they said it is the *best* Gregoria had ever cooked. The King said the same, and when they all started to eat, it was like they would never finish! They *ate ate ate* – only pausing long enough to bawl out “Please pass some more of that delicious pelau!” – and then they ate some more. Johnny, they ate like if they were blind. They ate like if there was no tomorrow. They ate like if a starving jab-jab had jumped inside they skins, because they just couldn't get enough of this pelau.³¹

And as in the other tales, the excessive consumption of this Caribbean dish is directly related to unbridled sexual excess figured by bodily grotesquerie. Trapping the object of their libidinal gaze in the makeshift DJ booth, built by the Colonel and King as part of another elaborate confidence game, the soldiers' unbidden sexual desires, elicited by the fearfully tantalizing power of the Other, get the better of them. Myna compares their sexual appetites with those of “woman-eating sharks” in a feeding frenzy:

Next thing one of the soldiers decided he could *never* hold himself back – he folded out he ventral flipper and began vigorous to back-stroking it up and down – and soon enough the remainder of those man-sharks were doing the same! Johnny, it was like drowning in a sea of white-caps! Like being swallowed up in a sea-froth of foaming waves! Because not until each *one* of those boys and the old Kingfish too had relieved themselves three and four different times – with the whole of this glass cage dripping with they fishy white fertilizer – could they turn they backs on Gregoria and carry themselves all drained-out straight downstairs to they beds.³²

Here, the consumption of Caribbean *spice* leads to uncontrollable sexual excess, to a violent and irrepressible urge to consume the Other. It is fitting, then, that Myna deploys gastronomic and predatory metaphors to describe this desire. Here we also see Antoni self-consciously invoking the terror of devolution that is the necessary complement to exoticist desire in many exotic narratives. It is perhaps not merely coincidental then that the soldiers' encounter with the Caribbean exotic devolves them (metaphorically) into fish.³³

Nowhere in the book, however, are the themes of eating, sexuality, and domination more clearly entwined than in the chapter, “The Tale of How Iguana Got Her Wrinkles *or* The True Tale of El Dorado”, another story that is both light-hearted aetiological myth and subversive political commentary. After a brief (generally accurate) account of the search for the mythic El Dorado by Sir Walter Raleigh and Fernando de Berrío, we are introduced to the first governor of the island, Don Antonio Sedeño.

When Don Antonio's wife and two daughters finally arrive on the island, they find the governor asleep in the arms of his lover, an Amerindian slave girl, who is in truth an Arawak princess of royal lineage. When the slave girl bears the governor's child, the baby is taken from her and kept by Don Antonio's two daughters, María Dolores and María Consuelo. The two Marías keep the prematurely born infant – described as having transparent salamander-like skin, red eyes, and tiny suction cup-like fingers and toes – in a shoebox and feed it green dasheen leaves gathered by moonlight along the river. She is called *Iwana*, or “iguana,” and soon matures into a beautiful young woman, “the very first child of the New World to come out half-Spanish and half-Amerindian”.³⁴

When a French aristocrat, Dr. Jewels Derrière-Cri de Plus-Bourbon, who can trace his ancestry back to Charlemagne, arrives seeking a wife, the two Marías are prepared for marriage. Dr. Jewels, who visits Don Antonio's home nightly to woo the two daughters and to decide which shall be his wife, has, not surprisingly, “peculiar culinary habits”. He refuses to eat anything except heaping platters of sautéed frog legs, so these must be specially prepared for his evening visits. After some time, it is revealed that being a socialist and an atheist, Dr. Jewels cannot marry a woman who has been baptized and thus chooses, to everyone's surprise, the hybrid Amerindian slave girl, *Iwana*, for his bride. Taken to his castle and chained naked to a bed in the tower, *Iwana* sleeps most of the day in the window, absorbing the sun and admiring a huge kapok tree, in which lives an actual iguana, who visits *Iwana* and basks with her in the sunlight. Late in the afternoon of *Iwana*'s first day at the castle, Dr. Jewels is heard unlocking the rusted padlock, and iguana, having no time to escape, dashes up *Iwana*'s leg and disappears. As Myna puts it, “as much as everybody on the island knew about the unusual *culinary* habits of the French doctor, nobody had never heard before nothing about he peculiar palate for sex”.³⁵ Leading *Iwana* gently by her chain to the bed, Dr. Jewels kneels reverently before her, “a better Catholic than us all”, and ties round his neck a red-and-white checkered kerchief before smoothing back his moustaches and taking his “evening feast”. Given his predilection for frog legs, of course, the doctor finds the taste of the iguana agreeable and favourably compares it to the taste of other women he has known, each described by Myna according to another series of vulgar stereotypes:

And he'd sampled every conceivable flavour and nationality, from French Bourdeau, to Italian oregano, to English pussies doused in they double cream. Hindu palori pussies, German pussies boiled in beer, and Portugee cavindash pussies pickled in garlic. This Dr. Jewels had the opportunity to sample Chinees sideways pussies, Singapore squinty-eye ones – even the incense-smoking *Catholic* pussies of those two Marías – since this

particular preference was the only *unperilous* kind of sex condoned by the Church.³⁶

Her news of the outside world restricted to what word she is given by iguana, Iwana is ignorant of the extermination of her people:

But there was one piece of news iguana could never find the heart to tell Iwana. It was news of she own Amerindian people, of she royal family at home, of the Arawacks, and Caribs, and Warrahoons. Of how all those Europeans were killing them off fast enough. Putting them as slaves to grow the cane and make the sugar – and tobacco, coffee, cocoa and *all* they crops – and they worked those gentle Amerindians and beat them with the cat-of-nine-tails until they dropped. Iguana could never find the heart to tell Iwana that in truth, all she royal family had perished long ago, and there wasn't a handful of she people still walking on the earth.³⁷

Interestingly, Dr. Jewels' master/slave relationship with Iwana mimics the broader cultural/political scenario just beyond Iwana's cell. At first very gentle, despite his insistence on imprisoning Iwana and keeping her in shackles for his own sexual gratification, Dr. Jewels' temperament soon undergoes a disturbing change:

Dr. Jewels *heself* began to change, as if to coincide with all these changes of the world. By now this Dr. Jewels had become a rickety oldman, frustrated with heself and he own feeble oldage. He no longer treated Iwana so kind, nor gentle, and Johnny, some of the activities during this period were too nasty to name.³⁸

And shadowing the movements of his colonial counterparts, Dr. Jewels soon introduces into this oppressive relationship the African slave. Dr. Jewels tries daily to force the African, who is named Anaconda, to make love to Iwana, but Anaconda escapes by transforming into his namesake and leaping into the kapok tree, where he is recaptured each day. Eventually, Iwana and Anaconda fall in love and escape by cleverly using the shed skin of the anaconda to mask the taste and youthful beauty of Iwana's body. Thus, when Dr. Jewels tastes the wretched anaconda skin and sees the wrinkles "in that very pussy which only the previous day, he had tasted smooth and sweet, fresh as a fresh younggirl,"³⁹ he pushes himself away from the bed in a huff, then turns to behold the two young slaves bound at the neck: "He contemplated for the first time the wretched state that was the world – which, in good measure, was he *own* doing – and without the least forewarning a-tall, Dr. Jewels threw heself from the tower to he death down below."⁴⁰

It is thus only through a subversion of the (false) exotic narrative that Dr. Jewels is able to comprehend the humanity of Iwana, to see her no longer as merely an object to be consumed but as a fellow human being deserving of the same freedoms and dignities that he himself enjoys. It is

the sour “taste” of reality that breaks the exotic spell and allows him to behold the Other with new eyes and to realize with horror his own inhumanity.

Like Jean Rhys’s powerful exploration of the fear/desire duality of the exotic in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, through these tales Antoni calls into question the legitimacy of the exotic narrative, albeit in perhaps broader terms. For his concern is not merely exoticist narratives as such (the sexualization of the Caribbean), but rather the ways in which these exoticist narratives are constructed as tools of neo-colonial domination. Read carefully, the seams of Antoni’s cleverly constructed exotic ruse begin to show, and something resembling a posture of critique (or at least of opposition) begins to emerge out of this bawdy cultural performance.

The anachronistic appearance of Colonel Sanders is particularly telling, in that Kentucky Fried Chicken was not made a franchise until 1952 and did not expand to Trinidad until 1973, when the first outlet was opened in St. James.⁴¹ Kentucky Fried Chicken is the second largest restaurant chain in the world with over 10,000 restaurants in seventy-six countries.⁴² Approximately forty or so of these outlets are located in Trinidad, where, one American internet travel site proclaims, one cannot turn a corner without seeing the familiar sight of a KFC.⁴³ Kentucky Fried Chicken was met in Trinidad with an enthusiastic demand that resulted in what Prestige Holdings Incorporated calls a “legendary expansion”.⁴⁴ KFC is the number one restaurant chain in Trinidad and thus one of the most visible signs of American cultural hegemony, despite the fact that many of these outlets are today owned by a Trinidadian company. In 1944, however, Myna could have met neither Colonel Harland Sanders, who was an unknown at the time, nor anyone claiming to be him. Nor could she have known about his Kentucky Fried Chicken empire, which did not yet exist. Myna’s retrodictive interpolation of the Colonel into these stories is curious and, I argue, should not be dismissed as either the failing or merely fanciful memory of an old spinner of yarns. Indeed, her clever exploitation of this reputation as a teller of tall tales is what disguises the subversive impulse of her stories and of the book in which they appear.

We should note first that despite the fact that he is discovered in his initial appearance to be an impostor, the Kentucky Colonel continues to dress, talk and behave as Harland Sanders throughout the book, and more significantly, Myna continues to respond to him, despite this knowledge, as if he were the real thing. For all practical purposes, in the world of the novel he *is* Colonel Sanders. The cultural significance of this fictitious persona is explained by an incredulous Myna when she is told of his arrival: “Well! I get vex and I told Amadao to stop playing the fool, because that Colonel Sanders wasn’t a *real* person, he was only the story

those Americans thought up to sell they chicken – no different from the Uncle Sam in he big hat of the stars-and-stripes that they invented to sell the world they war . . .”.⁴⁵ Here, then, the disingenuousness of American advertising (the global dissemination of the unrealizable American dream of conspicuous consumption) is immediately paired with American foreign policy and military might. And just as Colonel Sanders is interpolated into a tale that takes place before his time, we can also assume that the selling of the American war alluded to here is suggestive not merely of World War II but also of more current (and controversial) incidents of American foreign intervention.⁴⁶

In many ways, then, the Colonel (homologically reminiscent of *colonial*) represents America at its worst. He is loud, crude and dishonest. He arrives in an enormous white Cadillac, finned and trimmed with chrome, with no explanation as to how a two-bit conman like himself is able to procure such a luxury on the island. There is, of course, ultimately no need for such explanations, because the Colonel could not have really existed in this tale in the first place. Rather, his appearance, like that of his Cadillac, must be read as purposeful, as iconographically suggestive of another motive at work in the construction of these tales other than pure farce or humorous diversion. It is not merely incidental that Myna chooses as her representation of the wily and deceitful American, a cultural icon that both represents the American myth of pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps and the kindly avuncular face of one of the largest American-based food conglomerates in the world, and *the* largest in Trinidad.⁴⁷ It is likewise no coincidence that it is the Colonel who suggests that Myna open a pizza parlour, since the franchise for Pizza Hut, the *second* most popular food chain in Trinidad, is held by the same company that owns Kentucky Fried Chicken. Hence, through the character of the Colonel, the theme of the American *consumption* of Trinidad is given a complex twist. Antoni is interested here not only in the consumption of Caribbean cultural artifacts and in the performative exotic, but also in the fact that American corporations are “eating up” Trinidadian ones. It is therefore not without some self-reflexive irony, one suspects, that the company Antoni singles out here is one that produces food.

Despite its pervasiveness, however, food is not the novel’s only indicator of America’s consumption of the Caribbean exotic. In addition to the *spice* of Caribbean food and sexuality, there is also the equally popular cultural consumable, Trinidadian music, specifically calypso. The chapter in which Myna becomes a DJ and the first female calypsonian is peppered with the names of famous Trinidadian calypsonians of the WWII era along with occasional fragments of their lyrics. Myna’s playlist includes El Tigre, Atilla the Hun, Mighty Growler, Pretender, Lord

Executor and Lord Invader. Interestingly, this period was one of considerable political significance in the history of Trinidadian calypso. Mentioned at two different places in the book, the story of Lord Invader's famous "Rum and Coca-Cola" provides us with a useful example of both the American appropriation and consumption of Caribbean culture as well as strategically exotic resistance. Myna twice mentions the fact that Invader's calypso was on everyone's lips that year,⁴⁸ though, curiously, she does not mention why. For the calypso was not in fact popularized by Lord Invader himself, but by the Andrews Sisters, whose 1944 recording of the song on Decca Records sold more than 2.5 million copies and remained in *Billboard* magazine's number one spot for eight consecutive weeks, all this despite having been banned by four major networks for its portrayal of the pleasures of alcohol and its unlicensed use of the trademarked soft drink.⁴⁹ More seriously, it was claimed to have painted a scandalous picture of the American military, despite its tremendous popularity with the very soldiers whom it criticized.⁵⁰

The story goes that the song was heard in Trinidad in 1943 by Morey Amsterdam, an American comedian performing for the USO, who then took it to Jeri Sullivan, a New York nightclub singer. After the song became a popular novelty song in Sullivan's act, Amsterdam copyrighted it in his own name and then published the song, which was soon recorded by the Andrews Sisters and went on to worldwide recognition in 1944. Lord Invader filed a lawsuit for copyright infringement against Amsterdam, who now conceded that while he bought the rights to the tune, he in fact penned the lyrics himself. This claim was finally disproved by the existence of a 1943 booklet including the original lyrics by Lord Invader. Amsterdam then countered that the song was "folklore", belonging to the public domain, and therefore uncopyrightable. Eventually, Invader won the suit, but the story served as a cautionary tale about the American presence in Trinidad and its irreversible cultural consequences.⁵¹

Indeed, the song itself represents a broad trend in the calypsos of the mid-1940s toward a rethinking of the American presence in Trinidad. Led to believe by the British that a German attack on the island was imminent – something to which Myna alludes in the book⁵² – Trinidadians welcomed the protection offered by the American soldiers with open arms. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, calypso reflected this gratitude with songs like Atilla the Hun's "Ode to America":

I beg to welcome wholeheartedly
 Our visitors from over the sea
 I am sure you will all agree with me
 In my poem of eulogy
 To the champion of democracy
 America – Utopia of liberty⁵³

This effusion of encomiums to America⁵⁴ would, in just a few short years, become outcries of protest and demands for the Yankees to go home. The Trinidadian economy had grown dangerously reliant upon the military bases, and many skilled workers had deserted their careers to take up jobs in entertainment and the skin trade.⁵⁵ Prostitution grew rampant during the American occupation and became an enormous social problem, with brothels springing up in family homes and mothers ushering their daughters into the profitable new business. Moreover, Gordon Rohlehr suggests that the Trinidadian had begun to feel “denationalized” in his own country through the various restrictions imposed by the US presence and by the unscrupulous British practice of selling valuable property rights to the Americans, prompting Atilla to sing, “And today we don’t know who are masters in this land/If it’s the English or the American.”⁵⁶

From this growing chorus of disaffection for the Americans⁵⁷ emerges Lord Invader’s “Rum and Coca-Cola”:

Since the Yankees came to Trinidad
 They have the young girls going mad
 The young girls say they treat them nice
 And they give them a better price
 They buy rum and Coca-Cola
 Go down Point Cumana
 Both mother and daughter
 Working for the Yankee dollar.⁵⁸

Despite its venomous invective against the American presence, the simple Caribbean folk rhythm of the song was infectious, and in 1944, it was indeed on the lips of almost everyone, particularly the US soldiers stationed in Trinidad. Thus, by virtue of its exotic packaging, Lord Invader’s pointed diatribe against the Americans is consumed by the very culture that it criticizes, its message of malcontent disseminated far beyond the reach of Invader himself. That *some* of the people who heard the song understood its message is attested to by the controversy it aroused, by the fear that it cast an unfavourable light upon the US military. Americans who knew little or nothing about the situation in Trinidad were exposed to it by a strategically exotic (if fortuitous) vocalization that delivered the pleasures of spice as it simultaneously revealed to the American public the unpleasant realities of their nation’s military presence in Trinidad.

It hardly seems incidental that Antoni should concern himself with a calypso whose unusual history and historical effects should so closely resemble those of the novel that he is writing. Indeed, as I have attempted to show, *Folktales* is a novel written for the Western consumer

of Caribbean culture, and as such, bears all the familiar markings of a consumable. It is seasoned with the appropriate amount of spice, and its excesses are precisely measured to match those that we have come to know through glossy brochures, the Travel Channel, and exoticizing television programs like E! network's *Wild On* series. Yet the novel demonstrates, as I have argued here, an obsessive awareness of its role as consumable and thus both performs and radically deconstructs conventional narratives of Caribbean excess, specifically as they relate to the neo-colonial hegemony of the US. This strategically exotic *doublespeak* of performance/resistance is perhaps best exemplified in Myna's final speech to the soldiers following the end of the war, perhaps directed ultimately at contemporary America:

"All my cherished friends and guests: let me say that we hope you have enjoyed we hospitality. Let me say that we wish that you could have remained with us awhile longer. But now it is time for *us* to make we *own* return trip home, whether we are prepared for this voyage or not. And even though *we* voyage is the shortest distance, even though *we* own is the quickest, it is the longest and most difficult journey of all. But this," I told them, "is no kind of occasion to dwell on the uncertain future. So let we instead try to remember some of those sad, happy times that we have shared together in these sad, happy times of the war."⁵⁹

It is reasonably doubtful that Myna's declaration of her wish for the Americans to remain longer is in earnest. Furthermore, the extension of one's "hospitality" presupposes that the invitation is made willingly, which is not at all the case here, where the British masters themselves extended the invitation. The anxieties communicated in this doublespeak are also evident in the contradictory coupling of the "sad, happy times" of American occupation and the *shortest, longest* national and cultural journey that Corpus Christi/Trinidad must now take. Perhaps a clue as to the destination of this journey can be found in Antoni's assertion that contemporary Caribbean literature must move beyond considerations of colonialism and its aftermath.⁶⁰ For Antoni, the central concern of Caribbean writing should no longer be the colonial Caribbean past, but the Caribbean present. And while he conventionally eschews overtly political literary themes, one unavoidable concern of the Caribbean present is its complex cultural and economic relationship with the United States, of which Antoni has stated:

I think America plays such a large role in the Caribbean today. We're clearly in the American sphere of influence. If we sink or swim it will be due to America, but I think America would love to see us tread water for as long as we can. All the islands are tied to the American dollar, and when America is troubled, we are even more troubled.⁶¹

It is not insignificant, then, that as the peculiar ambivalences of this vexed relationship began to take shape during WWII and the establishment of US military bases in Trinidad, it is chosen as the very site at which Antoni squarely and, I suggest, purposefully situates *My Grandmother's Erotic Folktales*.

NOTES

- 1 According to e-mail correspondence with Antoni, *Divina Trace* and *Blessed is the Fruit* sold 5,000–10,000 copies apiece in the US and England, while *Folktales* sold 10,000–12,000 copies in the Finnish translation alone.
- 2 Review of Robert Antoni's *My Grandmother's Erotic Folktales*. Retrieved 23 December 2003 at http://www.caribbean.vacationbookreview.com/caribbean_91.html
- 3 Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 32.
- 4 All the reviews cited here can be found on Robert Antoni's homepage: <http://www.robertantoni.com.html>
- 5 Timothy Morton, *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000, p. 9.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 5.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 18.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 40.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 181.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 53.
- 11 "Pumpkin" operates here as Carlyle's generic term for any variety of tropical fruit.
- 12 Thomas Carlyle, *The Nigger Question*, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971, p. 4.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 12.
- 14 *ibid.*, p. 14.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 27.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 28.
- 17 Nnedimma Okorafor, "A Grandmother's Erotic Folktales", 29 July 2001. Retrieved 15 December 2003 at <http://www.robertantoni.com.html>, also available at <http://www.africana.com.html>
- 18 *Poetics of Spice*, p. 40.
- 19 Robert Antoni, *My Grandmother's Erotic Folktales*, New York: Grove, 2000, pp. 81–2.
- 20 *ibid.*, p. 82.
- 21 *ibid.*, p. 68.
- 22 *ibid.*, p. 72.
- 23 *ibid.*, p. 52.
- 24 *ibid.*, p. 55.
- 25 *ibid.*, p. 45.
- 26 Clearly a swipe at Ernest Hemingway.
- 27 *ibid.*, p. 61.

- 28 *ibid.*, p. 67.
- 29 *ibid.*, pp. 30–31.
- 30 *ibid.*, p. 181.
- 31 *ibid.*, p. 183.
- 32 *ibid.*, p. 187.
- 33 Antoni's preoccupation with evolutionary theory is evident, for example, in the "Hanuman" chapter of *Divina Trace*, where his detailed knowledge of its history, debates and thinkers is displayed.
- 34 *ibid.*, p. 129.
- 35 *ibid.*, p. 138.
- 36 *ibid.*, p. 139.
- 37 *ibid.*, p. 140.
- 38 *ibid.*
- 39 *ibid.*, p. 144.
- 40 *ibid.*
- 41 "Prestige Holdings Limited: Family Brands You Know and Love". Retrieved 17 November 2003 at www.phltd.com/PHL/history/cp.html
- 42 *ibid.*
- 43 Trinidad Travel. Retrieved 15 December 2003 at Homepage.mac.com/uniace/personal17.html#
- 44 *ibid.*
- 45 *Folktales*, p. 69.
- 46 *Folktales* was published in 2000, and so missed the most recent controversial invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.
- 47 It is also interesting to note that the Colonel's deceitful impersonation is associated discursively with both food and sex, as when Amadao discovers the Colonel's fake beard and pulls it off, chanting "*Fakees fakees pudinum bakees!*", which is suggestive of both "pudding" and "pudendum" *Folktales*, p. 174.
- 48 *ibid.*, pp. 78, 158.
- 49 Gordon Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad*, Port of Spain: Gordon Rohlehr, 1990, pp. 361–2.
- 50 *ibid.*, p. 361.
- 51 *ibid.*, p. 362.
- 52 ". . . I took my firechief hat from the nail where I had it hanging in case the Germans *did* arrive to bomb us just like the English promised . . .", *Folktales*, p. 162.
- 53 Qtd. in Rohlehr, p. 357 and partially in *Folktales*, p. 185.
- 54 Destroyer's "Britain is Supported by America" and Tiger's "The Best Place is the United States" provide other examples of this trend.
- 55 *ibid.*, p. 356.
- 56 *ibid.*, p. 359.
- 57 One might also include, among others, Invader's "The Soldiers Came and Broke Up My Life" and "Yankee Dollar", as well as Beginner's "The Yankee Harvest is Over", or Kitchener's "My Wife Went Away with a Yankee".
- 58 Qtd. in Rohlehr, p. 361.

59 *Folktales*, p. 201.

60 See Okorafor.

61 Qtd. in Peter Josyph's "Interview With Robert Antoni". Retrieved 20 December 2003 at <http://robertantoni.com.html>.